

What Babies and Toddlers Need to Thrive in Child Care

High quality care for babies and toddlers can enrich children's early experience and complement the work of parents and family members.

The key to quality child care is a high-quality relationship with caregivers. It is through a close relationship with caring adults -- including child care providers -- that children flourish and learn about the world and who they are.

Nine Elements of Quality Child Care for Babies and Toddlers

1. Small groups with high staff-to-child ratios.

Small groups create a sense of intimacy and safety. The rich dialogue between caregivers and infants is possible in small groups because there are fewer bodies, less noise and less activity to interfere with a child's ability to learn. Small groups and more staff enable caregivers to build strong relationships with individual children and adapt activities to meet the changing interests, needs and capacities of the group.

For children birth to age 3, recommended group size: 6--8 children; 1:4 ratio of caregiver to child. No more than 6 children who are not yet mobile should be in a group.

2. Staff trained in childhood development and programs licensed and accredited.

National research underscores that quality infant and toddler child care is contingent upon the special training that caregivers receive in early childhood development. Ongoing training, good salaries and benefits are essential to attracting and retaining quality caregivers. Staff should be certified by the Council for Early Childhood Professional Recognition with a Child Development Associates degree credential for infant/toddler caregivers or an equivalent credential that addresses comparable competencies (such as an associates or bachelors degree). Centers should be accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and family child care by the National Association of Family Child Care. Both should be licensed by the state.

3. A primary caregiver.

For children in group care, each child should be assigned a primary caregiver. A primary caregiver is principally responsible for the child and helps in building a positive, continuing, intimate relationship with the child. It also offers family members a key child care contact. It does not mean that one person only cares exclusively for a baby or toddler.

4. Continuity of care.

Having one primary caregiver for more than a year (optimally, from entry into child care until the child is three years of age or older) is important to the child's emotional development. Switching from one caregiver to another takes its toll. Too many changes in caregivers can slow a child's development and leave children reluctant to form new relationships. When very young children switch repeatedly from one caregiver to another, the time they spend grieving the loss of the old caregiver and learning the new

caregiver's ways may slow down their overall development.

5. Responsive caregiving.

Watching, asking and adapting are the tools of responsive caregiving. Responsive caregiving involves knowing each child and taking cues from the child about when to expand on the child's initiative, when to guide, when to teach and when to intervene. A responsive caregiver has an overall plan for each day, including materials and activities that are appropriate for the development stage of each child. In addition, the caregiver should continually observe each infant or toddler to discover what skills he is ready to explore and eventually master.

6. Cultural, linguistic and familial continuity.

Child rearing reflects the values and beliefs of families and culture of their community. Caregivers should be culturally sensitive and recognize their own values that they may be transmitting to children. Caregivers who use the infant's home language reinforce the infant's sense of "rightness" and sense of belonging in both the home and child care environment. Speaking the child's home language, welcoming family members into the child care setting, and respecting the child-rearing values and beliefs of the child's family all support the early development of a strong sense of the child's identity. To provide cultural and familial continuity, baby/toddler child care programs should, when possible, employ staff who are of the same culture and who speak the same language as the children served.

7. Meeting the needs of the individual within the group context.

Caregivers should understand the needs, temperament, moods and preferences of each child and adapt their care to meet those individual needs. To provide care for infants and toddlers with special needs, caregivers need training and support from community partners.

8. Promotion of health and safety.

Babies and toddlers are more susceptible than older children to infectious disease because their immune systems have not fully developed. In addition, their emerging mobility and curiosity put them at increased risk of injury. A quality group child care setting for young children should be safe and sanitary but also interesting to children and efficiently maintained to allow time for intimate, responsive interaction. Achieving efficient health and safety policies and procedures require: careful planning of areas for food preparations and diapering/toileting; detailed and scrupulously maintained healthy policies, emergency, injury and health procedures and child and staff health records; concise policies and staff procedures; knowledge of and collaboration with community health and safety resources; vigilant monitoring procedures for health and safety; time for caregivers to meet to share current health/safety information; and daily communication between family members and caregivers.

9. Age-appropriate physical environment.

The physical environment -- indoors and out -- should promote intimate, satisfying relationships. Spaces must provide growing infants with a wide variety of interesting objects, textures and physical challenges, while neither overwhelming them with choices or jeopardizing their safety.

A Checklist for Parents

Because the way children are treated in their earliest years of life by important adults shape their future

successes or failures, it is crucial that all caregivers provide a healthy setting that encourages appropriate emotional, social and intellectual growth.

Parents should observe caregivers interacting with their child before making decisions. Some questions for parents to ask in determining the caregiver's or program's ability to understand babies and toddlers and support healthy development, include:

- What training do staff have in infant/toddler development?
- Does the caregiver use straightforward, simple words to talk with my child?
- Are activities and schedules explained to my child?
- Are toys and materials well organized so my child can choose what interests her?
- Is this caregiver able to accommodate the special needs of my child?
- Does the environment accommodate the special needs of my child?
- Does this caregiver respect the language, culture and values of my family?
- Do the caregiver and I agree on discipline? Weaning? Toileting? Feeding?
- Can this person handle conflicts without losing patience, shaming a child or frequently displaying anger?
- Does the caregiver enjoy children?
- Am I welcome to drop in at any time?
- Will my child feel good about coming here?
- Is the environment sanitary and safe?
- Is the place appealing with comfortable lighting and an acceptable noise level?
- Is the child care program licensed by the state or local government?
- Is the child care program accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children or the National Association of Family Child Care?
- Are the caregivers certified by the Council for Early Childhood Professional Recognition with a Child Development Associates degree credential for infant/toddler caregivers or an equivalent credential that addresses comparable competencies (such as an associates or bachelors degree)?
- Is there a primary caregiver for my child?
- Are the ratios and group size appropriate for my child's age?