



How to choose a quality child care program

Parents often struggle to find a child care program that is affordable, and provides high-quality care. First-time parents may not know the most important elements of good child care.

Jeanne Knox, program manager for Catholic Community Services' Child Care and Early Learning Centers in the CCS Southwest Region, answers frequently asked questions about choosing a quality child care program.

Q What is the most important element that parents should look for in a child care setting?

A The most important concern is the health and safety of children. When visiting a prospective caregiver or child care center, parents should look for such things as sturdy equipment, unbroken toys, and a security arrangement that ensures that only authorized persons have access to the children. Also, notice whether the staff wash their hands frequently, especially before serving food and after diapering, toileting, wiping noses, and so on. The classroom itself (size, equipment, and arrangement) should be safe and clean, with different areas for varied activities. There should be places for both active and quiet play.

Q How important is staff training to the quality of a child's child care experience?

A Not only are staff training and education important, but so is the relationship between parents and caregivers. Providers with experience and education understand how children grow and learn, and are more likely to promote a learning environment in their classrooms. Parents who have open communication with their child's caregivers are more likely to be aware of the daily experience their child is having. Parents should feel free to ask questions and should be well informed about the program.

Q Why do group size and staff ratios matter?

A We know from research that smaller groups are best for children. The fewer the children in a group, the more attention each child can get from his or her caregiver. The number of children compared to the number of adults is called the child to staff ratio. Ratios are different for various age groups. For example, for infants and toddlers, licensing requires no more than four children to each caregiver. The stability of the staff is another sign of quality in a child care setting. Frequent disruptions and changes in child care staff are difficult for children. Programs with satisfied, long-term employees give children a sense of safety and familiarity.

Q What is the difference between licensing and accreditation?

A A child care center that is licensed meets the state's minimum requirements for health and safety, staffing, equipment, ratios, group size, and more. If you have questions about a specific center, you may contact the state's child care licensing office in the Department of Early Learning.

A center that is not only licensed but also accredited meets higher quality standards. These standards are set by a national organization, such as the Council on Accreditation (COA) or the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Accreditation is a process in which programs seek to offer the best quality child care and early learning opportunities.

Q Will I be able to observe my child at the child care center I select?

A The relationships between child care providers and the families they serve are among the most important elements of quality child care. CCS strongly encourages parents to visit their child's classroom and talk with the teacher about their child's progress. In fact, involved parents are one of the most important factors for a successful child care and early learning program.

Q Is financial assistance available for child care?

A The Department of Social and Health Services provides subsidized child care for families that qualify based on income and other factors. Some centers also offer discounts or sliding scale fees for services. Check with each center's director for specific information.

Q May people contact CCS if they wish to explore child care?

A Absolutely! CCS is happy to answer your questions and provide you with assistance in finding a program for your child. For more information call **253-502-2666**.

Catholic Community Services' Child Care and Early Learning Centers recognize each child as an individual displaying unique social, emotional, physical, intellectual and cultural needs, and encourage and promote opportunities for growth and development in each of these areas. All child care centers provide full-time care, Monday through Friday. CCS operates three child care and early learning centers located in Seattle, Olympia and Poulsbo.