

Quality Child Care: What does it really mean?



Quality child care may be defined as child care services that provide a responsive, developmentally appropriate environment for young children. This quality care, added to a quality home environment, leads to the best possible physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development in the child. Parents who know that their child is receiving quality child care can be assured that their child is safe, nurtured, and challenged to learn.

Parents generally consider their own preferences and a comfortable setting when selecting child care. They look at the warmth, amount, and kind of interaction between child and caregiver. They also look for values similar to their own. On the more practical side, parents ask, "What is the price," "Where is the care located?," and "Is there a space available for my child?"

Quality in child care settings is hard to measure and control. Attempts to legislate and regulate quality have raised questions and concerns about government intervention in child rearing and family issues, particularly related to discipline and what is to be taught.

Quality child care programs create positive environments and provide children with life skills that help in formal schooling. A poor start in early years often leads to frustration and failure later on in school.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) suggests that a "high quality early childhood program provides a safe, nurturing

environment that promotes the physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of young children while responding to the needs of families."

NAEYC indicators of quality in early childhood education include: small group size, low teacher-child ratios, developmentally appropriate curriculum, adequate teacher training, parent-teacher communication, and an environment that is safe and clean.

Components of Quality in Child Care

Group size and adult-child ratios.

Group size affects the relationship between the caregiver and the child. One-on-one responsive attention may be best for meeting a child's needs, but group care is more common.

The more adults that regularly spend time with a group of children, the better the chance that attention will be given to an individual child's needs. The desired ratio varies with age. For example, no more than three infants to

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one adult is considered manageable and recommended as high quality. Group size and adult-to-child ratios change as children grow older and more independent. But even with school-age children, how can one adult possibly attend to all of the *individual* needs of 30 children?

Developmentally appropriate curriculum. There is a predictable pattern of growth during the first 9 years of life. Teachers and parents who understand typical child development patterns have realistic expectations for child performance and behavior. With these in mind, effective learning experiences can be planned.

Teacher training. Adults trained in child development who offer a warm, nurturing environment are best able to provide a quality program. Adults who understand that children differ in growth rate, interests, abilities, frustration levels, and family and cultural influences are better able to meet the needs of children. Through training, providers learn how to plan for children who at different stages have different needs.

Readiness for Self-Care

There is no magical age when a child is ready to be left alone. Parents should carefully consider if a child is willing and ready to be in self-care. Does the child want to stay alone? Is the child responsible? Can the child anticipate and avoid dangerous situations? Can the child think of several ways to handle situations?

Parents should work closely with the child, school, neighborhood, and community resources to prepare the child for self-care.

North Carolina Cooperative Extension has additional materials dealing with self-care.

Close communication between families and caregivers. Parents and caregivers who agree on how to care for children can build a supportive environment. Knowing that their ideas are welcomed sets parents at ease and allows ongoing communication between parent and caregiver. This benefits the child and involves parents in the program.

Children also build their trust from knowing that the same person will be available to them on a regular basis. Frequent staff turnover hinders a child's sense of trust and security.

Safe environment. A safe area for children is essential. Attention should be given to obvious items such as play equipment, fire safety, and poisons. Parents and providers should be sensitive to the child's feelings of security and comfort in the child care setting, the assigned group, and with the actual care provider.

By looking and listening, parents can gain insight into child care practices. Check for cleanliness and safety. Look for child-centered areas with accessible child-sized equipment and space to rest, space to be active, be alone, and to mix in a group. Ask if precautions are taken to isolate a sick child from well children. Check for clean toileting and diapering areas.

Child Care: Who's Responsible?

Who is responsible for quality child care? Is quality child care the responsibility of the family with small children, or the responsibility of the schools? Is quality child care the responsibility of the librarians and shopkeepers who observe young children coming to their establishments as a safe haven after school? Is accessible child care the responsibility of the human resources director in the large company with a high percentage of parents? High-quality child care is a community concern and a community responsibility.

An investment in high-quality child care is an investment in prevention. Quality child care produces motivated learners and a productive labor force. Preschoolers of the '90s will make up 20 percent of the working population in the 21st century.

Parental Choice

Working parents must select some form of child care. Each state has a child care licensing unit, which supervises legal standards. Being licensed is very important. It means the facility has met the health and safety regulations set by the state. However, licensing standards are not a guarantee of quality child care. For licensing information, contact the Division of Child Development at 919-662-4527.

A variety of choices for child care are available, depending on the community. Some possibilities are listed on the next page.

- **Child care centers** typically provide group care for two or more children. They may be located in a home, school, church, or a building specifically designed for group care.
- **Family child care homes** offer a home environment for a small group of children in the caregiver's home. The caregiver may or may not be trained in child care and development. Some are licensed; some are not. In many rural areas, family child care homes and care by relatives are the primary type of child care available.
- **In-home providers** (often known as sitters and nannies) provide care for children in the child's household. They may or may not be trained in child care. Parents should check with the IRS for regulations regarding Social Security and withholding taxes.
- **Preschool or nursery school programs** are similar to child care centers. Historically, preschools were half-day educational programs for children. However, many well-established programs have extended their hours to a full day, keeping the term "preschool" or "nursery" in their name.
- **School-age child care** may be center-based, home-based, or school-based and may include before or after school, holiday, or summer care. Care for school-age children is an area of increased public focus as children in self-care have gained attention and raised community concern.
- **Self-care**, although not promoted as a quality care option, is an option for some parents. Children who seem to do the best in self-care are those who have participated in the decision about being in self-care.

How to Find Child Care Providers

New parents, parents returning to work, and working grandparents who are primary caregivers need dependable child care. Making a child care decision requires finding the right kind of child care for the particular child. Being creative when seeking child

care could be the key. Mention the need for child care to friends, family, and acquaintances to build a network of information about local child care possibilities.

- Check ads or place a classified ad in a newspaper. Ask at school, doctors' offices, or colleges and vocational schools that teach student child care and development.
- The Resource and Referral (R&R) network is an information system that links child care providers with parents seeking child care. Its services should soon be available in all parts of the state.
- Many communities have family child care associations or provider support groups. This network may be a resource for names of providers and child care centers.
- The local affiliate of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) would be a valuable option. NC-AEYC is the state-level organization (phone 1-800-246-6731).
- Contact the Human Development Extension Agent in your area for available resource information.

No matter the source of referral, the final decision lies with the parents. Parents should interview providers over the phone to narrow the decision. Important questions would include the extent of the center's or provider's experience with children, names of references, the center's philosophy of child-rearing, and daily schedules and routines. Once parents locate an affordable child care provider or center that is conveniently located and that has child-rearing values similar to the parent's, on-site interviews should be arranged. Ask about what is taught, their schedule, play area, group size, staff qualifications, and behavior policies.

For more information on making this important decision, you may want to get *Selecting Child Care: A Checklist*, from the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service center in your county. There is no charge for single copies of the publication.

References

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