



Quality: What It Looks Like

The quality of a child's future depends on the quality of caregiving in the first five years. This is particularly true of our most at-risk children. Benefits that can accrue from a first-rate early learning experience come only if the setting is safe, healthy, stimulating, thoughtful, organized and—perhaps most important—led by well-trained, attentive teachers. Here's what to look for in a successful early learning program.

What you want to see:

Educated, attentive, and engaged teachers and staff

- Teachers with four-year degrees and specific training in early childhood education.
- No more than eight infants and toddlers and no more than 20 preschoolers in a classroom.
- Teacher-to-child ratios of 1:3 for infants and 1:10 for preschoolers.
- Teachers who crouch to eye level to speak to children.
- Teachers who hold, cuddle, show affection, and speak directly to infants and toddlers.
- Families and teachers exchanging information about the child's development and learning progress.

A safe, healthy, and child-friendly environment

- A room well-equipped with sufficient and appropriate materials and toys.
- Classrooms in which materials and activities are organized logically and placed at eye level for the children.
- Materials and toys accessible to children in an orderly display.
- Centers that encourage safe, outdoor playtime.
- Frequent hand-washing by children and adults.
- Children offered breakfast, lunch, and a time to nap.
- Visitors welcomed with appropriate parental consent.

Stimulating activities and appropriately structured routines

- Children receiving a variety of stimuli in their daily routine using indoor and outdoor spaces and age-appropriate language, literacy, math, science, art, music, movement, and dramatic play experiences.
- Children participating with teachers and each other in individual, small-group, and large-group activities.
- Children who are engaged in their activities.
- Preschoolers who are allowed to play independently.

What you don't want to see:

Inattentive, overwhelmed, or unengaged staff

- Unengaged teachers sitting on the side of the classroom not participating with children.
- Shouting, swearing, or other displays of hostile discipline.
- Infants and toddlers crying without being soothed and supported.
- Teachers speaking to children only to control or direct behavior.
- Teachers who are unresponsive to children's needs or attempts to communicate.
- Children being asked closed-ended ("Yes or No") questions instead of "how" and "why" questions.

An unsafe, unhealthy, or uninspiring environment

- Small, cramped centers or homes without designated appropriate spaces for different ages.
- A center or home that smells or looks unclean, or has visible safety risks.
- Use of television or video to occupy children.
- Children easily distracted or frightened by visiting strangers.
- Disorganized or inaccessible play centers.
- Insufficient, damaged, or inappropriate materials or toys.

Activities and routines that are too chaotic or inflexible

- Children wandering aimlessly, left unsupervised, or displaying unchecked aggression.
- Children restrained in car seats or in high chairs at times other than meal time.
- Children spending a lot of time waiting for turns or standing in lines.
- Children expected to sit at desks or perform highly structured tasks (worksheets), or other forms of age-inappropriate expectations.
- Lack of children's self-directed creative/imaginative play.