

Finding the Right Child Care or Early Learning Program

It's back-to-school season and many parents of young children are facing the prospect of sending their kids to child care or preschool for the first time.

One Hope United has developed this FAQ to help parents ask the right questions as they visit centers and make one of the most important decisions of their child's academic life. We have more than 120 years of experience working to ensure all children have the foundation to live life without limits. We operate 12 early learning and child care centers throughout Chicago and its suburbs, serving more than 1,600 children, from 6-weeks to 12-years old.

Q: How important is the choice of a preschool to my child's educational career?

A: The early years of childhood learning are the most formative. Research has shown that children who are enrolled in a high-quality pre-kindergarten program are more likely to have higher reading skills by third grade than students who don't attend pre-K programs.

Q: What are the most important questions I should ask?

A: Ask about the center's staff and the tenure of their teachers. Also ask about the curriculum and whether it's a family-centered environment. You want a sense of how welcoming the environment is for family.

Q: What does a welcoming environment tell parents?

A: It tells them if there are opportunities for family to be involved, which is very important. Evidence suggests that if parents are involved in their children's education, kids perform better; it's linked to higher student achievement. So, you want to feel welcome and included. For example, can you participate with your children to help them along developmentally? Are workshops and resources provided to parents?

Q: That suggests that you can pick up on a certain vibe when you enter a center?

A: Yes, you should definitely get a sense of the center's energy. When you enter the center, does it feel family-friendly? Can you walk in at any point in time and feel welcomed? Or will staff look at you and wonder why you're here? Do you get a sense you're part of a community? Do you have opportunities to connect with other families?

Q: What should I ask about the kinds of activities my child will do?

A: Ask questions about what your child's daily experiences will be like. What is the curriculum they're using? Are the daily lessons posted for parents to see? Ask to see their curriculum book,

because it's a guide for what the children will be learning throughout the day. Our curriculum is aimed at reaching all developmental milestones starting in infancy.

Q: Nearly all of One Hope United's centers are accredited. Why is that important?

Most early learning centers are licensed. Being accredited is an additional stamp of quality. Just 6% of all centers in the U.S. are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The accreditation ensures your school is providing a high quality and holistic approach that focuses on children, staff, family and community partnerships, and administration.

You should also ask what percentage of the last graduating preschool class was kindergarten ready. You want to see numbers in the 90–100% range, because kindergarten readiness is a key milestone in kids' academic lives and helps set them up for success all the way through high school and college.

Q: What else should I be looking for?

A: It's not just what you see, it's also what you hear! You should hear children's voices predominate over adult voices. You should also hear conversations among peers (preschool age children), laughter, music and overall enjoyment.

Q: What about making a school visit?

A: Yes, look for a program with an open-door policy, which is encouraging you to visit throughout the day and be an active participant in your child's early childhood experience. We also recommend that before enrolling your child, visit the program at varying times of the day. Your experience should be consistent regardless of the time. And don't be shy about stopping in without a formal appointment.

Q: What should I look for in the center's teachers?

A: Teachers should speak to the children at their eye level. Staff should be using language that is guiding and comforting versus directive and harsh. Observe whether the children seem comfortable with the staff – and don't forget non-verbal body language such as eye contact and smiles.

Q: How much should instinct play a part in our decision?

A: We definitely recommend that you trust your instinct! If something doesn't feel right about the program, look elsewhere. Not only does this decision need to be the right fit for your child, but also your family. There are far too many early childhood programs available to settle on one that isn't the best fit.

To learn more or find a One Hope United center near you, please visit onehopechilddevelopment.org.