

# Choosing Quality Child Care for Children with Disabilities and High Support Needs

Are you looking for child care for a child with a disability or who needs a high level of support? Interviewing potential child care educators can help you learn whether they may be able to meet your child's unique needs. This checklist can guide you in using what you know about your child to think through what safe and quality child care looks like for them.

Use this resource to help you begin a conversation with potential early childhood and out-of-school-time educators. While it may not address all your questions or concerns, this checklist can help you learn about and discuss expectations with your child's future child care educator(s).

## Important notes:

- ★ **Child care types:** Many questions in this checklist refer to “educators” to include child care programs with more than one child care educator. However, you can use most of the questions with an individual home-based educator as well. These questions can also help you evaluate self-contained programs (for only children with specific disabilities) or inclusive settings (for children of all abilities).
- ★ **Disabilities and support needs:** You know your child best. Some of the questions on this list will apply to them, and some will not. Ask the questions that make sense for your child. Be sure to add any other questions you have to learn whether a child care option will meet your child's needs.

## Gather general information.

### Ask:

Do you have space for my child?

What are your rates for my child's age? Are there any other fees? Do you offer any discounts?

*If needed:* Do you accept any type of child care subsidy (e.g., state or military assistance)?

What are the hours that care is provided? Do you ever offer hourly or respite care?

How have you supported children with disabilities in your setting? Have you worked with other children with needs like my child's?

How long have the educators worked in the program? Do all educators have experience working with children with disabilities or who need a high level of support?

Would my child have a consistent primary educator? Who would care for my child if their regular educator were sick or on vacation? Would my child be familiar with that person? Would they have the same training and experience as the primary educator?

**Gather general information.**

What languages do the educators speak?

What education and experience do the educators have in child development and child care?

Do they receive training on inclusion, anti-bias and anti-racism?

Do they receive training on how to support children with specific disabilities? (e.g., training in understanding and caring for children who are neurodivergent [ADHD, autism, OCD, etc.]

Can you provide references for families you have worked with that I can contact?

*For school-age children:* Do you provide care on holidays, days off or school breaks?

**Observe:**

Do the educators seem to enjoy being with children? (*When meeting your child*) Do they appear to enjoy and feel comfortable with my child? Do they understand and respect my child's needs?

Do the books, displays, toys and materials reflect children with diverse abilities, races, genders, family types and cultures?

**Learn about regulation and monitoring.**

**Ask:**

Do you have a child care license? If not, why not? If so, is it up-to-date and in good standing?

If you are licensed, when was your most recent inspection? Were there supervision or health and safety concerns found?

*Learn how to access child care inspection reports where you live, or ask the educator to see a copy of their most recent inspection report.*

Do all adults complete background checks before child care begins?

*If care is provided in someone else's home, this should include adults who live in the home.*

**Consider your child's health, safety and medical needs.**

**Ask:**

What is the adult-to-child ratio?

*Adult-to-child ratio is the number of children that each educator is responsible for. Ratio requirements are usually based on children's ages. However, some children with disabilities may need one-on-one care or a closer adult presence than their peers without disabilities. Consider whether the adult-to-child ratio would allow your child to get the care and attention they need.*

*(If only one educator is present)* Would my child ever be left alone for a short time (e.g., a brief bathroom break)? If so, how would you ensure their safety?

*Note: A child should never be left alone for a long period of time, and the educator should always be able to hear the child even if they must step away for a moment.*

How many children will be in the group with my child?

*Group size is the maximum number of children allowed in the group. Ask yourself whether your child could be safe, happy and calm in the group size offered.*

**Consider your child's health, safety and medical needs.**

How often do the educators sanitize surfaces and toys?

How often do children and educators wash their hands?

Are the educators certified in infant and child CPR and First Aid?

How do they ensure safe sleep for infants?

*Infants should always be placed on their backs to sleep on a firm sleep surface (like a crib or bassinet), with no blankets, pillows or other soft objects in the sleeping area.*

Do the educators have the training needed to meet my child's medical needs? (e.g., seizure first aid, feeding tube daily care, EpiPen use, O2, etc.)? If not, would they be willing to be trained?

Can the educators give my child the medication they need? Are they trained on how to safely store medications and document doses?

If meals and snacks are provided, is it food that my child will/can safely eat? If not, can my family supply the food?

How will the educators ensure that my child does not have contact with foods they are allergic to?

Is there an area where a nursing parent can comfortably breastfeed/chestfeed a child?

Are the educators able and willing to meet my child's toileting or diapering needs? How will you notify me if my child has an accident?

*Consider whether your child needs to be taken to use the toilet more often, help using the toilet or a private place to have a diaper changed. There should be enough supervision that other children are not left alone or under-supervised while an educator is helping another child.*

How would the educators prepare my child for fire or other emergency drills?

Would the educators be able to evacuate my child quickly in an emergency?

If my child needs to be lifted or carried, are the educators able to safely do so during normal care and in case of an emergency?

**Observe:**

Does the environment appear safe for my child's stage of development? (e.g., outlets covered, no broken toys or equipment, no choking hazards, chemicals and medications locked away, etc.)

Is there an appropriate level of supervision for my child?

Do the educators appear to understand my child's health, safety and medical needs?

