

# Choosing and using quality child care

A guide for families



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# Quality child care



## A message from NCAC's Chief Executive Officer, Denise Taylor

Families seeking child care want the best for their child. There is a lot of conflicting advice available about how child care will affect your child, and what you should be looking for in a quality child care service. It is ultimately up to you to decide which service is best for you and your child. This Guide will provide you with helpful information about quality child care, how to find out how to use it most effectively.

## What is NCAC's role in quality child care?

The National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) was established by the Australian Government to administer Child Care Quality Assurance systems and to accredit child care services.

To be Accredited, family day care schemes, long day care centres and outside school hours care services are required to meet a set of standards that focus on the quality of care provided for children.

## Why is quality child care important?

In recent years the number of children aged from birth to 12 years attending care outside their homes has increased dramatically. Many families use child care due to work or study commitments, as well as to extend their child's development. At the same time, research in child development has shown us that the experiences children have in their early and middle childhood years significantly affect their wellbeing both now and in their future lives.

Quality child care services play an important role in increasing children's learning and achievement throughout their lives. This in turn provides them with more positive lifelong opportunities as well as reducing poor health issues later in life.

## What is quality child care?

There are some basic quality practices that should be happening in every child care service, regardless of the ages of the children in care or the type of child care being offered. These include:

### Good relationships

You should be able to see good relationships between adults and children, as well as between the people who work at the service. Adults in the service should speak to children, families and each other politely and respectfully, and the general feeling of the service should be welcoming and friendly.

### Effective communication

Services should be able to tell you and show you how they will provide you with information about the service and your child's care. They should also let you know how they will find out important information from you about your child and family.

### Children's learning and development

All services are required to support children's learning and development. Even though every service will do this differently, they should be able to tell you what they do to plan activities and experiences that will help your child to develop and to extend their learning.



## Health and safety

All services must make sure that the environment they provide for your child is safe, clean and properly supervised. They should also promote healthy eating for your child.

## Management

Services should give you information about any management decisions that will affect you and your child. There should also be procedures in place for managing any grievances or complaints you may have, and opportunities for you to be involved in developing and reviewing the service's policies and philosophy.

# What type of child care should I choose?

There are many types of child care that you can consider using, depending on the needs of you and your child. Some options include preschool, occasional care, a nanny, babysitter or informal care provided by your family members or by friends.

The types of child care services that currently participate in the Child Care Quality Assurance systems administered by NCAC are:

## Family day care

Care is provided for your child by a registered family day carer in their own home. Family day care provides care for small groups of children aged from birth to 12 years. Staff from the family day care scheme's coordination unit will assist with placing your child in care, and monitor and support the care of your child in the family day care home.



## Long day care

Care is provided for your child in a child care centre. Care may be provided for children aged from birth to five years. Long day care centres are open for at least eight hours per day, depending on the individual service.

## Outside school hours care

Care is provided for your child before/after school and/or during school holidays (vacation care). Not all services provide care at all of these times, so you will need to ask the service what care they can offer your child.

## How to choose

To decide which type of care will suit you and your child it is helpful to visit a few services and to speak with the service staff. You can also talk with people you know who are using child care about the type of care they use.

You may find that your child care needs change over time, and you might decide to use two or more different types of child care, either at the same time or one after the other.

*"We started Asher in family day care when she was a baby. We enrolled her in a long day care centre for the year before she started school so that she could get used to being with a bigger group of children."*

(Gavin - parent)

# What is quality care for different age groups?

While there are some characteristics of quality child care that apply to children of all ages, there are some that are more specific to particular age groups.

Some characteristics of quality for particular age groups that you may want to consider include:

## For babies (0-12 months):

- Care is provided by familiar adults who get to know your baby and whom your baby gets to know.
- The child care professionals take many opportunities for one-to-one interactions with your child, including during care routines such as nappy changing, toileting, dressing, eating and sleep/rest times. These times are used to talk with your child and to build positive, trusting relationships with them.
- There are many playful social experiences such as songs, rhymes, peek-a-boo games, and sharing books and stories.
- There is a lot of comforting physical contact between the child care professionals and your baby, such as being cuddled and being held while having a bottle.
- Your baby's distress signals such as crying or becoming frustrated are responded to by child care professionals in ways that are timely, comforting and appropriate.

