



by Karen Stephens

Quality Counts: Keys to Good Preschool Programs

In the first two years of life, children who are well cared for develop a sense of security and self-confidence. From that sturdy foundation, children's horizons broaden throughout the preschool years. From ages 3 to 5, boundless curiosity motivates children to explore. Language and thinking skills blossom right along with peer relationships. Social maturity develops as they learn to respect authority figures encountered outside their family unit. Preschool programs, part or full day, should respond to those new challenges. Good programs do more than merely baby-sit; they actually boost children's development, especially their language and social skills.

But of course, the operative word there is "good" programs. In a nutshell, quality counts! And the cornerstone of quality is staff who are trained to skillfully nurture child development. Next come sound health and safety practices, indoors or out, at the center or on field trips.

It can be a tough search to find a good program for your child, but once you find the right program you'll receive long-term dividends. Following are features parents should evaluate:

Licensing and Accreditation

- Look for licensed programs. Of special interest should be those that surpass minimum state licensing laws, especially in staff training requirements, classroom group sizes, and adult to child ratios. You don't settle for a minimal house, clothes, car, or school. Your child's preschool care should be no different.
- See whether the program is accredited, or working toward it. Accreditation identifies high quality, rather than minimum standards. As with licensing, never rely on accreditation alone for monitoring a program. Call the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs (800-424-2460) for accredited programs in your area. Or visit the web site of the National Association for the Education of Young Children at naeyc.org.

Staff-Child Relationships

- Staff are welcoming, responsive, and approachable. Smiles and conversation should flow easily. Interactions reveal staff are genuinely fond of children.
- Teachers bend or sit at eye-level to put children at ease and encourage communication.
- Teachers demonstrate respect for children's intelligence and how children perceive the world. They never treat children as if they are incompetent or a nuisance.
- Staff appreciate unique personalities and patiently respond to individual temperaments.
- Staff accept children's diversity and treasure it. Diversity is incorporated into daily activities, such as music, story time, art and crafts, or meal service.
- Teachers encourage self-reliance, independence, and decision-making skills. Children are given age-appropriate choices. Responsibility, such as caring for toys, is taught.
- Guidance and discipline is positive. Expectations and consequences are clear and consistent. Interactions promote compassion, ethics, self-esteem, and competence.
- Staff closely supervise children in the classroom and play yard. They don't sit in a group socializing among themselves instead of interacting or playing with children.

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Daily Activity Schedule

- A daily activity schedule is followed and posted for parents' review. It includes routines, such as music, story time, and outdoor play that give children a sense of security and predictability.
- Routines are handled so they promote relaxation rather than tension, especially meal times and naptime. Meals are served in small groups and conversation is encouraged. Stuffed animals are provided for naps, backs are rubbed to ease kids into to sleep, early wakers can color or draw quietly rather than remain bored on cots.
- Children have time for individual and small group play, initiated by their own interests, rather than always being forced into a large group with teacher-dominated activities.
- There is a balance of active and quiet play as well as indoor and outdoor play.

Approach to Learning

- Children learn by doing according to developmental level. Teachers use teachable moments and plan for hands-on learning. Teachers intently listen to children's comments and questions. They help children discover how to investigate questions and find answers. For instance, a magnifying glass and insect book are used to learn more about butterflies.
- Children learn through playful activities with a variety of creative materials. Kids are actively engaged with peers. You hear a constructive hum of activity. There is lots of movement as kids dance, create art, or build with blocks. Giggles and laughter float through the classroom (children's as well as staff's).
- Television and videos are used no more than once a week (even educational programs) and are always reviewed for appropriateness.
- If computers are used, programs are screened for appropriateness, and computer play is balanced with other active play opportunities.

Classroom Atmosphere

- Classroom is clean and neat. It welcomes children without being over-stimulating.
- Each child has a cubby for personal belongings. Toothbrushes are stored sanitarily.
- Creative work is displayed at child eye-level, such as paintings, drawing, clay sculptures, crafts, story projects, and/or kids' collections. Creativity is encouraged; no two works of art look alike.
- You hear pleasant chatter, not yelling teachers or crying/screaming kids. Children aren't bombarded with a background of loud television, radio, or even children's music. Children are never scared into complete silence, or left alone to create mayhem.
- There are spaces for children to play in groups as well as alone in quiet, private play.
- Comfortable furniture promotes relaxation, such as beanbag chairs or love seats. Nap cots have sheets, pillows with cases and a blanket.
- Items such as plants, aquariums and skid-proof rugs are used to create a homey feel.

Learning Materials

- There is a variety of well-organized play and learning areas. Materials can be used by both genders and with varying developmental abilities and are within easy reach of children. ∑ Basic play areas (often called learning centers) include: block center, art and craft area, dress-up or housekeeping area, table toy area (puzzles, Legos, board games, etc.), children's book corner, and a music and movement area. You may also see a science center, math area, computer station, woodworking and/or a sand and water play area.

Parent-Staff Relationships

- Staff recognize parents as children's first and most important teachers.
- Parents and staff communicate daily about child's experiences.
- Parents are informed daily of meal menus, toileting accidents, illness or injuries.
- Parents are encouraged to share activity ideas, attend field trips and share special skills.
- Parents are offered a formal parent conference at least once a year, and upon request.
- An advisory board includes parent representation.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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