

Choosing a Child Care Center

Child care centers provide group care in a nonresidential setting. They are licensed by a state agency to care for a specific number of children at each level, with limits on the ratio of children to caregivers. They may offer part-day, full-day, after-school, or kindergarten options. Centers for children 3-5 years old are the most prevalent, however, many centers offer programs for infants, toddlers, and school-age children.

Centers are located in schools, hospitals, religious or spiritual organizations, recreation centers, or self-contained buildings. They usually have outdoor play space or a park nearby. Variations of centers include preschools or nursery schools. Nursery schools are part-day programs aimed at providing enrichment activities for children who do not need full day care.

Full-day programs may provide breakfast, lunch, and two snacks. Centers usually follow a daily curriculum or schedule. Hours of operation typically begin between 6:00 a.m.—7:00 a.m. and end between 6:00 p.m.—6:30 p.m. Times may vary depending on the center. The following is a list of considerations:

Pros	Cons
Centers are usually regulated to set minimum standards for health, safety, and adult-to-child ratios.	Centers are usually not flexible about hours of operation and may charge late fees.
Center directors and staff usually have education in child development.	Center care may be expensive—especially for infants and toddlers.
Centers may offer a wide variety of activities and experiences as part of their programming.	Your child may not get as much individual attention at a center as in a family day care environment or from a nanny.
Your child will have playmates his age and may also meet children of different backgrounds or cultures.	A center may not accommodate all of your children.
Centers are able to provide care even if a teacher is ill.	Centers are unable to care for a mildly ill child.

Accreditation

In addition to a license, which allows the facility to operate, there is a growing trend to apply for accreditation. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) offers an accreditation program for child care centers. Accreditation is a seal of approval. NAEYC has developed criteria, which includes parent input and inspector validation. Centers must apply to NAEYC in order to be accredited and are subjected to an extensive external review process. While accreditation indicates that the center has met NAEYC's standards, it does not mean that accredited programs are necessarily better than those that have not applied for accreditation.

Evaluating Child Care Centers

In order to evaluate child care centers, it is important to visit several programs and spend time observing in each one. Carefully review these materials prior to visiting the centers.

Call in advance to make an appointment. Your referral service will provide you with basic information regarding vacancies, fees, hours, and policies. It is usually best not to bring your child along to every program you visit. It may be confusing for the child. Once you have narrowed your choices, consider making another visit with your child.

The activities of the day and the interaction between the provider and the children are strong indicators of the quality of care provided. Observe your child's prospective classroom. Pay attention to first impressions. Is the room bright and cheerful? Is children's art work displayed? Are children engaged in a variety of activities? Do the children seem involved and happy? Are staff members pleasant and responsive to the children and each other?

You will want to spend some time talking with the director about the program and tour the entire center.

Workplace Options. (Reviewed 2013). *Choosing a child care center*. Raleigh, NC: Author.

Disclaimer: This document is intended for general information only. It does not provide the reader with specific direction, advice, or recommendations. You may wish to contact an appropriate professional for questions concerning your particular situation.

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