

Establish Your Priorities

Every family has different child care needs. Correspondingly, every child care program offers a varying assortment of program options to consider. Your goal is to enroll your child in the program that most closely matches your highest priorities. Needless to say, physical and emotional safety are paramount in every parent's mind. However, beyond safety, there are a myriad of other options, choices, preferences and possibilities to consider.

To simplify the process, begin by determining what your highest priorities are. These priorities are the deal-breakers. The items on your list that are the top 3 or 4 things that a provider *must* offer. When you are absolutely clear on your highest priorities, it is easier, more time-efficient and less frustrating to narrow your choices of providers.

To help determine what is of utmost importance to you, here is a list of many of the most important options to consider.

Location:

Location is almost always one of the top considerations. It is wise to put careful thought into where your child's provider is located in relationship to your home, workplace or business or an older sibling's school and so on. Some may think the obvious choice is a facility closest to mom or dad's work. However, the real question is, which parent has the most regular schedule and stays in the same location for the most time.

If either parent participates in flex-time, has unusual hours or works in the field that will need to play into the decision. Another consideration may be a grandparent or other extended family member who may often deliver and/or pick the child up from child care?

Traffic patterns are definitely part of the equation and should be taken into account. Traffic and commute challenges also raise the question about whether "to commute with" or "not to commute with". If the child care provider will be a reasonable distance from home, some parents prefer not to have their child in the car for extended periods of time. Yet, conversely, some parents enjoy the interaction with their child during the commute time and/or enjoy taking advantage of the carpool lane. Don't forget to calculate in extra gas usage if you will be deviating significantly from your normal route *twice* a day on your way to and from child care.

Clearly, there are numerous choices to assess, yet, the main influencing factor remains, who is closest to the child most of the time. In the event of illness, injury, family emergency or other situation that might require you to quickly retrieve your child, close proximity is key.

And finally, the transitioning from home to child care will be an adjustment *every day* for your child. Therefore, it will be important to choose a location that will facilitate as smooth a morning drop off as possible.

Tuition:

Location and tuition commonly run neck and neck for the top spot of most significant considerations. Each provider has their own tuition fee schedule based on their program expenses.

Your tuition will depend on your child's age. Infants and toddlers have a much lower provider to child ratio, and consequently, higher tuition fees. After age 2 the tuition fee begin to become more affordable as the provider to child ratios goes up.

Beyond the actual "tuition", be sure to ask if there are any additional fees while conducting your interviews. Additional fees can include; annual registration fees, required monthly Scrip Fundraising purchases, supply fees charged at regular intervals, field trips, Internet viewing charges, various late fees and so on. Extra-curricular activities will mean an additional financial commitment as well.

Tuition - plus - any additional fees add up to the *real* cost of your child care obligation.

Hours:

Most child care programs operate from somewhere between 6:00am and 7:00am in the morning to 6:00pm in the evening. Full time tuition usually covers all the hours a provider is in operation. For part time enrollment, each provider will have their own hours offered within their full time hours of operation and tuition fee schedules to accommodate part time enrollment.

Meals:

Will the facility provide meals or will you bring a sack lunch & snacks for your child each day? If your child is an infant, who will provide baby food/formula? Are there any food restrictions to consider?

When making your evaluations, the subject of meals may play an important role in your decision. If your child is an extremely picky eater, has food allergies or maintains a vegetarian/vegan, gluten or dairy free etc. diet, you may prefer a program in which you bring your own food.

However, for convenience, you may prefer a program that provides meals on site. If, after reviewing your choices, your favorite choice of providers offers meals, yet, you would like to bring your child's food, see if the provider can accommodate you in that regard. One thing to note: Picky eaters will often be willing to try and enjoy new foods when they see the other children eating them. There may also be a tuition difference for programs that provide meals verses programs that have the families bring food from home.

Provider to Child Ratio:

Your state licensing regulations will dictate provider to child ratio in your state. However, the National Association for the Education of Young Children recommendation is:

Age of Child	Staff-Child Ratio
Birth to 15 months	1:3 to 1:4
12 to 28 months	1:3 to 1:4
21 to 26 months	1:4 to 1:6
2 to 3 years	1:6 to 1:9
4 years	1:8 to 1:10
5 years	1:8 to 1:10

To learn your state's licensing requirement on provider to child ratio, please visit our State Child Care Licensing Agency page. There you can obtain the website address and additional contact information for your specific state's Child Care Licensing Agency.

Staff Turnover:

In a center situation, a stable, well-qualified and experienced staff is the mark of a quality program and best for the children. Programs operate at their finest when the staff is well established and are knowledgeable about the routine, philosophy and expectations of the program. Your child's experience will be optimum if their caregivers are firmly planted in the program and remain a constant in their experience.