## For toddlers (12 months-3 years):

- The child care professionals show understanding of the special challenges that your toddler may experience as they gain a deeper understanding of their world, and a natural desire to test their independence and power.
- Your toddler is supported to get along with other children, and the child care professionals recognise that children of this age are often self-focused and can sometimes have difficulty in playing and learning harmoniously with others.
- Positive ways of guiding your toddler's behaviour are used to help them to begin to learn which behaviours are okay and which are not. The child care professionals recognise that toddlers are still developing their skills and they support your child sensitively when they are frustrated or acting impulsively.

## For preschool aged children (3-5 years):

- Support is given to your child by the child care professionals to help them develop self-esteem and confidence and to gain a sense of being a valued and contributing member of the group.
- There is a strong focus on supporting your child to engage in meaningful and respectful conversations and interactions with other children and adults at the service.
- Positive behaviour guidance strategies are used and children are encouraged to take an active role in managing their own behaviour.
- Your child is provided with encouragement and opportunities to develop their independence.
- The planned activities provided for your child are based on their interests and abilities, and your child is supported to begin to develop the skills that they will need when they start school.

## For school aged children (5-12 years):

- There is a strong focus on supporting your child to engage in meaningful and respectful conversations and interactions with other children and adults at the service.
- Children are encouraged to interact fairly and respectfully with others, and to negotiate and resolve issues effectively.
- The service uses community resources such as local parks, recreation facilities, libraries and shops to provide your child with opportunities to become involved in the wider community.

# Should I be concerned about using child care?

## Will child care be good for my child?

Every child is different and will respond to child care differently. Current research in child development suggests that attending good quality child care is beneficial to children's overall development and wellbeing. Good quality child care services are safe, caring and supportive places where child care professionals build strong relationships with children. They also support each child's learning and development through positive interactions and individualised daily experiences.

The Child Care Quality Assurance systems aim to ensure that all children attending child care have positive experiences which will lead to the best possible outcomes for them.

## Will my child be upset if I leave them in care?

Whether they are attending child care for the first time, moving to a new room or section of the service or starting care in a different service, many children experience some difficulties in settling, especially when they find it hard to separate from their family or familiar caregivers. This is a normal reaction, and there are many things that you and the child care professionals at the service can do to help your child to move through the settling process successfully. Some useful strategies for settling your child into care are on the following page.

## Will my child become more attached to the child care professionals than to me?

As parents and family members you are extremely important people in your child's life. Even if your child attends care regularly, they still usually spend the majority of their time in your family environment. While it is important that the child care professionals build a secure rapport with your child, this will be a very different bond to the one that you have with your child. Your child will benefit from both relationships.

*"Grace started child care when she was two and a half. It was really important to us that the service use a positive approach to helping her when she was frustrated or having a tantrum."*

(Angela - parent)

# What should I ask the service about?

When you call or visit a child care service, asking some of the following questions may help you to decide if the service is right for you and your child:

## General questions:

- Is the service Accredited by NCAC?
- How will I find out about my child's day?
- What will happen if my child misbehaves?
- What if my child has specific needs, such as a medical condition or developmental difficulties?
- Does the service provide food and/or nappies?
- How will the service keep my child safe and healthy?
- Is there a planned program of day-to-day activities?



## For 0-3 year old children:

- How will my child's individual routines be catered for?
- How will I find out about my child's eating, sleeping and toileting patterns during the day?
- Can the service help my child with toilet training?
- What happens if my child is being breast fed?

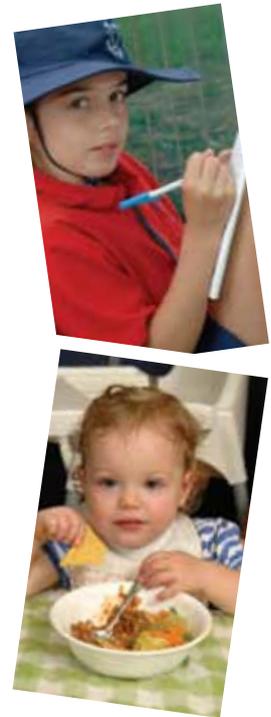
## For 3-5 year old children:

- How will the service help my child to develop their independence and social skills?
- How will the service help my child to get ready for school?

## For 5-12 year old children:

- How will my child get to and from school to care?
- Will my child have time for relaxation and recreation before and after school and during school holidays?
- What will the service do if my child is being bullied or excluded by other children?

