

The Do's and Don'ts for Selecting a Quality Daycare

Helpful tips for choosing a daycare center or afterschool program

By Deb Landry

*F*rom infant care to afterschool programs, it is never too early to start looking for the perfect place for your child to learn, grow and play. Here are some tips to make your search easy and stress free.

1. **Make a list:** Narrowing the search by making a list in order of importance such as a good reputation, location, child to adult ratio, cost, educational programs, enrollment numbers and daycare centers vs. home daycares. **Don't** be afraid to ask for references: best bet, ask parents of children who no longer attend the facility.
2. **Know the facts:** The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends the ratios for infants 1- 12 months be one staff member for every three children; toddlers 12 to 24 months, one staff member for every five children and for children between 24 and 36 months, one staff member for every six children. All States issue licenses which should be visibly posted at the daycare. **Don'ts:** A license doesn't necessarily mean quality care but if a center's license has expired or one does not exist, cross this one off your list.

3. **Go shopping:** Visit the facilities of choice and talk with other parents about their experiences. When visiting daycare centers, pay close attention to your first impression and instincts. The facility should be warm and welcoming with an organized and affectionate atmosphere.

Caregivers should be enthusiastic, prepared and responsible. Check that all childproofing devices are in order. **Don't** forget to bring the kids along with you and visit more than once. Make a scheduled appointment to visit with the director and then make an on the spot site visit at a later date.

4. **Nutrition:** Whether you bring your child's lunch and snacks or they are provided, food should be nutritious with special attention paid to allergies of your child and others. **Don't:** A center that supplies and allows candy or sweets will probably be lax in other areas too, no candy coating allowed.
5. **Safety, Health:** Safety should be number one on your list. A good center pays attention to details and is clean and sanitary from the kitchen to the toilets. The facility and its toys should be sanitized daily to protect children from illnesses. The building should be well ventilated and all equipment in good shape. **Don't** choose a center that has no security. No one should be able to get out or get in without permission.
6. **Playground safety:** The center should have an outdoor play area no smaller than 75 square feet and 35 square feet for the inside. All playground equipment should be maintained regularly and in good condition to avoid injuries. The outside area should be lined with grass or wood chips for protection and have staff security outside at all times so strangers cannot walk in off the street. Weather permitting; children should have the opportunity to play outside every day.

Don't choose a center that doesn't allow time for outdoor activities. Physical activity is vital for good physical, mental, and social health.

- 7. Staff Training and policies** A qualified, trained staff is the foundation for a good center. Staff should have at least a two-year degree in early childhood development, CPR and pediatric first aid training. Policies should be written, reviewed, used and available for parents to read. Pay close attention to policies on sickness, discipline and other important issues like bullying and harassment prevention.

Don'ts: Staff and Directors who avoid questions or don't get into details usually have something to hide. Low staff turnover is key to ensuring continuity and high quality care.

- 8. Signs of Problems:** Make a daily routine of asking your child about their day. Teach them problem-solving skills, character education, stranger danger, and personal safety as soon as it is age appropriate.

Don't use centers with so-so reputations, no structured rules or policies, dirty facilities, high turnover of staff, expired or no license, no structured curriculum or no educational focus.

- 9. Curriculum, Activities and Media:** Schedules are great and should be posted with daily physical activity, quiet time, group programs, individual activities, meals, snacks, and free time. TV, computers and videos should play little if no part in the curriculum.

Don't choose a center where the TV is part of the daily schedule or the centerpiece of the playroom. If videos are part of the curriculum, make sure they are age-appropriate, educational and sporadically used. Children should have interaction with adults and other children to assist in brain development.

- 10. Final Thought:** Choose a program you feel comfortable with so you have open communication and can establish clear ground rules on your childrearing expectations and one that encourages and allows your involvement. For more information on childcare regulations and the latest in childhood development in Maine visit: <http://nrc.uchsc.edu/STATES/ME/maine.htm>.