

Choosing Quality Child Care on Short Notice

This checklist can help you choose a child care provider or program if you do not have a lot of time. Use the questions as your guide during a phone interview (or, if possible, an in-person visit). The explanations can help you learn what to listen or look for in response to each question **no matter what type of child care you choose.**

★ Start here:

Do you have space for my child(ren) starting on (date) ?

What rates do you charge for child care? What other fees are charged? Do you offer any discounts?

What are the hours you provide child care?

If needed: Do you accept state or other subsidy payments for families that qualify?

What languages do providers speak?



Ask over the phone and observe in-person:



Are you required to have a child care license? If so, is the license up-to-date and in good standing? When was your most recent inspection? Were there supervision or health and safety concerns found?



Do all adults complete background checks before spending time with children?



What steps do you take to keep children healthy and safe?



What previous child care experience do providers have?



Are providers certified in infant and child CPR and First Aid? Do providers take regular trainings on child development; health and safety in child care; and diversity, equity, and inclusion?



What types of interactions can I expect to see between the providers and children?



How do you handle guidance and discipline at my child's age and development?



What would a typical day look like for my child?



What are your policies on excluding children for illness or behavior?

What you should know:

Most states allow you to check a provider's licensing status and inspection reports online. [Find your state's licensing and inspection info here.](#)

No adult should be left alone with a child without clear, comprehensive background checks on file. [Learn more about background checks.](#)

Listen/Look for how the provider or program prevents **illness** (frequent handwashing and sanitizing), **injury** (layout of space; appropriate play equipment), **abuse** (background checks, discipline policies, training), and **missing children** (secure indoor/outdoor spaces, policies to count children at transitions). Providers should have a detailed plan for emergencies that could happen in your area.

Providers should have at least one year of experience caring for children your child's age.

Training in CPR, First Aid, and health and safety helps providers protect children. Training on topics like child development, anti-racism, anti-bias, and inclusion helps providers understand how children learn and grow and create equitable, inclusive child care environments.

Listen/Look for back-and-forth interactions happening between providers and every child, all day long. Providers should treat children and their feelings, thoughts, and ideas with respect.

Providers should use positive guidance rather than punishments and aim to teach appropriate behaviors as children grow.

Listen/Look for activities geared toward children's interests and development. Activities should allow for learning through play, interactions, reading, art, music, etc. Screen time should not be a regular activity.

Listen for specific illnesses, symptoms and behaviors that might cause a child to be excluded from care. Listen for how providers handle discipline and how they work to prevent suspension and expulsion from child care.



If your child has a disability or high support needs, you may need to ask additional questions and listen for answers based on your child's needs rather than their age group.



For more on quality child care for children with disabilities, see [Choosing Child Care for a Child with Special Needs](#).

If you have an infant (0-12 months), also ask/observe:

0-12 MONTHS

Do infants get fed, changed, and put down for a nap on a strict schedule, or are these based on each baby's needs?

Providers should follow each baby's needs for feeding, changing and naps.

What activities do you offer for babies?

Activities for babies should look like "play" (exploring toys, cloth or board books, patterns and textures, mirrors, etc.) and "talking," reading, and singing with providers.

What kinds of interactions should I expect to see between babies and caregivers?

Back-and-forth interactions with providers should happen all day long. This can look like providers listening when babies squeal, cry, or coo and responding with words or in a similar way, just like a conversation.

How do you ensure safe sleep for infants?

Babies 0-12 months should be placed on their backs to sleep on a firm sleep surface (crib, pack and play, bassinet) with a fitted sheet and no other bedding or soft items. Babies who fall asleep in a car seat or swing should be moved to a safe infant sleep space as soon as possible.

If you have a toddler (1-2 years), also ask/observe:

1-2 YEARS

What activities do you offer for toddlers?

Activities for toddlers should provide opportunities for learning through play, reading, art, music, movement and interactions.

How do providers handle behaviors that are challenging at this age?

Providers should understand that behavior is a way that children communicate and that big feelings are typical at this age. Discipline should be about teaching children appropriate behaviors rather than punishment.

What steps do you take to create a safe environment for toddlers to learn and explore?

Providers should remove hazards (cleaning supplies, tripping or choking hazards, etc.), cover electrical outlets, secure building and outdoor play area exits, and provide developmentally appropriate toys and materials.

Do you have a potty training policy, or do you support families in potty training older toddlers?

Listen to the provider's potty training policy and decide if it matches what you would like for your child.

If you have a preschooler (3-4 years), also ask/observe:

3-4 YEARS

How will you help my preschooler get ready for Kindergarten?

Preschoolers should be able to practice independence, communication, and following directions through play. Play can include identifying letters, counting, and making observations. It should allow children to move their bodies and work on skills like gripping a pencil and grasping small items.

Do children get to choose how they want to play, or do providers lead children in play?

At this age, free play is best, but some adult-led activities are ok.

Do you have a potty training policy, or do you support families in potty training preschoolers?

Listen to the provider's potty training policy and decide if it matches what you would like for your child.

If you have a school-ager (5-12 years), also ask/observe:

5-12 YEARS

Are you able to care for school-age children during school delays, closures or holidays?

Providers that care for children when schools are closed can be helpful for families who need to work on teacher work days or holidays.

What kinds of activities are available for school-age children? Do you offer homework help, if needed?

There should be a variety of activities to meet children's interests (sports, art, board games) and needs (homework help, quiet space, big body play).

How do you support school-age children as they face problems and disagreements with one another?

Providers should be available to support children when they have a problem. They should encourage children to try to work things out together but be ready to help when needed.