**Tip:** Before you start looking for care it is a good idea to think about what matters most to you about your child's care. Write down some of your own questions to ask when you visit the service.



*"I was nervous about putting Jack into child care, but once he settled in he loved it. He really enjoys the different activities and experiences that are provided and he has made lots of friends."*

(Lauren - parent)

# How can I help my child to settle into care?

Every child will settle into child care differently and some children will take longer to settle than others. There are some things that you can do to make the settling process easier for you and your child.

## Before your child starts care:

- If you can, visit the service with your child before they start and spend some time with them there.
- Find out about the daily routines at the service and talk with your child about what will happen while they are at the service.
- If you have time before your child starts care, find out about how your child's current routines can fit in with those at the service. If some of your child's home routines can't be followed in the child care setting, try to adjust these at home so that your child can have similar home and child care routines.
- Tell the child care professionals at the service about any concerns you have about your child starting child care.

## When your child has started care:

- If possible, give your child shorter days in care when they first start, then build up the length of time they spend at care each day.
- Tell the child care professionals at the service about the things that help to distract or calm your child if they become upset at home. For younger children you may be able to send in a favourite toy or comfort item such as a teddy, doll or blanket. You will need to check with the service first to see whether this will fit in with their policies.
- Plan a 'goodbye routine' for your child with the child care professionals at the service. For example, there may be a special window that your child can be taken to so that they can wave goodbye to you.
- Avoid leaving your child without saying goodbye, even when they are happily settled at an activity, as they can feel upset when they realise that you have gone without saying goodbye.
- Try to say goodbye to your child in a way that lets them know that you trust the service and that you know they will be okay at child care. It is also helpful to reassure them that you will pick them up or that you will see them later if they will be picked up by someone else.
- Ask the child care professionals about how your child is settling and ask them for advice about how you can help your child to settle.
- Talk with other families who use the service about how they settle their child and share tips for settling.



## At the end of the day

Some families also experience difficulties at the end of the day when they collect their child from care. You may find that your child resists going home, and some children can become quite distressed about leaving at the end of the day - even children who were upset about being taken to care in the morning! This is quite common and does not mean that your child prefers child care to home or to you. Being upset at the end of the day usually happens because your child is tired and they don't want to finish the game or activity they are involved in.

It can be helpful to find out about what your child did during the day so that you can remind them about the fun they've had. You can also speak with the child care professionals about the future program plans so that you talk with your child about what will happen next time they come to care.

**Tip:** Consider phoning the service to find out how your child settled after you left. Children often settle quickly and happily once the actual separation from their family member is over.

*"The staff at the centre helped us to develop a goodbye routine for Sam. We would read a story with him, then a staff member would take him to help feed the goldfish when we were ready to leave."*

(Peter - parent)

# How can I be involved in my child's care?

There are many ways that you can participate in your child care service, and each service will offer different involvement opportunities. It is up to you to decide how you want to be involved in your child's care and other activities at the service. The level and type of involvement that you want may change over time.

## Possible options include:

- helping with the development and/or review of your service's policies and philosophy
- responding to surveys or questionnaires and providing suggestions for changes or improvements at the service
- becoming a member of your service's parent or management committee (if they have one), or attending committee meetings as a non-member
- attending information evenings such as events where guest speakers are invited to talk with families, for example about child nutrition or behaviour guidance
- helping with fundraising and/or working bees
- contributing to your service's participation in the Child Care Quality Assurance systems. For example, attending parent meetings to discuss the service's strengths and to offer suggestions for improvements
- attending social events such as family barbeques or picnics, open days and special morning/afternoon teas.

One of the best ways to be involved in your child's care is by sharing information with child care professionals about your child's interests and experiences outside of care. This helps them get to know your child better and to plan for their experiences. You can talk with the child care professionals at the start or end of the day or write information down, send an e-mail or organise a meeting with the people who work with your child.

## What if I have concerns about my service?

You may at some time have concerns or be dissatisfied with something that your service is doing. This can usually be managed easily by speaking directly with the service. You may be worried that your concerns are silly or seem trivial, or that the service will react by treating your child negatively. However, it is important that your child care service recognises that the care and wellbeing of your child is your top priority and that every concern is important and needs to be addressed.

