

Quality Child Care for Preschool Age Children

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You want to find the best possible care for your preschool age child*. 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 looking for quality care for your preschool age child.

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 childhood years matter a lot. Although human beings learn and change throughout life, these early experiences form the basis for development, learning and wellbeing for the rest of life. It is important that all children have experiences and relationships that help them feel safe and secure and 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 young child, but if the child attends child care, the experiences and relationships that happen there are important too.

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 preschool aged children. 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.

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.

* The term preschool age child is used in this *Factsheet* to refer to children aged between 3 and 5 years. An age range instead of a specific age is given because there is a lot of variation in individual children's development and behaviour.

In quality care for preschool aged children, the following practices are particularly important:

- Support is given to children to help them develop self-esteem and confidence through gaining a sense of being a valued and contributing member of the group.
- A strong focus on supporting children to engage in meaningful and respectful conversations and interactions with peers and adults.
- Appropriate and effective behaviour guidance strategies are used, and children are encouraged to take an active role in managing their own behaviour.

Experiences

The kinds of experiences children have in care - how they spend their time and what is provided for them - matter a lot. All times of the day and all experiences matter. You will want to see evidence of the following:

- Children have many opportunities to play and have experiences in small groups or with one other child or adult.
- There are many opportunities for children to play and explore, in recognition that play and exploration are wonderful ways for children to learn and develop.
- Children are encouraged and supported to:
 - begin to appreciate being a member of a group
 - value and show caring and respect for others
 - be comfortable with differences in people, and appreciate what people have in common
 - appreciate the contributions others can make
 - experience the benefits of collaborating and working together.
- 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.
- Child care professionals provide for each child in ways that show that they have expectations that fit each child's age and abilities and that take into account individual differences.
- Each child has a variety of opportunities and experiences that support all areas of development.



In quality care for preschool aged children, the following practices are particularly important:

- There are many opportunities for children to play in small groups and to engage in solitary play if they choose to. They also have opportunities for one-to-one interactions with other children and adults.
- Routines such as eating, sleeping/resting and toileting are flexible to meet individual needs and predictable enough to support children's growing independence.
- Children have opportunities to practice and develop their independence and self-help skills.
- A variety of resources are available, including both natural and commercial materials.
- Planned and spontaneous learning experiences are offered, taking advantage of children's curiosity, increasing problem solving skills, and eagerness to explore and investigate the world around them.
- Child care professionals use books, other print materials and children's play to allow children to engage in 'pretend reading and writing', to give children a strong basis for learning to read and write in the future.

Planning and evaluation

Quality practice happens when child care professionals make flexible plans and prepare for positive relationships and children's experiences.

Where there is quality, child care professionals are continually evaluating what is happening - that is, thinking about how good the experience is for children and families and what improvements can be made.

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 takes place that gives children choices and builds in flexibility into the schedule, the way the day is organised and the routines or daily living experiences, so that adjustments can be made that take into account unexpected events and the needs of individual children.

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 communications 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 and stimulating children's creativity and curiosity. Children need equipment and resources that ensure that they are 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 preschool aged children, the following practices are particularly important:

- The physical environment is organised to support children's concentration and engagement with meaningful experiences.



- The environment is rich and stimulating while remaining predictable and not overwhelming.
- Noise and activity levels are comfortable and there are moments of peace.

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, so 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 or their children;

- 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; and
- The service should also ensure that families are provided with the service's current policies on health, nutrition and illness.

In quality care for preschool age children the following practices are particularly important:

- There should be safe areas, indoors and outdoors, where children can safely practice their developing physical skills such as climbing, balancing, running and jumping. It is also important that equipment and spaces can provide an element of challenge for children.
- Child care professionals should talk with children about health and safety issues, and support children to develop and practice self-care skills.
- Children should be able to be within sight and/or hearing of child care professionals at all times and the service should have clear procedures for maintaining effective supervision of children.
- There needs to be an effective process for providing families with information about their child's health and wellbeing while in care.

Choosing quality care for preschool age children

It is important that you feel comfortable with the care you choose for your child. 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 child include:

- Which child care professional will be my child's main carer?
- What experiences will be available to stimulate my child's interest and support their development?
- How will the child care professionals guide my child's behaviour?
- How will my child be supported to gain independence in their social interactions and self-help skills?
- How will my child be supported to prepare for the transition to primary school?
- How will my child be encouraged and supported to build relationships with others?
- How will my child's individual needs for issues such as sleeping, toileting and eating be met?

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.
- Trister Dodge, D., Colker, L. & Heroman, C. (2002). *The Creative Curriculum for Preschool*. Washington DC.: Teaching Strategies Inc.

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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