

# The Early Care + Education Starter Kit

Some useful information for those who are considering early care for their child. If you don't find what you're looking for, contact us and we'll find resources for you. [admin@wonderslearning.org](mailto:admin@wonderslearning.org)

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# Play Helps Children Learn

Play isn't just fun, it's fundamental. Children need the playtime they crave, as it's crucial for healthy development.

Children learn about the world through exploring ideas, manipulating objects and problem-solving with others. At play, children are using their creativity and imaginations to try on new roles and to test new concepts. Play provides a meaningful context in which children practice skills and express ideas.

Developmental theorist Jean Piaget said that "play is the work of children." It fosters cognitive, physical and social-emotional development. In the context of pretend play, children become very motivated to show what they know and to learn new skills. Doris Bergen, a Distinguished Professor of Educational Psychology at Miami University, states that there is a growing body of evidence supporting connections between cognitive competence and high-quality pretend play.

Imagine what might happen when a group of young children transforms the corner of their classroom into a pizza parlor. While creating and playing in their restaurant, children acquire and use skills in all of the so-called "academic" learning areas.

In the pretend pizza parlor, children practice letter formation and letter-sound correspondence while creating menus and writing up orders. By making signs to promote their restaurant, children explore the conventions of print and see first-hand the usefulness of writing to convey a message. Children learn and try out new vocabulary words, such as "receipt" and "reservation". They hone their oral language skills while problem solving with peers and acting out their roles. They gain fine-motor practice when drawing and cutting out the ingredients.

In dramatic play scenarios, children develop their number sense and mathematical thinking. In the pretend restaurant, children practice writing numerals on checks, estimate how many pepperoni it takes to cover a pie, measure ingredients, and count out money when paying the bill. Intrigued, children ask questions about social studies and science (e.g., "Where do the ingredients come from?"; "What jobs do we need to run the place?"; "What makes the crust rise in the oven?")

Beyond "academic" learning, children also use play to develop through interactions with peers and adults. Social-emotional skills are essential for success in childhood and beyond. Interactive play is the ideal medium for social-emotional learning. While crafting play scenarios children must negotiate and trouble-shoot with their peers. They need to control their impulses and effectively express their emotions for the play to continue smoothly.

Being able to take on other people's perspectives is a valuable skill that is also learned through role-playing. While making and serving



Read Doris Bergen's paper, "The Role of Pretend Play in Children's Cognitive Development":  
<http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v4n1/bergen.html>



**"It is a happy talent to know how to play."**

Ralph Waldo Emerson

## Play Helps Children Learn

pretend pizza, children can experience the world from the eyes of cooks, wait-staff and customers. They must come up with strategies for fair play when tackling problems like, “Can a restaurant have more than one chef?” or “How can we split up the cheese fairly so our customers are happy?”

Teachers and parents perform the important roles of facilitating and fostering the learning that happens during play. To promote skill acquisition and concept discovery, teachers and parents should carefully plan the resources and materials that are offered. They must use what they have observed about the strengths and needs of individual children to create appropriate play opportunities that help children reach the next level in their development.

While play is occurring, teachers and parents can encourage children to reflect on what they’re doing and help them put their ideas into words. When children are problem-solving, adults can offer support and provide clear expectations about behavior without intruding or “taking over.” The adult’s goal should be to offer an appropriate level of guidance; not so much that the flow of the play is interrupted and not so little that the play can’t be sustained. A great way for parents and teachers to extend children’s thinking is by asking non-intrusive, open-ended questions, such as: “What do you think would happen if...?” or “What would you do if...?”

When it comes to early childhood education, learning is a complex process that children experience in a way that a typical academic environment doesn’t address. Hands-on, interactive play needs to be an essential part of each child’s day because playing *is* learning.



Elvin Klassen, a former teacher, principal, and district administrator, wrote an article that discusses how and why to ask questions that promote growth. He provides some great examples of open-ended questions.

Read it here: <http://bit.ly/cT15H>



Read an article that explains why play-based learning can set your children up for success at school and beyond.

Read it here: <http://goo.gl/tTpoa9>



# How to Choose High Quality Care + Education

Finding high quality care and education for your child can be a daunting process. Discovering the right “fit” for your family can take a lot of time and effort. Here are some suggestions for evaluating your childcare options.

## BEFORE YOU VISIT PROGRAMS:

**Create your own wish list.** Consider what qualities are most important to you. Think about your family’s needs and about the interests and abilities of your child. A great way to begin your search is by listing what matters to you the most. What are your top priorities? What would be your “deal breakers”? What kind of environment would be a good fit for your child’s temperament, health, and interests?

**Do your research.** Spend some time learning what research in the field of early childhood education tells us about quality child care. Child Care Aware of America has put together a resource that describes the 38 indicators of high quality child care derived from leading research in the field.