Some helpful tips for raising your concerns include:

- Talking with someone else such as a friend or a partner to pinpoint exactly what your concerns are. This can help you to decide exactly what you want to say.
- Arranging a time to speak with someone rather than approaching them while they are working with the children or other families. This will help your concerns to be managed more effectively, and will also help to protect your privacy.
- Clearly and calmly explaining your concerns to the appropriate person at the service. Try to avoid raising your concerns when you are feeling angry or very upset.



- Providing suggestions for how you would like to see these resolved, and be prepared to negotiate a solution with the service if necessary.
- Telephoning a NCAC Child Care Adviser on **1300 136 554** for advice and support about raising your concerns.

If your issues are not resolved satisfactorily, ask the service about their grievance and complaints handling procedures. All services are required to have these for Child Care Quality Assurance.

**Tip:** If you are nervous about raising your concerns, or you have a number of issues to raise, write these down before you meet with the service. It can also be helpful to make some notes about the steps the service is planning to take to address your concerns.

*“It is important that families speak openly and honestly with us so that we can deal with their concerns quickly, before they become a major issue.”*

(Tanya - child care professional)

## Frequently asked questions

### Child care basics

#### *How do I know if the service is a good one?*

All services that have approval for Child Care Benefit to reduce families’ fees must register with NCAC and participate in the Child Care Quality Assurance systems. A service that is Not Accredited has not met one or more of the satisfactory requirements of the Child Care Quality Assurance systems, and is required to improve their practices and to go through Quality Assurance again in three to six months. The service may have already identified where they need to improve their practice, and they may already be working on this.

If your service is Not Accredited, this does not necessarily mean that you should remove your child from their care. The service should tell you about their Accreditation Decision, and you can request to see their most recent Quality Profile Certificate that shows their achievements in Child Care Quality Assurance. You can also ask the service about what they are doing to plan for improvements and you may also be able to provide them with some constructive suggestions.

#### *Is a privately owned service or a community based service better?*

Every service is different, and there are a range of management types under which services can operate. NCAC looks at each service individually and recognises that each one will provide quality care in its own way, regardless of its management type. Community based and privately owned services are both required to meet the same standards for Accreditation. What is most important is that you are satisfied with the quality of care provided for your child and family.

#### *How much does child care cost?*

Services are able to set their own fees, and there is no regulatory authority that oversees the fees charged in services. Daily charges can vary greatly between services, often depending upon the service’s location, the type of care they offer and any additional services or resources they may supply, such as meals or nappies. Many services charge fees for days when children are away, or when the service is closed for public holidays. It is helpful to ask your service about their policies and procedures for fee payments when you enrol your child.



## *What happens if my child is unwell?*

Children in child care come into contact with many other children and adults, and as a result can be exposed to infectious illnesses. While your service should have hygiene procedures to minimise the spread of infection, it is not possible to completely prevent the spread of all illnesses.

Even though it can be difficult to make other arrangements, it is important that you do not send your child to care when they are ill. Keeping your child away from care when they are unwell will help them to recover more quickly, and will prevent the spread of your child's illness to other children and adults at the service. Your service should be able to provide you with clear guidelines about their illness policies.

## *Can my child attend care if they are not immunised?*

Children who are not immunised can attend child care, but the service is required to ask you to keep your child away from care if there is an outbreak of an immunisable disease. Families who receive Child Care Benefit from the Australian Government to reduce their child care fees are required to have their child's immunisation schedule up to date, or to have certification from a recognised immunisation provider that exempts their child from being immunised on either medical grounds or due to conscientious objection.

## **Child care and your child**

### *Will my child get along with the other children?*

Developing friendships and social skills is an important part of every child's development, and many families choose to send their children to child care to support them in these areas. The professionals at the service will help your child to develop good relationships with the other children in care, and they will support children to manage conflicts appropriately.

It is natural that children in care will at times experience conflict with others, and this is especially common in younger age groups where children are still learning basic skills such as sharing and turn taking. Younger children will sometimes physically lash out at others, for example by hitting or biting. However, child care professionals understand that this is a normal part of child development, and they have the skills and knowledge to care for and support children in these situations.

### *How will my child's learning and development be supported?*

All services are required to support children's development and should be able to tell you what they do to plan for children's learning. The education that takes place in child care should be based on children's interests and the value of play and choice in their learning should be recognised. For example, a child's interest in dinosaurs might be used as a basis for planning a matching and sorting skills game using coloured dinosaur figures and containers of the same colour. Child care professionals should plan activities and experiences that promote all areas of your child's development. Your child's learning should be supported by conversations with, and guidance from, the child care professionals who work with your child.

