

What constitutes quality child care?

Research defines 10 essential components of quality child care programs that produce meaningful outcomes for the young children they serve. Child care programs that endeavor to improve often begin with tangible changes to physical layouts, equipment, and materials. Because young children learn best in secure relationships, quality programs also promote nurturing care and strong relationships between children, caregivers, and families. The best programs commit to participating in continuous quality improvement (CQI).



1. Safe & Healthy Program Practices

Quality programs exceed minimum state and local standards for licensing to ensure the health and safety of children and adults in both indoor and outdoor environments. Attentive and knowledgeable teachers follow detailed procedures and standards for maintaining hygiene, preventing illness, minimizing infection, and dealing with health and safety emergencies. Nutritious meals and snacks are provided to accommodate the unique dietary needs of infants and toddlers. Teachers follow strict guidelines for proper diapering, toileting, hand washing, sanitizing, and safe sleep practices.

2. Staff Well Trained

Teacher education in early childhood development and ongoing in-service training promotes the teacher's ability to address the unique needs of infants and toddlers and diverse families. Quality programs implement a system of observation, feedback, and reflective practice. Staff at all levels are offered opportunities for mentoring/coaching support and professional development specific to infants, toddlers, and families.



3. Environments for Learning

Quality infant and toddler environments are designed to be comfortable for children and adults and offer enjoyable experiences. The atmosphere promotes children's feelings of security and competence. The physical arrangement of space and choice of equipment supports meaningful interactions between adults and children during caregiving routines and play. Adaptable environments accommodate the growth, changing abilities, and varied interests of infants and toddlers. Environments for infants and toddlers are separate from older children, offering them opportunities to safely experience a sense of freedom, adventure, and exploration.

4. Small Groups with Optimal Ratios

Group size and ratios determine the amount of time and attention each teacher can devote to an individual child. Small groups promote a sense of intimacy and safety, which supports a rich learning environment. With small groups and more staff, teachers can build strong relationships with children and adapt activities to meet their changing interests and needs. Throughout the day, teachers remain engaged with the small group of children and serve as their "secure base" both indoors and outdoors.



5. Primary Caregiving & Continuity of Care

In quality programs, each child is assigned a caregiver who has the primary responsibility for that child and with whom they build a meaningful relationship. The primary caregiver also builds a respectful relationship with the family and partners with them to ensure the best outcomes for their child. Optimally, children experience continuity of care when they remain with the same caregiver from entry into care until three years of age. This provides the foundational support for the child's healthy social emotional development and promotes readiness to start school.



6. Active & Responsive Caregiving

Responsive caregiving helps infants and toddlers begin to understand and regulate their emotions, and provides predictability, safety, and security. Responsive teachers take cues from each child and know when to expand on their initiative, when to guide, and when to intervene. They respond to signs of stress in children and provide comfort and security as needed. Teachers promote the child's emerging sense of self and relationships with others, and show acceptance and respect for all children.

7. Curriculum & Individualization

Curriculum for infants and toddlers happens within the context of relationships, predictable daily routines, and discovery through play. Teachers observe and reflect on the unique abilities, temperaments, and developmental needs of each child. Individualization occurs when those observations are used to shape interactions, offer experiences, and supply materials that promote curiosity and encourage children to follow their own interests.



8. Emerging Language & Literacy

The path to language and literacy begins with interactions between adults and young children. In quality programs, teachers build language experiences within daily routines. When possible, teachers speak the primary or home language of the children. They respond to the sounds made by infants and toddlers, and use words to give meaning to what children are expressing. Teachers maintain a balance between listening to and talking with each child. Books and other print materials are available throughout the classroom. Shared reading is enjoyed daily and families are encouraged to read with their children at home. Songs, nursery rhymes, finger plays, and pre-writing materials promote the development of language and literacy.

9. Family Engagement & Cultural Continuity

Families are essential participants in quality programs for infants and toddlers. They provide invaluable information about their children to teachers and center staff. Teachers communicate each day with families, welcome them into their child's classroom, and organize events that include family members. Families are informed about and have opportunities to influence the curriculum and program decisions. Programs incorporate practices that reflect the values, beliefs, cultures, and communities of the families they serve.



10. Comprehensive Support Services

High-quality child care serves as a protective factor for young children and plays a pivotal role in children's well-being. Child care professionals partner with families in careful observation of each child's development and recognize signs of stress and adversity. Specific protocols are established for routine developmental screenings and ongoing comprehensive assessment. Trauma-informed practices are in place to build in strategies and targeted supports for infants, toddlers, and families. Teachers and program administrators work with consultants and community agencies to ensure families are linked to social services, health services, therapeutic interventions, and early childhood mental health consultation, as needed. Ongoing communication and multidisciplinary support teams ensure continuity of services across settings, enrich child development, and promote positive outcomes that support and strengthen families.

Based on the original work of:

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