

Quality Child Care for Babies

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You want to find the best possible care for your baby*. Quality care can be found in both centre-based long day care services and in family day care, where children are cared for in a family home setting. This Factsheet will give you some information about what to look for and ask about when finding quality care for your baby.

To decide whether a child care service will be suitable for your child, you should consider visiting the service at least once, to spend some time in the children's environment and to talk with the child care professionals at the service. Visiting the service to observe what happens on a day-to-day basis can help you to build a clear picture of whether the service will meet your family's requirements.

Why does quality matter?

Research from all over the world shows that experiences in the early years, and particularly in the first three years, are significant. Although human beings learn and change throughout life, early experiences form the basis for development, learning and wellbeing for the rest of their lives. It is important that all children have early experiences and relationships that help them to feel safe and secure and that give them many opportunities to use their skills, develop new ones and learn about the world around them.

The family is the most important influence on a baby, but if the child attends care, the experiences and relationships that happen there are also important.

What does quality look like?

There are some characteristics of quality child care that apply whatever the age of the child and some that are more specific to babies. Although the characteristics of quality care are closely linked, some of the most important ones revolve around:

- relationships and interactions;
- experiences;
- planning and evaluation;
- environments; and
- health and safety.

Relationships and interactions

What is most important in the early years is for children to experience a caring and responsive relationship with at least one adult, and as they get older, to have friendships with other children. Great importance is placed on the relationships between children and child care professionals, and there should be many warm friendly interactions in which adults show respect for children.

In addition, quality care involves child care professionals working in partnership with families and getting to know the child in the context of their family. There should be effective and ongoing exchanges of information between child care professionals and families about children's needs, routines and experiences. The process of consultation and collaboration should take place with the aim of working in partnership. Child care professionals should genuinely want to know what families know about their child and what they believe is important for their child.



*The term baby is used in this Factsheet to refer to children aged from birth up to 12-16 months old. An age range instead of a specific age is given because there is a lot of variation in individual children's development and behaviour.



Experiences

The kinds of experiences children have in care - how they spend their time and what is provided for them - are important. All times of the day and all experiences matter, and contribute to the quality of care experienced by children.

In a quality child care setting, the experiences provided for children should provide many opportunities for children to play and explore, in recognition that play and exploration are wonderful ways for children to learn and develop. There should also be many occasions in which children can play and have experiences in small groups or with one other child and/or adult. Children are supported and encouraged to take an active role in their own learning and development, follow their own interests, gain new interests, use all their current skills and learn from other children and adults. It is important that each child has a variety of opportunities and experiences that support all areas of their development.

It is essential that child care professionals' expectations are appropriate for each child's age and abilities, and take into account individual differences.

In quality care for babies, the following practices are particularly important:

Positive interactions should also demonstrate respect for the diversity of families' cultural, religious and language backgrounds, as well as for the different abilities, lifestyles, values, child-rearing practices and composition of individual families.

In quality care for babies, the following aspects of relationships are particularly important:

- Care is provided by familiar adults, who get to know the baby and whom the baby gets to know.
- There are many opportunities for babies to have one-to-one experiences with child care professionals - holding, talking, looking and smiling, sharing books and play materials, playing together.
- Many playful social experiences, such as songs, rhymes, finger plays and peek-a-boo games.
- There is a great deal of relaxed and comforting physical contact between child care professionals and babies, such as being cuddled and being held while being bottle fed.
- Crying and signs of distress are responded to by child care professionals in ways that are timely, comforting and appropriate.
- Child care professionals take advantage of opportunities in care routines, such as nappy changing, sleep and rest times, feeding and eating, to talk with babies and to strengthen relationships.

- Each baby has many opportunities to use all skills, such as reaching for, holding and exploring objects, and adequate space to develop physical skills such as crawling, rolling, and pulling up to stand.
- Child care professionals are comfortable talking to babies in appropriate ways and respond when babies make sounds and attempt to communicate.
- A variety of sensory experiences - chances to touch, feel, hear, taste and see - are offered in recognition that they are valuable and pleasurable learning experiences.
- A range of natural materials and spontaneous experiences are used as opportunities to foster development and learning.

Planning and evaluation

Quality practice happens when child care professionals make flexible plans and prepare for children's experiences using the knowledge they have about individual children's interests and abilities. Where there is quality, child care professionals are continually evaluating what is happening - that is, thinking about how beneficial and enjoyable experiences are for children and their families, and what improvements can be made to these.

More particularly:

- Experiences are planned and offered that take into account the interests, needs and abilities of each child.
- The service has in place a variety of ways, both informal and more structured, of evaluating every aspect of the service with the aim of improving.
- Planning allows for children to make choices and builds flexibility into the day. For example, daily routines and experiences are organised so that adjustments can be made to cater for unexpected events and individual children's needs.