Do surfaces, toys and the environment look and smell clean?

Do all children have their own sleep space (crib, cot, mat) that is the same every day?

## Consider the **environment and activities.**

### Ask:

What would a typical day look like for my child? Are the educators willing to make changes in the space or schedule to meet my child's needs? How can I request changes?

Will my child be able to choose which activities they would like to do during much of the day?

Do you ever take field trips? If so, how would you support my child and keep them safe? Are there other options for care if we determine my child should not participate in a field trip?

### Observe:

Is there anything about the environment that might be stressful for my child?

*Think about lights, smells, sounds and crowds.*

Will the activities and equipment meet my child's sensory needs?

*Consider whether your child needs frequent big body play; equipment or space to swing, jump or spin; quiet sensory activities (sand, play dough, paint, water); or other types of play.*

Are all child care areas accessible to my child? (e.g., entrances, exits, indoor and outdoor play spaces, hallways, bathrooms, eating and sleeping areas, etc.)

Does the outdoor play area appear safe for my child? Is the equipment appropriate for their development and abilities?

How will the educators support my child in the outdoor space?

Are the tables, chairs and playground equipment accessible to my child?

Is the space arranged in a way that would allow my child to move freely without tripping, getting stuck or hurt, or bumping into furniture?

Are toys, books and other supplies located where my child can reach them? Are those items appropriate for my child's development and abilities?

## Consider your child's **communication and social support needs.**

### Observe:

Are children encouraged to celebrate each person's differences and to support one another?

Do the educators have consistently positive interactions with children and other adults?

Do they have back-and-forth interactions with every child all day long? Do they adapt how they interact with each child according to how the child communicates?

Do they help children learn how to communicate with each other, especially if they communicate in different ways?

## Consider your child's behavioral and emotional support needs.

### Ask:

Are the educators physically able to run after a child and/or safely keep them from leaving the child care area? What steps are taken to prevent a child from leaving the area on their own?

How do the educators help children who need extra support with their behavior or emotions?

If my child gets overstimulated or overwhelmed, what strategies would the educators use to help them to feel calm and safe again?

How do the educators help ease transitions for children who struggle with moving from one activity to another?

What strategies are used if a child becomes disruptive within a group of children? (e.g., refusing to follow directions or join the group, acting aggressively, at risk of hurting themselves or others)

How are guidance and discipline handled?

*Ask to see the guidance and/or discipline policies.*

How do the educators share concerns about a child's behavior? Do they work with families on how best to support a child with behavioral concerns?

What is the policy on restraining children if they demonstrate aggressive behaviors? Are the educators trained in de-escalation to prevent the need for restraints and proper restraint techniques? What strategies do they use to safely de-escalate a situation?

Have the educators received training in trauma-informed care for young children?

### Observe:

Are the educators sensitive and responsive to the needs of all children?

Is there space away from groups or activities where my child could go for quiet and comfort if they are overwhelmed?

Are there fidget toys, weighted blankets, noise-reducing headphones or other items available to help children who are overstimulated?

Are children allowed and encouraged to stim or fidget as needed or desired?

How do the educators talk about behavior? Do they avoid talking about good vs. bad behavior?

How do the educators react when a child behaves in a way that is not desirable?

*Educators should understand that behaviors are a way that children communicate. Children who appear to be "giving us a hard time" are often simply having a hard time. Educators should support and protect children, then work to teach appropriate behaviors. There should not be a focus on punishment.*

## Consider the provider's communication and policies.

### Ask:

How do the educators monitor and document children's development and health? How do they communicate concerns? How can I share if I have concerns?

Do the educators seek families' suggestions for accommodations that may be helpful for a child?

What is the sick child policy?

Is there an open-door policy that allows families to stop by at any time?

*It is normal for educators to discourage visits during nap time or other busy times of the day. However, families should be able to drop in if they desire.*

Is there a policy on excluding a child from care for behavioral reasons? If so, what is the policy?

Are there written policies and procedures?

*Ask to see a copy of the policies. Review them carefully to make sure you agree with the requirements and expectations. Other policies to be aware of are the media policy, pick-up policy and termination policy. If hiring an individual, you may need to create your own policies as a part of your child care contract. [Find tips on what to include in a child care contract here.](#)*

## Consider how the provider can help work toward your child's goals.

### Ask:

Do the educators understand the goals, steps and strategies in my child's Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Plan (IEP)?

Will they allow my child's therapy services to be held on-site during child care hours?

Do they follow guidance from Early Intervention (EI), Early Childhood Special Education (ECSPED) or Special Education (SPED) on ways to adapt activities and environments according to children's IFSPs or IEPs? If possible, are the educators willing to communicate directly with EI, ECSPED or SPED?

Can I or a family member be present initially to help my child adjust or to help the educators learn what works well for my child and what may not?

How can I work with the educators to support my child's learning in and out of child care?

## When looking for the right child care option, be sure to visit any that interest you.

A visit will allow you to get a feel for the person or program and give you time to ask questions and observe the environment and interactions. Use this page to take notes and compare several different options.

### Option 1

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Visit: \_\_\_\_\_

Notes:

### Option 2

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Visit: \_\_\_\_\_

Notes:

### Option 3

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Visit: \_\_\_\_\_

Notes: