

Parenting Pointers

Parenting Tips on: Choosing Quality Childcare and Preschool

Nancy Almond, EVICS Coordinator

Research shows that over 85% of a person's intellectual, emotional and cognitive ability is developed by the age of five, making the early years a crucial time in a child's life. Children who begin school behind, stay behind. When parents search for child care and preschool programs it is very important they demand the best care and environment possible for meeting their child's needs.

What does quality child care mean and what does it look like? Children certainly need to be in a safe place, but they also need to be in the care of a warm, attentive, and properly trained provider, where they will be happy, active and learning.

To determine the quality of care offered parents need to examine the *process* and the *structure* of the program. The *process* means looking at what goes on in the child care program. For instance, high-quality child care has planned activities for children that have a purpose. When looking at the program's *structure*, parents should take into account the staff/child ratio, staff training and experience, safety features, opportunities for parent involvement, and program administration. Licensed programs have met specific standards for health and safety, ratios and equipment. Accredited programs go a step further and have passed specified standards for providing quality care.

The following 5 steps offer parents a guide when searching for quality early care and education:

Step 1 - Educate and call: Parents need to remember that they are purchasing a service to meet their needs and the developmental needs of their child. As with other consumer decisions, parents need to educate themselves on the variety of care and early education options available to them in the community. Learn what the choices are and the pros and cons of each. (In Estes Park, call the EVICS Office at 586-3055.)

Step 2 – Ask Questions: Once parents know the options available to them, it's time to start the interview process. Calling providers and asking questions about licensing, hours of operation, ages of children served, qualifications of staff, program policies, and daily activities will help parents narrow their options. EVICS can provide parents with a list of interview questions.

Step 3 – Visit: Meeting the program director or home provider and visiting the facility is crucial to the decision. Compare programs to determine the best fit for the child. Parents should take time to observe child/teacher interactions, safety and space concerns, environment, and age appropriateness of activities.

Step 4- Investigate and Enroll: To make an informed decision parents are encouraged to contact the Division of Childcare and review provider files. Files include information regarding licensing history, past inspections, complaints, and restrictions. Call 1-800-799-5876 or go on line to: www.cdhs.state.co.us/childcare. Once parents have asked the important questions and visited programs, it's time to enroll!

Step 5 – Stay Involved: Communication is key to success for parent, child and care provider. Communication is strengthened when parents participate in parent/teacher conferences, volunteer in the classroom, serve on parent boards, and help to organize special events or field trips. Daily communication is critical to continuing the learning process at home.

Choosing a high-quality child care program takes time and patience. No child care program is more important than the care a parent gives. But, a quality program will give children nurturing care, support and experiences that provide a solid foundation for a happy and successful life.

Information in this article was provided by *Estes Valley investment in Childhood Success (EVICS)* with permission from *Qualistar Early Learning* and *The National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies*.

EVICS offers free childcare referrals, parent information and resources, and childcare provider support and training in the Estes Valley. For more information contact 586-3055 or evics@fnii.com Check out our website at www.evics.org