

LOOK, LISTEN, AND ASK

Tips for Choosing a Quality Child Care Center



Use this tip sheet as a guide when you visit to help you look at, listen for, and ask about key features of a quality child care center. Please note that because of the current pandemic, some programs may not be able to offer in-person tours or program visits at this time. In this case, you should discuss virtual tour options with programs you are considering.

Look



- Look to see how the teachers speak with children. Do they speak with them **at the children's eye level** by sitting, crouching, or kneeling? Do they greet each child?
- Look at the classroom layout. Can the **teachers always see the children**?
- Look at the classroom space. Is it **well organized and clean**?
- Look to see if the classroom provides a **variety of toys** that your child would enjoy. Are the toys kept so that children can reach them and play with them?
- Look at the outdoor and indoor spaces used for play. Look at the play equipment and toys. Do they look **safe and appropriate**?
- Look at the building, equipment, and materials available to the children. Are they **clean and in good repair**?
- Look at the center's handwashing procedure. Do the teachers and children **frequently wash their hands**?

Listen



- Listen to the sounds you hear while visiting. Do you hear frequent **laughter and play**?
- Listen to how teachers speak with the children. You should hear a **positive, nurturing tone of voice** at an **appropriate volume level**.
- Notice the smells while you are visiting the program. Are they **clean, pleasant smells** or do you notice strong unpleasant odors?

Ask



- Ask **how many children** are in the classroom and **how many adults** care for them. The fewer children for each adult, the better.
- Ask for a copy of the program's **family handbook**. Review the program's philosophy and policies for rates, fees, and payment. Look at drop-off/pick-up, program closure, emergency planning, and child discipline and guidance policies.
- Ask how the program handles **challenging behaviors**. Do they use positive guidance strategies (such as giving choices, redirecting behavior, setting limits with follow through, listening, and encouraging)?
- Ask if the program allows **families to drop-in and visit**. Please note that this may not be permitted during the current pandemic.
- Ask how the program **keeps families informed** about things happening in the program. Are there opportunities for families to get involved in program activities and provide input?
- Ask how the program **shares details of the child's day** with families (feeding, diapering, napping, playing, mood, developmental milestones).
- Ask if the program provides **meals and snacks**.
- Ask about the **education and training requirements for the director and teachers**. Do they participate in continuing education?
- Ask how the program **handles sick children and when a child should stay home due to illness**. What is their process for **giving children medication**, if applicable?
- If your child has a disability, ask how the program would support your child throughout the day. Have **teachers been trained in how to support children with disabilities** or are they willing to get trained, if applicable?
- Ask how teachers plan classroom activities.
- Ask if the program has had high **staff turnover**. Low staff turnover is important.
- Ask if the children **play outside** often.
- Ask how the program lessens the spread of illness.

If you have an infant or toddler



- Look at the **classroom's daily schedule**. Ask how the teachers accommodate each child's needs and personal schedule (sleeping, eating, and playing).
- Look at **how bottles are stored**. Are they clearly labeled with the child's name and date? Are they stored safely in a refrigerator?
- Look to see **where the teachers are positioned** in the classroom. Are they close to children, holding them, feeding them, and playing with them?
- Look to see **where the children are positioned** in the classroom. How long are children in devices that restrict their movement (such as swings, high chairs, bouncy seats, exersaucers, cribs)? Children should spend most of their time playing on the floor.
- Look at the furnishings and equipment in the room. Are they **clean and in good repair**?
- Look to see if a **variety of toys are available** to children. **For infants**, are there toys they can use to make noise, listen to, or look at? Are there board books? Are there toys that allow them to build, stack, or play pretend? Are there toys that allow them to use small and large muscles (peg puzzles, large and small balls)? **For toddlers**, are there toys that allow them to solve problems (wood puzzles, things to sort), toys that help them pretend and build (dress-up items, play food and furniture, puppets, different building blocks), art materials (large crayons, chalk, markers, paint, paper, basic instruments)?
- Look to see **how the children sleep**. **For infants**, does each child have their own crib and is it labeled with their name or picture? Are children placed on their backs to sleep with no toys, bumpers, bottles, or blankets in the crib? **For toddlers**, ask how the program supports nap and rest time.
- Look to see **what is displayed in the classroom**. Are there many colorful toys and real pictures of people, objects, and animals displayed at the children's eye level?
- Look at the **diapering procedure**. Are diaper-changing surfaces cleaned and disinfected after each use? Do teachers wash their hands before and after each diapering and are children's hands washed afterward?
- Listen to how caregivers are talking with infants and toddlers during diapering, feeding, and play. Are they **talking to them often and in a gentle, playful tone**?
- Ask how the program supports **breastfeeding**, if applicable.
- For toddlers, ask how the program supports **toilet learning**.

If you have a preschool child



- Look at **how the room is set up**. Does it feel like young children belong there and their play and work is important? Is furniture child-sized? Does the furniture allow children to easily work together?
- Look to see if the **room is divided to encourage play**. Does it have dedicated spaces for children to participate in different kinds of play? Areas should include space to explore blocks, dramatic play, art, books, table toys, music and movement, and science.
- Look to see if there are a **variety of materials** that children can reach without having to ask for assistance.
- Look to see **what is on the walls and shelves** in the classroom. Look at the **books and play materials**. Are people from diverse backgrounds represented in pictures on the walls, in books, and play materials (such as dolls)? Are there many colorful pictures of real objects and animals displayed? Is children's artwork displayed throughout the room at children's eye level?
- Look to see if the program provides **soft, cozy spaces and materials** (pillows, rugs, bean bags, soft furnishings). Is there space for children to seek comfort and take a break from the day?
- Ask how the program supports **nap and rest time**.
- Look and listen to see **how children are communicating**. Are they having frequent conversations with other children and teachers about what they are doing?
- Ask how the program supports **children's social and emotional development** (taking turns, following directions, playing and compromising with others, caring and showing empathy, sharing, recognizing and talking about their emotions).
- Ask about the **program's daily schedule**. Are a mix of activities planned (indoor and outdoor, playtime alone and with small and large groups, active and quiet times, and staff-directed and free play)?