

Quality Child Care for School Age Children

By Anne Stonehouse

You want to find the best possible care for your school age child*. Quality child care for school age children can be found in outside school hours care services such as before and after school care and vacation care. School age children may also attend family day care where children are cared for in a family home setting, or a centre-based long day care service. This *Factsheet* will give you some information about what to look for and ask about when looking for quality care for your school 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 environment and to talk to the child care professionals at the service. Visiting the service to observe what happens on a day-to-day basis can help you and your child to build a clear picture of what happens in the service, and whether it will meet your family's requirements. Visiting the service prior to care can also assist your child to settle into the environment more easily.

Why does quality matter?

Research all over the world shows that experiences in childhood matter a lot for both the child's present and future. Although human beings learn and change throughout life, these early experiences form the basis for development, learning and wellbeing for the rest of life. Relationships are particularly important, and as children get older, relationships with children their own age matter increasingly. It is important that all children have experiences and relationships that help them feel safe and secure and give them many opportunities to be contributing, valued members of groups.

The family is always the most important influence on a child, but if the child is in 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 school age. 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 childhood is for children to experience caring, responsive relationships with adults. 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. School age children also need friendships with other children, and child care professionals should support children in developing and maintaining positive relationships with their peers.

* The term school age is used in this *Factsheet* to refer to children aged between 5 and 12.

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, and the wider school community. There should be effective and ongoing exchanges of information between child care professionals, families and, where possible, the child's school, about their 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.

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

- Child care professionals seek children's input in decision making processes in the service, and children's ideas and opinions are valued.
- There is a strong focus on engaging children in meaningful and respectful conversations and interactions with peers and adults.
- Support is offered for children to interact fairly and respectfully with others, and to negotiate and resolve issues effectively.
- Appropriate and effective behaviour guidance strategies give children opportunities to help regulate their own and other's 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 quality of care experienced by the child. Children in outside school hours care need many opportunities to make choices and engage in many varied experiences.

In a quality child care setting, children's experiences should provide them with many opportunities to play and explore, and recognise that these 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 should be supported and encouraged to take an active role in their own learning and development, to follow their own interests, gain new interests, use all their current skills and to learn from other children and adults.

It is also important that each child has a variety of opportunities and experiences that support all areas of their development.

It is most important that child care professionals work with individual children in ways that show that they have expectations that fit each child's age and abilities and that take into account individual differences.

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

- There is recognition by child care professionals that care for school aged children occurs as an addition to formal school programs, so there needs to be many opportunities available for children to relax and spend time with their friends.
- Opportunities and encouragement are offered for children to take on a variety of appropriate responsibilities and leadership roles.
- The overall program supports the development of life skills.
- Children are encouraged to participate in the community, for example, by using local facilities such as libraries, recreation centres and parks and by participating in community projects such as tree planting or clean up projects.
- Participation in ongoing projects is an option for all children.
- There is support for children to develop their self-esteem and confidence.
- There are a variety of interesting things to do, materials to engage with and projects to participate in.
- Within the program there are possibilities for children to start a new interest or hobby, learn a new sport, pursue current interests, and to share their interests and skills with others.
- Many opportunities are available for children to make choices and to help plan and manage their own experiences and activities.
- Flexible programs cater for the wide range of ages and abilities of school aged children. For example, a program may need to meet the needs and interests of children ranging in age from four to twelve. This is particularly important when outside school hours care operates within a long day care or family day care setting.

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 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 and 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 in language and print. For example, children should be able to access different types of literature such as books and magazines, and they should have many opportunities to see adults and other children using writing as part of their every day activities. Child care professionals should talk with children about what is happening around them. It is important that children are encouraged to communicate, and that adults respond positively to what children say.

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 they are sometimes challenged to extend their skills, 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.

It is important to remember that outside school hours care services often operate out of spaces that they share with others, meaning that they may have limited access to space for storage, and they may be required to pack up the entire space that they use at the end of each session.



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

- A pleasant and interesting environment offers children choices and gives them access to a range of appropriate materials, equipment and experiences.
- There is adequate space for children to engage in vigorous physical activity such as ball games and group games to allow children to 'let off steam' after school.
- An appropriate space and resources are available for children who choose to do homework.
- Where facilities are shared with younger children, for example in long day care or family day care settings, there should be adequate furniture and resources available that are appropriate for school age children.

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 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 school age children, the following are also particularly important:

- There should be safe areas, indoors and outdoors, where children can engage in very active physical play without risking their own or other's safety or wellbeing.
- Private, safe and hygienic toilet facilities should be available, and these should include sanitary facilities for girls who are menstruating.
- There should be effective procedures for supervising children during excursions, transitions between the school and the service, and where outdoor areas or toilet facilities are not in sight of the service's main building or venue.
- There needs to be an effective process for providing families with important information about any incidents or health issues that have affected their child during care.

Choosing care for school age children

It is important that you and your child feel comfortable with the care you choose. To gain the information needed to make an informed decision about the child care service, 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 and your family may find helpful when considering child care:

- How will my child be dropped off and picked up from school? How will my child be made aware of these procedures?
- How will I find out about my child's experiences in care, and about any issues or incidents that have occurred?
- What safety requirements are considered when transporting my child to and from school and on excursions?
- How will my child be involved in planning, decision making and setting rules?
- Are there procedures for dealing with inappropriate behaviours such as bullying?

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

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Useful website

- Raising Children Network - (raisingchildren.net.au)



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

Telephone: 1300 136 554 or (02) 8260 1900
E-mail: qualitycare@ncac.gov.au
Level 3, 418a Elizabeth St
Surry Hills NSW 2010

www.ncac.gov.au