

Early Years are Learning Years

Choosing a Preschool

Even before kindergarten, parents should be aware of ways to make the most of learning opportunities for their young children. One important choice for many families in their child's early years involves preschool or child care.

The first years of a child's life are a crucial development period, and children who are nurtured and stimulated during these years are much more prepared for formal reading and math and are more likely to have the social skills they will need when it's time for kindergarten. Parents are a child's first teachers, but early childhood education programs are also important, especially with the growing number of families with one parent, and families where both parents work full-time.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has approved new Early Childhood Program Standards that outline what NAEYC believes every child care, preschool and other early childhood education programs should provide to nurture the learning and development of young children. These standards can be used as a guideline by parents to determine the quality of a preschool or child care program.

As the leading organization of early childhood educators, NAEYC established an accreditation system in 1985 to raise the quality of early childhood education and help families identify good preschool and child care programs. To earn NAEYC accreditation, programs must meet national performance standards of quality that go beyond most state health and safety licensing requirements. Teachers and staff in these programs receive ongoing training, and the programs are observed by independent, professional experts, and reviewed by a national accreditation panel.

To find a NAEYC-accredited child care or preschool program in your area, click on "Accredited Program Search" on the NAEYC Website at www.naeyc.org. Local child care resource and referral agencies are also good sources. To find one in your area, check www.childcareaware.org.

The following guidelines, based on the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards, can help you identify high-quality early care and education programs for your young children.

Preschool and child care programs should focus on children:

- Watch to see that children interact with other children and adults, so they can build healthy relationships.
- Ask about the curriculum, which should include a variety of activities appropriate for the children's ages and needs.

Preschool and child care programs should have qualified staff:

- The staff should have the educational background to promote your child's learning and development. Ask what degrees and training teachers have.

- Ask how long teachers and staff have been with the program. Teachers that stay in the program longer are more able to focus their attention on the children and establish bonds with them.

Preschool and child care programs should build relationships with families:

- Program staff should work with families to meet their child's needs. Ask how information and concerns are communicated between staff and families.
- Check that the program's policies allow families to visit their child during the program day.

Preschool and child care programs should be well-run:

- Check that the program is licensed by the state. The facilities need to be age-appropriate and well maintained, both indoors and outdoors.
- Check whether the program has policies and practices to help keep children safe from preventable illness and injury.
- Ask about the child-to-teacher ratio, which helps determine how much individual attention your child will get. For example, there should be at least one adult for every ten 4-year-olds.

Evaluating a program based on these standards will help you choose a high-quality program for your child that will allow them to get a great start on learning.

Early Years Are Learning Years is a regular series from NAEYC (www.naeyc.org) providing families with tips for giving their young children a great start on learning.