

SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

Looking For Quality Preschool

Question: I am starting to look at child care and preschool programs for my daughter. I want her to attend a quality program, so that she is ready for school when she starts kindergarten. What should I be looking for in a good program?

The American Academy of Pediatrics describes quality child care as care that gives young children valuable opportunities to learn to relate effectively with other children and adults, to explore their physical and social worlds, and to develop confidence in their abilities to learn new skills, form trusting bonds of friendship and process information from a variety of sources.

Study after study finds that it's not the name on the door of the program or even what the program says about itself that matters most. It is the adults who teach and care for the children who are the key ingredient of quality.

Look for child care/preschool programs where the teachers/caregivers:

- value relationships first and foremost and are warm and caring with each child;
- know each child and what that child's interests are, observing what the children are doing and create opportunities to build on and extend that learning;
- engage the children socially, emotionally and cognitively; and
- help children learn to set goals and become accountable for achieving them.

Basic quality is that the program provides a clean, safe, nurturing and interesting environment. You are most likely to find that if the program is licensed.

Below, we elaborate on what research finds in quality programs, focusing on the characteristics of programs that promote the life skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning.

Self-Directed, Engaged Learning: It is through learning that we can realize our potential. As the world changes, so can we, for as long as we live—as long as we learn.

1

Look for relationship-based education.

Robert Pianta of the University of Virginia, an expert on early childhood education and teacher quality, describes in greater detail the importance of the relationship between teacher and child:

A lot of people talk about the relationship between kids and a teacher as [providing] a secure base for exploring the world. A good teacher-child relationship is going to offer the child the opportunity to stretch and risk a little bit socially, emotionally or in learning something hard and new. It's going to provide just the kind of support that the child needs to be able to master what's being offered.

The foundation for learning is good relationships. As Jack Shonkoff from Harvard University says: "There is no development without relationships." Be sure to look for programs where this is the bedrock of their learning approach. You will see this in how the teachers interact with the children. Ask yourself:

- Are teachers making eye contact with the children?
- Are they listening to the children, laughing and smiling?
- Do they seem to know what each child is interested in?
- Are they asking the children questions and responding warmly to what children say by continuing the conversation?
- When discipline issues arise, do they teach the children what they can do to resolve problems, not just stop challenging behavior?

When you are visiting the program, ask the teacher about the children in the program. If the teachers use positive words about the children, they are likely to use positive words and have positive feelings about your child, too.

2

Look for programs that elaborate and extend children's learning.

Studies show that children are most likely to remember what they learn by having direct and real experiences—not by simply listening passively or learning by rote drilling. Early childhood programs that are considered to be "gold standard" base their curriculum on closely observing the children and then providing activities that move the children from where they are to the next step in learning.

As Craig Ramey of the Abecedarian Project explains: "If the child [who is just learning to talk] says 'Ball,' then the teacher might say, 'That's great. [You have] the red ball.'"

Teachers who elaborate and extend learning do things like:

- have extended conversations that prompt children to go beyond the here and now;
- include "wh" questions (Who? What? Where? When? Why?); and
- ask children to think about the past, the present and the future.

Catherine Snow of Harvard University and her colleagues have found that these methods have resulted in children with better literacy skills in their school-age years.

When you are visiting the program, look at what is happening. If the children are all doing the same thing for long periods of time or if the art work on the walls is by the teachers—not the children—then there is less likely to be real engaged learning going on. Here is a clue. When

you walk into the room, the children should be too busy to notice you very much.

3

Programs should engage children socially, emotionally and intellectually.

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, a collaboration of scientists and scholars from universities across the United States and Canada, concluded: "Cognitive, emotional and social capacities are inextricably intertwined throughout the life course."

Children are more likely to learn and remember information when emotional and social engagement is combined with cognitive work. Quality preschool programs:

- provide activities that are emotionally meaningful to the children;
- promote social learning where children learn from each other, not just the teachers; and
- promote intellectual learning that engages the children in hands-on, direct and ongoing ways, including physical and art and musical activities.

4

Find programs that support children in learning to set goals.

Larry Schweinhart of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project says:

The reason we want children to be involved as initiators is because it works better for education and, in fact, it makes them better citizens in the long run. The basic cornerstone of that daily routine is making plans, then carrying out plans, and then getting back together and reviewing the plans, under the guidance of the teacher.

Your child's drive to master her environment can be seen as the beginning of goal setting. Setting goals is critical to helping children develop lifetime habits of engaged learning.

- Classrooms that encourage goal directed behavior in their students are often set up with clearly defined activity areas, like the block area, reading area, pretend play area, etc. Ideally, in such programs, children make and carry out plans for play and learning in these areas, and then review how their plans went and what they learned, under the guidance of their teacher.

5

Look for programs that encourage children to become increasingly accountable.

Child care programs and preschools that make expectations clear, follow consistent routines and schedules, and encourage independence help children take increasing responsibility for

their own learning. It is also important for the program to celebrate children's strengths, efforts and interests. When children are active learners, they are more likely to enjoy school and the learning process, becoming committed, lifelong learners.

To find local resources about high quality programs in your area contact Child Care Aware at 800-424-2246 or at <http://childcareaware.org/>.

Basic standards include issues such as whether the teachers have learned about child development (teacher education), whether there are enough teachers for each child (staff:child ratios) and small enough groups (group size), so that children get individual attention.

To look for the best in quality, look for programs that are accredited by organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Their website is: <http://www.naeyc.org/>.