## **What you can expect from your child care service**

### *How will I know what my child does at care?*

The service should have a range of ways to let you know about your child's day. For babies and younger children, services often have a noticeboard, chart or personalised communication book to let you know about your child's eating, sleeping and toileting during the day. For all children the service should be able to provide you with information about daily activities and experiences through signs, noticeboards or displayed programs. Even though they may be busy at the end of the day and may not have time for a long conversation with you, the child care professionals who work with your child should be able to tell you generally about your child's day, and let you know about anything special or unusual that may have happened during the day.



## How will the service meet my child's specific needs?

The Child Care Quality Assurance systems require child care services to work closely with you to ensure that they understand and provide for the specific needs of your child. The service will talk with you when you enrol about any special needs that your child has, such as allergies, medication needs, physical requirements or specific dietary needs. You need to be clear and honest with the service about your child's needs, and it is helpful to give them any written information from other professionals. These might include assessment reports or medical management plans developed by health care professionals. If your child's needs change, it is important that you give the service information about this.

**Tip:** NCAC's Child Care Advisers are qualified and experienced child care professionals who can provide you with advice about quality child care. They can also refer to you to other agencies that may be able to assist you or answer your questions. NCAC's Child Care Advisers can be called toll free on 1300 136 554.

## Information and support for families

### NCAC's 'Search for child care' website facility

NCAC provides the names, contact details and Accreditation history of registered child care services on our website ([www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)) through a search facility that enables you to look for services by postcode or suburb. If you are unable to access the internet you can telephone NCAC on 1300 136 554 to speak with a Child Care Adviser. For an interpreter contact the Translating and Interpreter Service on 131 450.

The 'Families and Children' section of our website can provide you with a range of information about quality child care. Services that we provide for families through the website include:

### Frequently asked questions

Our Child Care Advisers have compiled additional frequently asked questions from families and prepared responses to these. Questions and answers are updated regularly, and you can read them on the 'Ask a Child Care Adviser' page on our website.

### Family Factsheets

Family Factsheets provide information about aspects of child care. Family Factsheets are also available in a range of community languages, and new Factsheets are produced regularly. These can be downloaded from the 'Families and Children' section on our website.

### Family Information Kit

The Family Information Kit contains publications for families that will assist you when searching for and using quality child care. The Kit can be ordered free of charge from the 'Families and Children' section on our website

NCAC website: [www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)



## Other useful contacts

- The Australian Government's mychild website provides information on government policies and programs related to early childhood and child care, including assistance with child care costs. The website also has links to other information for families.  
**[www.mychild.gov.au](http://www.mychild.gov.au)**
- Child Care Access Hotline provides information on child care and help with locating child care services in your area. Call **1800 670 305** (freecall).
- The Raising Children Network website provides comprehensive information about children aged 0 - 8 years, including children's health, development, education, behaviour and special needs. There is also information aimed at supporting adults to manage aspects of family life. **[www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)**
- Child Care and Children's Health Parent Factsheets are available to download from the 'Resources and Publications' section of the Centre for Community Child Health website. The Factsheets cover aspects of child health and development, and are available in a range of community languages.  
**[www.rch.org.au/ccch/resources.cfm?doc\\_id=10863](http://www.rch.org.au/ccch/resources.cfm?doc_id=10863)**
- Licensing authorities provide information about licensing in children's services. Licensing department contact details for each state and territory are available from the links page on NCAC's website, or by telephoning NCAC.
- Fair Trading and Consumer Affairs provides information about the payment of child care fees or contracts. Contact your state or territory department responsible for fair trading and consumer affairs.
- You can also find out about child care services that are not required to register with NCAC through your local business or telephone directory, local council listings, classified advertisements, community noticeboards, friends, work or study colleagues and your employer or educational institution.

## Contact NCAC

If you would like more information, please contact NCAC:

**Telephone:** 02 8260 1900, 1300 136 554

**Fax:** 02 8260 1901

**Address:** Level 3, 418a Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills NSW 2010

**E-mail:** [qualitycare@ncac.gov.au](mailto:qualitycare@ncac.gov.au)

**Website:** [www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)

For an interpreter, contact the Translating and Interpreter Service on 131 450.