

SIGNS OF A GOOD DAYCARE CENTER By The Baby Center

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Choosing a daycare center for your child involves asking plenty of questions and being observant. Start your search about six months before you'll need childcare (the best centers fill up fast), and use the following list of criteria as a guide. If you find a center that scores a perfect ten, you've found childcare gold.

Of course, that goal is pretty lofty; only about 7,000 centers have been accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) — the highest standard around — so you'll have to decide what's most important to you and choose from among your best options. "For us it was location, location, location," says BabyCenter mom Laura Mason of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. "We wanted a daycare within walking distance of work, since our son is breastfed and won't take a bottle."

Look for:

A GOOD REPUTATION

A good daycare center should have a welcoming, friendly atmosphere and be known for its nurturing environment. Ask the center for names and numbers of current clients and call them for references, or stop by during afternoon pickup time and approach some other parents then. Also, be mindful of your first impression: In this case it counts a lot.

Bottom line: Unless parents you like and respect rave about it, the center's probably not one you'll like either.

ESTABLISHED GROUND RULES

It's important for a center to be flexible — letting you pick up and drop off your child at different times, for instance — but it should also have clearly established regulations for everything from operating hours to how to handle emergencies. The center should be able to supply you with a written copy of its policies. That way you know it takes its responsibility — your baby — seriously.

Along the same lines, look for a center with a strict sick-child policy. Find out which illnesses will keep your child home, and for how long. A tough policy may inconvenience you if your child is ill, but keeping sick children (and staff) away from the center makes sense. Good centers help cut down on illness by requiring all children and employees to have current immunizations and regular checkups.

If the center neither has an open-door policy nor encourages parents to stop by unannounced, chances are it has something to hide. Keep looking. A great daycare center will go beyond merely letting you in and invite you to become part of the center's community by helping with activities, accompanying the children on field trips, and so on.

Bottom line: If a center is poorly organized or has lax or nonexistent rules, it's not likely to be right for you.

A STIMULATING CURRICULUM

The best daycare centers have structured schedules that include plenty of time for physical activity, quiet time (including daily reading sessions for groups and individuals), group programs, individual activities, meals, snacks, and free time.

TV and videos should play little or no part in what your child does all day; if videos are part of the curriculum, make sure they're age-appropriate and, ideally, somewhat educational, teaching about animals, other cultures, and so on. A well-thought-out curriculum stimulates your child's development and makes daily life more fun.

Look for a center with a wide range of age-appropriate toys that will encourage your child's development and, as she gets older, stimulate creative, imaginative play. See our lists of the best toys for each age group.

Bottom line: Your child needs a place that offers a regular curriculum with a range of age-appropriate activities.

A QUALIFIED, CARING STAFF

A trained, qualified staff is one advantage centers may have over nannies and home daycare providers, who don't always have specialized education. Daycare center employees should be educated, with at least two years of college, a background in early childhood development (though many states don't require this), and CPR and other emergency training. (In some states and counties home daycare providers can obtain a license as well, if they're trained in CPR, pediatric first aid, and early childhood education.)

Note how the staff interacts with the children. Caregivers should be responsible, enthusiastic, and well prepared. Look for a staff that shares your philosophies on sleep, discipline, feeding, and other care issues. Good caregivers will ask detailed questions about your child's health and care to help determine whether their center is right for you.

Make sure the center has plenty of staff so your child gets the attention and care she needs. The ratio of caregivers to children can vary, depending on group size. NAEYC has set these guidelines:

For babies, the ratio is one caregiver for every three children if a group has six infants, one for every four if a group has eight babies.

For toddlers (12 to 28 months), the ratio is 1:3 for six children and 1:4 for eight or more children.

For children between 21 and 36 months, the ratio should be 1:4 for a group of eight children, 1:5 for a group of ten, and 1:6 for a group of 12.

For children 30 to 48 months, the ratio should be 1:6 for a group of 12 children, 1:7 for a group of 14, 1:8 for a group of 16, and 1:9 for a group of 18.

For 4- and 5-year-olds, the ratio should be 1:8 for a group of 16 children, 1:9 for a group of 18 children, and 1:10 for a group of 20 children.

Note that centers aren't required to follow NAEYC's recommendations, so ask what each center's ratio is and decide whether it's okay for you. A good center will keep groups of children small no matter how many employees they have, to encourage interaction and development.

Look for a center with good staff benefits. Centers that pay their employees well and offer them vacation time, health insurance, and an education allowance, for example, are more likely to have caregivers who stick around. Low turnover is key to ensuring consistent, stable care for your child.

Bottom line: If staff training isn't up to snuff, and they seem overworked or don't stick around very long, the center isn't for you.

HEALTHY FOOD

If you have to bring your child's food, find out the center's guidelines. Some may require you to pack only nutritious foods and that's okay. Centers that don't restrict candy or other sweets may not have your child's best interests at heart.

If the center does have a food plan, find out what it serves at meal and snack times (and make sure the staff is aware of your child's food allergies, if any). Does it encourage healthy eating habits and cover all the food groups?

Bottom line: Healthy food habits start early. If the center doesn't offer a variety of nutritious food choices for your child, look elsewhere.

CLEAN, SAFE FACILITIES

A good center is clean and sanitary. Floors, walls, and the kitchen area should be clean, food preparation areas should be far from toilets and diaper changing stations, trash shouldn't be left sitting unemptied, and the building should be adequately heated, lit, and ventilated. Staff should wash their hands regularly, and after every diaper change.

Look for plenty of space, too. According to NAEYC, centers should have at least 35 square feet of indoor space per child and 75 square feet per child outside.

Make sure the center follows the basic rules of safety. Toys and play equipment should be in good repair, upstairs windows (if any) should have screens or bars, all medicines and other hazardous

substances should be out of reach, bedding should be fresh and firm (to reduce the risk of SIDS for babies), and the outdoor play area should be level and secure.

Smoke detectors should be in place and working, radiators and heaters should be covered or otherwise protected, a first aid kit and fire extinguisher should be close at hand, and all standard childproofing techniques should be used (covered outlets, safety gates, door latches, etc.). The center should be secure, as well, so strangers can't just walk in off the street.

Look for a facility with an outdoor play area. Children should have the chance to play outside every day — running, jumping, and skipping are good for them physically, mentally, and socially. If you live in a city, where even the best centers may not have enough space for a safe outdoor play yard, make sure the center has a spacious indoor area (the next best thing).

Bottom line: Spot a safety hazard? A missed hand wash? Keep looking.

A CURRENT LICENSE

Ask to see a center's license and credentials, then double-check with a call to your local social services department. If possible, look for a facility that has also passed the stringent accreditation process required by [NAEYC](#), a benchmark of quality. Search [NAEYC's database](#).

Centers must also meet state licensing regulations for health and safety. Of course, a current license isn't a guarantee of quality care — that's why you have to evaluate the caregivers themselves, especially in states that don't require licenses.

Bottom line: A license isn't everything, but if a center doesn't have one, it's not for you. Read more on signs of a bad daycare center.

Resource: http://www.babycenter.com/0_signs-of-a-good-daycare-center_6065.bc?showAll=true