

CHOOSING THE BEST CHILD CARE

Parents often want to know how to select the best child care facility for their child. Some options include Mother's Day Out, Pre-School, and Montessori programs, so what does it all mean? There are centers which offer strictly day care, which is often similar to a nurturing baby sitting service. There are others who define themselves as preschools offering a combination of child care and pre-academic classes for 4 and 5 year olds. There are also those that offer a combination of day care and pre-school set within the Montessori concept. Some programs offer half day and full day options, as well as 2-3 days per week, or full time. What you will find is that choosing the best child care program for your child is truly in the eyes and needs of the beholder.

Like anything else in life, it is important to understand what you and your spouse are looking for in a program. Preliminary discussions and planning can save you a lot of time before hitting the pavement to do your own observations. For instance, identify what area of the city is near your home or office. Next, you will want to consider what your specific needs are based on the age of your child. Again, planning early is very important. Most high quality programs in any city are going to fill up quickly. Therefore, if your child is turning one and you feel that possibly around age two you may want to send he or she to a pre-school, you should begin investigating at least

12 months in advance. If you wait until your child is two and want to send them immediately, there will be options; however, in order to feel that you have done your homework, successfully interviewing centers thoroughly ahead of time is the best. You may need a center with extended hours, such as 6:30am-6:00pm, or you may feel strongly that your child is in a setting for only three hours per day, two days per week, to match your new part time work schedule.

Prices vary within child care centers, and you will want to know what type of budget you are working with before you get started.

When initially interviewing schools over the phone, and then in person, remember the most expensive is not always indicative of the best. Whatever specifics you are looking for identify ahead of time to narrow your search. Put pencil to paper and understand your needs, begin making phone calls and thorough notes, and then hit the streets. I usually advise parents to visit initially without their children and then always bring their children back for a second, and third visit if they desire. If you walk into a place where you are clearly uncomfortable, it is a lot easier to make your exit without your child wanting to play where you feel is unclean and unsafe.

Once you have made a preliminary visit and are comfortable and satisfied, by all means bring your child back with you so that you can see if they are comfortable and feel free to engage within this new setting. When visiting a child care center, the best tools to use to determine if it is what you are looking for are your 5 senses and gut feel. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? What is there for the children to touch? What is available at snack and lunch for the children to eat? What is your gut feel when you enter the facility, while you are there and when you leave? If you are not taking physical notes, make mental notes and reflect on these when you get home. It is truly important for you to

visit a center more than once. Dropping in unannounced is a great way to get an honest feel of a center, however, if you do drop in at lunch time, or nap time, just be prepared to see these types of activities. If this is not what you wanted to observe, then inquire about their daily schedules and make another drop in visit. If you prefer to get a guided tour, and a meeting with the director, you will most likely have to schedule this ahead of time. Regardless of what information you do need, you and your child are the customer and should both feel wonderful about your final choice for child care.

Remember that if by chance you make a choice that you eventually feel was made in error, don't feel that it is the end of the world. Sometimes we are not truly aware of aspects of a business until we have been involved with them for quite a while. If after a certain amount of time you are dissatisfied and no one has been able to remedy your situation, then continue your search. You may be out a mere registration fee, but there may be a better option out there for you and your child. The pre-school experience is an extremely important one, and where they are for those first 2-4 years has quite a bearing on how they view themselves and who they become. It should and can be a rewarding experience for the parent and the child.