PARENT ACTION GUIDES

Early Childhood Education
(Ages 0-5)

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Deciding on a childcare or preschool program for your child can be a daunting and stressful task. There are many issues to consider including quality, location, cost, and hours of operation. Fortunately, many of these issues can be resolved with a quick phone call or visit to the program's website. Unfortunately, quality, the main concern for parents, requires more effort.

Why is Early Childhood Education Important?

The first five years of a child's life are the most important in brain development. During this time, children acquire knowledge at a more rapid rate than at any other period in their life. Children who attend high quality early education programs are more likely to: be ready for kindergarten, score better on standardized tests, go to college, and have higher paying jobs as adults. A supportive and engaging early childhood education program is important because it starts infants and toddlers on the path to success.

What Should You Look For in a Childcare or Preschool Program?

Early childhood education programs such as prekindergarten and academically focused childcare set children up to be successful students before they ever step into a kindergarten classroom. These programs should provide children with developmentally appropriate instruction in vocabulary, early literacy, phonemic awareness, math, and many other areas that students often struggle with during their elementary years. In addition, these programs should also help children to become more comfortable with routine and structure.

Licensed childcare facilities are monitored and regulated by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. The state routinely inspects these facilities and enforces basic health and safety standards. Records of the state's inspections are publicly available at **www.dontbeinthedark.org**. In addition, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accredits and certifies centers. The NAEYC standards are much higher than the state's minimum standards. A list of centers accredited by NAEYC is available at **www.naeyc.org/academy/accreditation/search**.

After checking the program's accreditation status and the state's records for violations and compliance, you should visit the center to gain a better sense of both the physical and emotional environment.

Visiting the Center

During your visit, plan to spend 20-30 minutes talking to staff and observing their morning or afternoon routines (circle time, book reads, and center time are the best times to observe). If possible, avoid visiting during meal and nap times as you will be less likely to see the quality of learning activities between the staff and children.

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Things to pay attention to include:

Physical Environment:
Classrooms and areas for children should be open and visible from any other point within the classroom. This ensures that the teachers can always see your child and make sure that your child is not at risk for injury or participating in unsafe activities. Age appropriate materials such as alphabet posters, letter walls, calendars, and weather and reading charts should be at your child's eye level (not near the ceiling or at an adult's eye level). For classrooms serving children three years and older, look for evidence of: writing (both children's and teacher's), sorting, counting, as well as number, letter and word recognition. These are all good signs that the program is working on academic enrichment activities.

Emotional Environment:
Students should feel safe to share their thoughts and feelings in the classroom. The classroom should not be a place for unkind words, bullying, or verbal abuse, as these are detrimental to the child's well-being and social development. Ask staff specifically about their discipline policies. Also watch how staff members relate to one another and to the children both in and out of the classroom.

Teacher Qualifications

Ask teachers and staff about their qualifications. You are trusting your child to their program and have the right to make sure they are qualified and capable professionals.

Early childhood teachers should have formal training in the field of early childhood education so that they may adequately provide the instruction and care that your child deserves. The state of Texas requires a high school diploma or GED, 24 hours of pre-service training, and 24 hours of annual continuing education for early childcare professionals. Suggested teacher trainings include classes on curriculum, safety practices, first aid, and emergency preparedness. Below are the most common qualifications for early childhood instructors.

- **Early Childhood Associates Degree / Child Development Associates Degree from an accredited program:** teachers holding this degree have spent two years acquiring knowledge on how to provide the appropriate environment and curriculum to children in their classroom.

- **Bachelor's Degree in Education (or another field) with a teaching certificate from the state specifying an Early Childhood qualification:** teachers holding this degree and certification have rigorous training in classroom management, curriculum, and at least one semester of practicum in a classroom under the observation of a mentor teacher.

Other Things to Consider and Ask About:

- **Waiting lists:** Many early childhood programs have waiting lists and a registration process, including a non-refundable deposit.
- **Food menus:** Some programs ask parents to provide the food for their child, while others offer meals and snacks. For those that serve food, menus should be available to give you an example of the types of foods being served. If parents are expected to provide meals and snacks, ask how the food is stored throughout the day (refrigerator or at room temperature) so you know what you should pack.
- **Time spent on the playground:** Children should spend 30-45 minutes on the playground in the morning and afternoon (weather permitting).
- **Screen time (TV and Computers):** It is recommended that screen time be limited to no more than one to two hours per day for children over two years of age.
- **Childcare assistance:** Families meeting specific requirements (financial and other factors) are eligible for childcare assistance. Check with your local workforce solutions office to see if you qualify for childcare assistance. To locate your local workforce solutions office, go to **www.twc.state.tx.us/dirs/wdas/directory-offices-services.html**.