Read it here: <http://goo.gl/5LGuZh>

**Make a list.** Whether you ask friends and relatives, search the internet, or consult an official listing, compile a list of accessible early care providers. Keep an eye out for important information listed on official websites and customer reviews, as it may help you immediately eliminate some options from your list.

## WHEN YOU VISIT:

**See for yourself.** Once you have a list of programs to consider, it’s time to attend open houses and arrange visits. It is often helpful to first visit on your own and bring your child on a return visit.

**Keep notes.** There is a lot to take in during a visit and the information provided can be overwhelming. It helps to come to each visit with a list of things to look for and questions you’d like answered. Print out and bring an easy-to-use, comprehensive checklist found on page 6 of this kit to keep track of your notes.

**Learn about culture.** Ask about a program’s philosophy and beliefs about child development. Do they believe children learn by doing? Do they nurture each child’s social and emotional growth? Do the teachers plan hands-on learning experiences that help advance children’s cognitive skills? Here are ten program standards, according to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC): <https://goo.gl/6yMjJY>

**Check accreditation.** Find out if the program is accredited by NAEYC. If it is not currently accredited, are they in the process of becoming accredited? Accreditation is a national, voluntary system with the goal of setting professional standards and helping families identify high-quality care. It is a lengthy process that

requires all staff to take part in reflecting on, assessing and improving the care they provide. You can search for accredited programs on the NAEYC website: <http://goo.gl/Cjs87o>

Here are some additional indicators to seek out for when visiting child care providers:

- ☀ **Clear, written health and safety policies.** Make sure to get copies of their policies and parent handbook.
- ☀ **Classrooms that are warm and welcoming.** Are there interesting and varied materials? Is the environment set up to encourage children's exploration and interaction?
- ☀ **Calm, caring and frequent interactions between teachers and children.** Do the teachers seem to know the children well? Do they speak with children in ways that reflect and extend children's thinking and understanding of the world? Are the staff responsive and respectful?
- ☀ **An inclusive, multicultural philosophy.** Do they teach respect and acceptance of ALL people? Do they have an open-door partnership with families?
- ☀ **A belief in the importance of life-long learning.** What are their required teacher qualifications? Do they encourage teachers to further their education? Do they provide meaningful training opportunities for staff? Do they offer workshops and resources for parents?

**Ask for references.** The director should be able to provide you with the name and phone number of a few parents you can call to ask about their experiences with the program.

#### **AFTER YOU VISIT:**

**Listen to your instincts.** Consider all you have learned and observed, and go with your gut! Objectively compare and contrast the programs, but don't forget to trust your instincts.

**Wrap-up and review.** Have you found the right "fit" for you and your child? Can you picture your child thriving in this program? How do you think you'd feel at drop-off time each morning? Can you easily imagine your child learning and laughing in one of the classrooms?

# Know Your Options When Choosing Early Care Providers

## In your home.

If you are looking for the convenience of having a caregiver travel to your home on a regular or semi-regular basis, consider hiring a **nanny** or an **au pair**.

- ☀ A **nanny** is someone who provides 40-60 hours of child care per week on either a live-in or a live-out basis. Nannies are typically unsupervised by the parent throughout the day, and sometimes perform minimal household duties related to child care. Nannies can be hired through a licensed agency or independently.
- ☀ An **au pair** is a live-in child care provider who works under the direct supervision of the parents for about 40-60 hours a week. Au pairs are frequently young people from faraway destinations, and have minimal early care training.

## Outside the home.

Child care professionals who work outside of your home often provide trained supervision in childproofed environments, where children can socialize and learn from the instructors and one another. The primary types of out-of-home providers are **early care + education centers**, **part-time programs**, and **family child care centers**, in which children are watched over in the caregiver's home.

- ☀ **Early Care + Education centers** employ several staff members to take care of a larger group of children. Children interact with both adults and peers, and are helped in developing social and emotional skills. Many early care centers create developmental activities, ensure quality play time, and upkeep disciplinary and health standards. Single-site providers operate in one location, while multi-site providers give parents the flexibility of choosing one of several locations depending on changes in their day-to-day schedules.
- ☀ **Family child cares** are operated from the homes of the child care provider.
- ☀ **Part-time child care**, such as a play group, allows parents to leave children in the care of a supervising adult for a few hours at a time.
- ☀ **Publicly funded preschool programs** are subsidized by many state governments, and offer full- and half-day care either for no charge or on sliding-fee scales based on income.



# A Checklist to Evaluate Early Care + Education Providers

The following is a modified checklist excerpted from Child Care Aware®.

Find the original checklists at <http://www.childcareaware.org/child-care-center-checklist/>

Take this checklist with you when you visit a childcare provider.

