

Selecting the Right Child Care Setting for Your Infant or Toddler

How do you know if a child care program is a good fit for your infant or toddler? The right provider will be one who can keep your child healthy and safe while working to support their learning and development every day. This publication will provide you with information and tips on how to select high-quality child care for your infant or toddler.

Brain Development Begins at Birth!

A child's brain goes through a period of rapid growth and development from birth to age three. Their brains make millions of connections every second! The experiences that a child has during this time and the relationships they form can change the way their brain looks and works. Positive experiences and relationships with caring, trusted adults set the stage for future learning and development while also helping children to feel safe and secure as they grow.

Parents are their child's first and most important teacher, and early childhood professionals in child care programs play a big role as well. Caregivers in quality child care programs understand that infants' and toddlers' brains are growing quickly. They have knowledge and training on how to provide stimulation and learning experiences that support skill development from the earliest months into the preschool years.

Finding the Right Fit

Every child is different, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to caring for an infant or toddler. You know your child best, and it is important to use this knowledge when evaluating child care options. Look for a child care program that will support and value your child's style while also providing responsive care to each child.

Unique Styles

When evaluating your child care options, think about your child's individual style. Consider how adaptable they are to new people and situations. Ask yourself how they tolerate change, transition, and sensory stimulation such as sights and sounds. Think about your child's activity level and the amount of focused attention and social interaction they need each day. Reflect on how they like to play and communicate their emotions. Think about the type of environment where your child could thrive and keep it in mind as you visit different programs.

Responsive Care

An important aspect of caring for infants and toddlers is responsive care. Because very young children are still learning to communicate, their caregivers should be excellent observers of the children in their care. They must be tuned in to children's cues, cries, gestures, and sounds. When a child expresses a need, responsive caregivers wonder why the behavior is occurring. They then come up with an educated guess and interact with the child to see if their guess is correct. Is a crying baby tired? Hungry? Wet? Lonely? Frustrated?

Responsive caregivers use their knowledge of a child's individual style and what they have learned about their behaviors to provide individualized care. This can include feeding infants on demand (rather than on a set schedule), putting children down for a nap when they show they are tired, and providing quiet play time or active stimulation for each child throughout the day.

Quality care also includes responsiveness to each child's development. Children grow and learn at different rates, so caregivers must think about children's unique abilities, skills, and interests. Responsive caregivers meet each child's current developmental needs while also encouraging continued learning and growth. They know that very young children are learning to manage their emotions and develop social skills. They understand that some challenging behaviors (like testing boundaries or crying when tired or overwhelmed) are normal and require sensitivity and guidance rather than punishment.

Questions for Potential Caregivers

Be sure to take a tour before selecting a child care program. Below are some of the important considerations that are specific to infants and toddlers. You can also find a full checklist for your visit at www.childcareaware.org.

Feeding and Diapering

- Are infants fed on demand?
- Is breast milk stored appropriately?
- Is there a place where mothers can comfortably breastfeed their child?
- How are new foods introduced to older babies/ toddlers?
- Do caregivers always keep a hand on the child while diapering?
- Do caregivers clean and sanitize the diaper changing surface after every change? Do they wash their hands for at least 20 seconds afterward

Safe Sleep Practices

- Are all infants put to sleep on their backs?
- Do the infant sleep spaces consist of a firm sleep surface, such as a mattress in a crib, covered by a fitted sheet with no other bedding? Are the infant sleep spaces kept free of soft objects, toys, crib bumpers, and loose bedding?
- Are all child care staff, volunteers, and substitutes trained on safe sleep practices to reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)? Are those practices posted in the infant sleeping area as a reminder to all staff, volunteers, and substitutes?

- Do all infants have their own designated sleep space that is the same every day?
- During rest time, can staff see and hear infants and toddlers at all times? Do they regularly check on infants and toddlers when they are sleeping?
- If infants can roll over, is a sign posted by their bed indicating that the child can roll?
- What measures are taken to prevent babies' second- and third-hand smoke exposure? Any smoke exposure can increase the risk of SIDS.

Safety and Supervision

- Are caregivers trained in infant CPR, and is their certification current?
- Are infants and toddlers within sight and sound a t all times?
- Are outlets covered/protected?
- Does the program follow best practices regarding ratio and group size?

For a child care center:

- 0-12 months: 3-4 children per caregiver, max group size of 8 children
- 13-23 months: 4 children per caregiver, max group size of 8 children
- 2-year-olds: 4-6 children per caregiver, max group size of 12 children

For a small family child care home with one caregiver present:

- There are no more than 2 children under age 2 present at one time
- If there are 2 children under age 2 present, there are no more children enrolled.
- If there is 1 child under age 2 present, there may be 1-3 children ages 2 and older enrolled.
- If there are 0 children under age 2 present, there may be 1-6 children ages 2 and older enrolled.

Positive Interactions

- Do caregivers have frequent, positive back-and-forth interactions with each child, even babies?
- Do they notice children's interests? Do they stretch children's learning by talking with them and asking questions about what they are thinking or doing during play?
- Do caregivers get down to children's level to talk and listen?
- Do they give guidance and comfort as needed when children display difficult behaviors?

Environment and Activities

- Are the toys and materials clean and appropriate for the ages of the children?
- Are there enough toys and materials for the number of children?
- Are the infants and toddlers given lots of opportunities to explore toys and materials on their own, with a caregiver available for support or encouragement?
- Are infants and toddlers provided time each day to explore in an interesting outdoor play space when the weather is appropriate?

Finding the right child care program for your infant or toddler is a big task. Contact your local Child Care Resource & Referral agency (CCR&R) for a list of programs in your area, and use the information in this publication and other tools that your state offers (like inspection reports) to help you make your child care choice. Visit www.childcareaware.org to find your local CCR&R and to access information for your child care search.