In quality care for babies the following is particularly important:

- The daily schedule is flexible and individualised, taking into account the importance of catering for the unique needs and routines of each baby.

The environment

The physical environment plays an important role in children's experiences. This relates not only to the materials and equipment provided, but also to how these are placed, how the environment is organised, its attractiveness, how much and what kind of noise there is and how much the environment changes or stays the same. All of these factors affect the quality of care experienced by children.

The child care environment should be rich with language and print, and child care professionals should talk with children about what is happening around them. It is important that child care professionals encourage children to communicate, and that adults respond positively to the verbal and non verbal communication of children.

Resources are a key aspect of a child care environment, and there should be a variety of play and learning materials, equipment and resources that can be used by children in many different ways. The materials provided for children should encourage them to explore, think and solve problems, as well as supporting children's creativity and stimulating their curiosity. Children need equipment and resources that ensure that each child is sometimes challenged to extend their skills and as well as having many experiences of being successful.

Children should be able to spend time outdoors, engaging in a range of experiences, some of which are similar to what they do indoors and others that take advantage of the natural environment.

In quality care for babies, the following practices are particularly important:

- The environment is stable and familiar, interesting and rich, with things to look at, touch and listen to. However, this is balanced with ensuring the environment is both predictable and not overwhelming.
- The noise and activity levels are manageable – not too busy or so noisy that babies get stressed or overstimulated.

Health and safety

Maintaining children's health and keeping them safe is the most fundamental responsibility of a child care service. Children in child care settings are more likely to come into contact with contagious illnesses than they are in their home environment. It is particularly important that child care professionals have current knowledge about infection control and communicable illnesses, including immunisable diseases.

In a quality child care setting both the environment and the practices of child care professionals should promote children's health and safety. The service should have a thorough understanding of the recommendations of recognised health and safety authorities, and there should be written policies that reflect and support best practice.

While considerations of safety are important, child care professionals must approach this in a balanced way to ensure that children can still explore and challenge their skills in a stimulating play environment. A quality service should:

- implement recommended sun safety practices;
- supervise children effectively, and ensure that children do not have unsupervised access to animals;
- ensure the environment is smoke free;
- have a policy to promote children's nutritional health, either through the food provided at the service, or by supporting families to make healthy food choices in the food they provide for their children; and
- have clear procedures for minimising cross infection through hygiene practices, excluding ill children and keeping up to date records of individual children's immunisation status. The service should also ensure that families are provided with the service's current policies on health, nutrition and illness.

In quality care for babies the following practices are particularly important:

- There should be safe areas, indoors and outdoors, where babies can practice rolling over, sitting, crawling and standing.
- Time that children spend in play pens, high chairs and strollers should be minimal.
- Babies should be able to be within sight and/or hearing of child care professionals at all times, and sleeping babies should be monitored closely.
- Families are supported to breast feed their child if they choose to do so.
- There needs to be an effective process for providing families with important information about their child's health and wellbeing throughout the day.

Choosing quality care for babies

It is important that you feel comfortable with the care you choose for your baby. To gain the information needed to make an informed decision about the child care service you wish to use, it is important that you and your family think about what matters to you. This will help you to decide upon the best questions to ask in order to get all of the information you need to feel good about your choice.

Some questions that you may find helpful when considering child care for your baby include:

- How will the child care professionals comfort my child if they become upset, or have difficulty separating from me when they start care?
- Who is responsible for providing my child's nappies? Are cloth or disposable nappies used?
- How will I be informed about my child's eating, sleeping and toileting during the day?
- Which child care professional/s will be my child's main carer/s?
- What happens if my child is bottle or breast fed?
- Will my child be able to follow the same routine they have at home?
- Will my child be able to use a comforter such as a dummy, blanket or special toy?
- How will my child's development be stimulated in child care?

Child care services will vary in many ways, but all quality services have child care professionals who are interested, knowledgeable and enthusiastic about caring for children and working in partnership with families.

NCAC produces a free *Family Information Kit* that outlines what to look for in quality child care. To request one, please visit the 'Families and Children' page on the NCAC website (www.ncac.gov.au), or telephone 1300 136 554 ■

References and further reading

- Parenting and Child Health. (n.d.). *Choosing Child Care*. Retrieved 16 January 2008 from <http://www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=114&np=122&id=1509#4>
- Eaton, J. & Shepherd, W. *Early Childhood Environments*. ACT: Australian Early Childhood Association Inc.
- Greenman, J. Stonehouse, A. and Schweikert, G., (2007). *Prime Times - A Handbook for Excellence in Infant and Toddler Programs*. St Paul, Minnesota: Redleaf Press.
- Gonzalez-Mena, J. & Widmeyer Eyer, D. (1997). *Infants, Toddlers and Caregivers*. California: Mayfield Publishing Company.

Useful websites

- Raising Children Network (raisingchildren.net.au)



For more information on Child Care Quality Assurance please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.

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