Be sure to also ask about the tenure of the staff members in the classrooms next in line to your child's classroom. As your child grows and moves from one group to the next, you want to be aware of how long those staff members have been with the program as well. Providers with very stable personnel will proudly share with you how long their staff has been with them.

Staff changes in child care programs happen, even in the very best facilities. However, chronically high staff turnover is exceptionally disruptive to the program and can be an indicator of something amiss within the center.

Provider Education and Qualifications:

Most states have minimum education and experience qualification requirements for child care providers. However, also in most states, Family Child Care Home Providers have no educational requirements imposed by state licensing.

Child care centers, on the other hand, are required to employ staff members who have completed college level courses in Early Childhood Education. Owners, Directors and other administrators have additional requirements beyond the caregiver requirements. Personnel holding administrative positions are also required to have completed Early Childhood Education courses as well as additional administrative courses. Each state has its own minimum requirements.

Most states also require all providers to be CPR and first aid certified with annual recertifications required. Our Telephone Interview Questionnaire reminds you to ask about these certifications while conducting your telephone interview.

All child care providers must also be fingerprinted by the state before they are able to work with children. The fingerprinting process enables the state to run a perspective caregiver through the national Dept. of Justice database.

To learn more about your state's educational and qualification requirements please visit our State Child Care Licensing Agencies page. There you can obtain the website address and additional contact information for your specific state's Child Care Licensing Agency.

Program Types:

There are a variety of program types and educational philosophies to consider. Here is a brief overview of many of the program styles and philosophies you will encounter while interviewing perspective providers:

Family child care home: Family child care providers provide care in their home. The size of their program depends upon their license capacity, usually with a maximum enrollment of 12/14 children. These homes are registered or licensed by the state.

Family child care homes vary widely in what they offer. Some home providers run a structured learning environment with an educational philosophy to match, are very organized, well-equipped with well thought out programs. Other family care homes are much more casual in their approach.

For infants and younger children sometimes the smaller environments are a good fit before moving to a center-based program.

Center-Based Care: A child care center provides care for groups of children by a staff of caregivers. Staff members in child care centers are required to have training in early childhood education. Centers are licensed by the state and can be small and have a home-like environment or large and feel more like an elementary school. Centers are either privately operated for profit by a chain or individual, or operated by non-profit agencies, such as churches, public schools, government agencies, or non-profit organizations.

Within center-based care there are 3 main curriculum styles that you will find.

- 1. Play-Based:** In a play-based program, children are given the independence to choose activities based on their own interests. The focus of the program is on play and socialization, rather than academics. Like most centers, play-based center classrooms are set up in stations or specific play areas, usually having a kitchen and play house area with dress up clothes, a reading nook, a sensory table, a block area, art area and large floor area for circle time and large movement activities etc. Teachers may incorporate academic skills through theme based activities, and may add theme based props to classroom learning centers, but the main goal of play-based child care programs are often to develop social skills.

Teachers are facilitators of learning rather than an instructor as in the case of an elementary school teacher. Students' progress is monitored by their participation in hands-on activities and observational assessments, not by worksheets and drills.

That isn't to say that the children don't learn, but lessons are generally done through play-based activities and have their roots in basic social skills, like helping children to get along, learning to share and taking turns.

While there are structured learning times, there is quite a bit of teacher-supervised free play -- how much depends on the school and what their particular philosophy is.

- 2. Developmental Approach:** Developmentally appropriate practice, often shortened to DAP, is an approach to teaching grounded in the research on how young children develop and learn and in what is known about effective early education. Its framework is designed to promote young children's optimal learning and development.

DAP involves teachers meeting young children where they are (by stage of development), both as individuals and as part of a group; and helping each child meet challenging yet achievable learning goals.

Developmentally appropriate practice is the foundation for all of NAEYC's work including—publications, training programs, conferences and accreditation of child care programs. NAEYC is the acronym for National Association for the Education of Young Children.

- 3. Academic Approach:** Academic-based programs focus on teaching children basic skills like math and reading. While there is play, it is not done in the context of learning. Unlike play-based programs, academically focus programs often utilize worksheets, flash cards and other learning tools to help children understand the lessons being presented.

Academic or skills-based programs are teacher directed and managed. It is a structured and routine oriented environment. Teachers extensively plan activities for the children and guide them in that learning.

Children in academic programs may spend the majority of their day learning letters and sounds, colors, shapes and numbers, as well as participating in handwriting practice. They may also participate in learning drills and complete worksheets in addition to a few art projects.