## Caregivers/Teachers

- Do the caregivers/teachers seem to genuinely like children?
- Do the caregivers/teachers get down on each child's level when speaking with him or her?
- Are children greeted when they arrive? Are the adults warm and welcoming?
- Are positive guidance techniques used? Do the adults avoid yelling, spanking, and other negative punishments?
- Are children's needs quickly met even when things get busy? Do the adults pay individual attention to each child?
- Are your children watched at all times, even when they are sleeping?
- Are the caregivers/teachers trained in CPR, first aid, and early childhood education?
- Are the caregivers/teachers involved in continuing education programs?
- Are the adults trained in child abuse prevention and how to report suspected cases?
- Will the caregivers/teachers always be ready to answer your questions?
- Will the caregivers/teachers tell you what your child is doing every day?
- Are parents' ideas welcomed? Are there ways for you to get involved?
- Do the caregivers/teachers and children enjoy being together?
- Is there enough staff to serve the children?  
(NACCRRA guidelines recommend one caregiver per 3 or 4 infants; one caregiver per 3 or 4 young toddlers; one caregiver per 4 to 6 older toddlers; one caregiver per 6 to 9 preschoolers)

## Setting

- Is the atmosphere bright and pleasant?
- Is there a fenced-in outdoor play area with a variety of safe equipment? Can the caregivers/teachers see the entire playground at all times?
- Are there different areas for resting, quiet play and active play? Is there enough space for the children in all of these areas?

## Activities

- Is there a daily balance of play time, story time, activity time and nap time?
- Are the activities right for each age group?
- Are there enough toys and learning materials for the number of children?
- Are there daily or weekly activity plans available? Have the adults planned experiences for the children to enjoy? Will the activities help children learn?
- Do the adults talk with the children during the day? Do they engage them in conversations? Ask questions, when appropriate?
- Do the adults read to children at least twice a day or encourage them to read, if they can read?
- Are toys clean, safe and within reach of the children?

## Health and Safety

- Do adults and children wash their hands (before eating or handling food, or after using the bathroom, changing diapers, touching body fluids or eating, etc.)?
- Are diaper changing surfaces cleaned and sanitized after each use?
- Do all of the children enrolled have the required immunizations?
- Are medicines labeled and out of children's reach?
- Are adults trained to give medicines and keep records of medications?
- Are surfaces used to serve food cleaned and sanitized?
- Are the food and beverages served to children nutritious, and are they stored, prepared, and served in the right way to keep children growing and healthy?
- Are cleaning supplies and other poisonous materials locked up, out of children's reach?
- Is there a plan to follow if a child is injured, sick or lost?

## In General

- Do you agree with the discipline practices?
- Do you hear the sounds of happy children?
- Are children comforted when needed?
- Is the program licensed or regulated?
- Are surprise visits by parents encouraged?
- Will your child be happy there?



# Early Care + Education Accreditation

## WHAT IS ACCREDITATION?

Accreditation is a national, voluntary system maintained by governing organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the world's largest organization focused on early childhood education. The accreditation programs aim to set professional standards and help families easily identify high-quality care. It is a lengthy process that requires all staff to take part in reflecting on, assessing, and improving the care they provide.

## WHY LOOK FOR ACCREDITATION?

Early care providers who receive accreditation are scrutinized for quality-assurance compliance, and show a voluntary commitment to continuous improvements in operations and program development. Accreditation standards are based on current research in the field of early childhood education, so children receiving care through accredited child care providers are treated in a manner best suited for promoting positive growth and development, and are exposed to a wide variety of developmental resources and materials. Accredited providers have a proven history of creating and executing well-planned, developmentally-appropriate programs and activities in a safe and healthy environment.

## NAEYC CODE OF ETHICAL CONDUCT

The NAEYC is one of the accreditation organizations for early childhood care. Its Code of Ethical Conduct sets forth a framework of professional responsibility.

Core values of the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct:

- ☀ Appreciate childhood as a unique and valuable stage of the human life cycle
- ☀ Base our work on knowledge of how children develop and learn
- ☀ Appreciate and support the bond between the child and family
- ☀ Recognize that children are best understood and supported in the context of family, culture, community, and society
- ☀ Respect the dignity, worth, and uniqueness of each individual (child, family member, and colleague)
- ☀ Respect diversity in children, families, and colleagues
- ☀ Recognize that children and adults achieve their full potential in the context of relationships that are based on trust and respect

The full report can be viewed here:

<http://goo.gl/h6FZzK>

## Accreditation Organizations

Achieving accreditation through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is just one of the ways in which early care providers can ensure that their standards are current and professionally acceptable. Below is a list of the different organizations through which an early care provider can be accredited:

- ☀ **National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)**  
<http://www.naeyc.org/>
- ☀ **Association for Early Learning Leaders (AELL)**  
<https://www.earlylearningleaders.org/>
- ☀ **National Early Childhood Program Accreditation (NECPA)**  
<http://www.necpa.net/>
- ☀ **National AfterSchool Association (NAA)**  
<http://www.naaweb.org/>
- ☀ **National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC)**  
<http://www.nafcc.org/>
- ☀ **Council for Professional Recognition - Child Development Associate Credential (CDA)**  
<http://www.cdacouncil.org/>