Parent Cooperative Nursery School: In addition to Family Child Care Homes and Center-Based Care, Parent Cooperative Nursery Schools are a 3rd program type.

Parent cooperatives employ a different concept towards child care in contrast to the previous aforementioned programs. In the 2 previous program models, the children are cared for by caregivers and the parent plays no part in the operations of the program. However, parent participation programs are just the opposite. Parents play a major role in every area of the operation of the program.

A parent cooperative nursery school is a community of parents and teachers who work together to provide a rich learning experience for the children. Each family shares in the responsibility of operating the school. Under the guidance of experienced and skilled teachers, parents participate in the classroom daily on a rotating basis. All families enrolled are asked to work a prescribed number of hours a week in order to provide adequate staffing for the facility.

In addition to working with the children, parents are also active in the day-to-day planning and running of the school. Facility maintenance, attendance at housekeeping and fundraising events and general membership meetings are further examples of a parent's involvement in the program.

Parent cooperative nursery schools also provide family education, with workshops and seminars that provide parents with resources and parenting strategies. Parent participation is a unique feature of a cooperative nursery school and has the added benefit of reducing the cost of tuition compared to traditional child care.

Parent participation programs are usually half day programs.

Educational Philosophies:

As you conduct your phone interviews you may have the occasion to talk with a director of a program with a specific educational philosophy. Those educational philosophies will likely fall under one of 4 philosophies.

Montessori - This approach, developed by Maria Montessori in Rome in the early 1900s, is child-centered, with teachers serving as guides. In the Montessori program model, play is a child's work. While there is a focus on academics, the

distinguishing feature is that children learn at their own pace. There are special Montessori toys called manipulatives that are self-corrective; this means that a child knows if they assembled a puzzle correctly, for example, based on the toy fitting together, not because someone showed the child how to do it.

That focus on letting children learn at their own pace also affects how classrooms are arranged, with children ages three, four and five all being in the same room. This allows the older children to serve as role models for the younger ones, and also exposes children to different ages. Children generally have the same teacher for those three years, allowing close teacher-student relationships to develop. The mixed-age aspect also encourages older children to help the younger children, which helps build their self-esteem.

Waldorf - This play-based approach is characterized by a predictable structure, providing children with a dependable routine, such as certain days of the week for set activities like baking or gardening, as well as mixed-age classrooms with the same teacher for multiple years. There is an emphasis on creative learning, reading, singing, acting etc. There is also an emphasis on cooperation, and the setting generally appears like a home—warm and friendly, with wooden toys and natural materials.

What stands out about Waldorf is its stance against traditional grading systems and exclusion of media in the curriculum. Waldorf does not include media (computers, videos or electronics of any kind) and also does not involve academics, which means no homework, tests, handouts or even desks. Children are introduced to formal reading skills in the first grade. The programs are “all-weather” and children spend a lot of time outdoors.

High Scope - This curriculum, which can be found in a lot of community-based programs, such as the local church or YMCA, revolves around a concept of active participatory learning, holding that “children learn best through hands-on experiences with people, materials, events, and ideas.”

Bank Street—The Bank Street philosophy was developed by the Bank Street College in New York City and is very similar to play-based learning. The program hold a child-centered philosophy and believe that children are “active learners, explorers, experimenters and artists” and benefit from a diverse curriculum.

The philosophy stresses the importance of materials in the classroom and views the teacher as a “facilitator of learning.” This method aims to help children make sense of the world around them by studying multiple aspects of their environment.

It's less important whether the school touts a particular educational philosophy or curriculum style, and much more important that the director and teachers feel excited and enthusiastic about what they do.

Extra-Curricular Activities:

Does the provider offer swimming lesson in the summer? How about computer, language or gymnastics/tumbling classes on site? Supplying optional extra-curricular activities and classes to children in child care programs is a cottage industry that affords many added opportunities that may be beyond the scope of the providers on staff.

Mostly extra-curricular activities are an added bonus but are not required to participate in. And while having private vendors offering extra-curricular activities can offer a convenience, there is an extra expense involved so you want to understand your obligation, if any, prior to enrollment.

Parent Involvement:

Usually there will be some type of parent involvement requested. Depending on the provider and their program, this can range from completely optional program events all the way up to significant involvement in the case of a parent cooperative.

This is an important question to ask up front. Parent involvement requirements can impact on your choice of provider contingent upon your availability during the day.

Accreditation:

A child care provider who is accredited has applied for and received an accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children. While accreditation is certainly a measured degree of quality in a child care program, only about 10% of programs are accredited nationwide. Consequently, there are many, many wonderful child care providers, whom are not accredited, that will serve your child very well.