

Quality Counts

Choosing Early Care &
Education Programs



child care
resources
i n c.

What influences a child's development? In short, everything ... from moving shadows on a wall, to the funny noise a toy makes, to the simple acts of being held or read a story.

A child's development is in constant motion, influenced by everything and everyone. This is especially true during a child's formative years from birth to age five when development is on a fast track and the brain is naturally laying the groundwork for the future.

But while nature begins the process, proper development must be nurtured and guided in stimulating environments, both in and out of the home. Children cannot do it alone. In every stage of a child's life, parents, family, schools – and for many children, early care and education and school-age child care professionals – need to provide children with every opportunity to learn.

With this collective support, children have the best chance to succeed physically, socially and academically throughout life.

Quality Counts

Choosing early care & education programs

Choosing an early care and education program is an important decision for any family. Finding a *quality* program is even more important. Why?

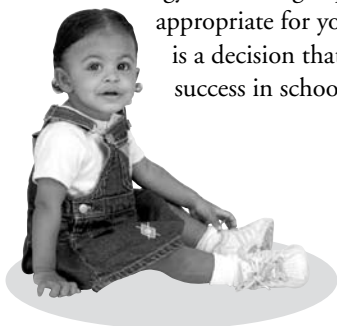
Research shows that a child's first five years are the most formative for the brain, providing a tremendous "window of opportunity" when the brain makes the connections necessary for learning. The first years of life have the potential to establish either a firm – or fragile – foundation for your child's future. As a parent searching for an early care and education program, it is your responsibility to identify the program that will help lay the best foundation for your child.



Defining quality early care and education is not simple. At the foundation of a quality program is its commitment and ability to support and nurture a child's healthy physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive development, and enthusiasm for learning. It is these domains that form the basis of a child's readiness for school and by which children are assessed upon entry.

How can you recognize quality? This brochure can help you. It presents the range of available early care and education program options, North Carolina's child care licensing standards, information concerning your responsibilities as a parent or guardian, and checklists of quality indicators (p. 11-15) to use when interviewing and visiting programs.

The search for the right program for your child takes time and energy. Choosing a quality program that is appropriate for your child and your family is a decision that will support your child's success in school and in life.



Your early care & education options



Center-Based Programs are independently operated or operate in schools, workplaces, individual homes (considered small centers), churches or synagogues. Most are open on a fixed schedule, eight or more hours per day, Monday through Friday. Children in centers are usually grouped by age. As they grow, children often move into the next age group with a different caregiver. All centers must meet state licensing regulations for the legal operation of a child care facility.

Licensed Family Child Care Homes (FCCH) are operated by individuals who provide care in their homes for more than two children who are not related to them. These programs offer a home-like setting that provides the opportunity for siblings to stay together. A licensed FCCH may care for up to eight children, with no more than five preschool children in care at any given time. The caregiver's own preschool-age children must be included in the number of preschoolers. However, their school-age children are not counted for licensing purposes. FCCH's must provide age-appropriate toys and activities, nutritious meals and snacks, and meet basic health and safety standards. All FCCH's must meet state licensing regulations for the legal operation of a child care facility.

Legally Exempt Family Child Care Homes are allowed to care for two non-related children in addition to their own without being licensed by the state.

Part-Day Preschools operate for four hours or less per day serving children between the ages of birth to five years. While license-exempt, part-day preschools may voluntarily seek state licensure and may pursue national accreditation. Typically, part-day programs operate on the same calendar year as the public school system, serving families where one parent is not employed full-time. Faith organizations and community-based not-for-profit organizations primarily sponsor part-day programs.

Bright Beginnings is a Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools-sponsored program that serves educationally at-risk four-year-old children in school settings and in area child care programs. This program enables four-year-olds who might otherwise have started their school years behind their peers to build the foundation they need to succeed when they enter kindergarten. Bright Beginnings has a child-centered curriculum with a strong language and early literacy focus. It features support services provided by child development, health and mental

health, and literacy specialists, as well as active parent/family involvement.

Public Pre-Kindergarten Programs include center-based and school-based programs for three- and four-year olds that are fully or partially publicly-funded and operate under the direction of state, local, and federal education and human service agencies.

More at Four is a state-wide, voluntary program that prepares eligible four-year old children for school success by providing them with high quality pre-kindergarten experiences. The curricula used are child-centered, have a literacy and language focus and include parent participation. More at Four classrooms operate in centers and school settings for six hours per day, following the public school calendar, with no more than a one-to-nine staff-to-child ratio.

GS 110-106 (Religious sponsored child care facilities) are child care facilities or summer day camps operated by a church, synagogue or school of religious charter. While exempt from licensure, they must file a notice of intent to operate a child care facility with the state. A religious-sponsored child care facility may choose to seek licensure, but if it does not, it must still meet state licensing requirements with the following exceptions: staff qualifications, staff training, written activity plans and developmentally appropriate activity centers.

Head Start and Early Head Start are federally-funded programs that provide free, comprehensive developmental services for children ages birth to five from low-income eligible families. These programs are child-focused and family-centered.

School-Age Child Care refers to programs for children before and/or after school hours and during school holidays and vacations. Family child care homes, child care centers, and schools typically offer this type of care. Programs that operate for four hours or less per day are license-exempt, but may voluntarily seek state licensure or pursue national accreditation.

Summer Day Camps are generally designed for school-age children and operate during the day for less than four months. They may be offered by child care centers, colleges, recreation sites, faith-based groups, or other sponsoring organizations. This type of program is exempt from state licensure.

Other child care options include care by relatives or neighbors, nanny and/or au pair care, and mother's morning out programs.



Star rated license

North Carolina law requires a child care program to be licensed if it serves three or more children and operates more than four hours a day at least once per week. Programs operating fewer than four hours a day or seasonally (such as part-day preschools, school-age programs and camps) are not required to be licensed.

The North Carolina Division of Child Development (NCDLCD) awards licenses with ratings of one to five stars. Ratings distinguish between programs that operate at minimum licensing standards (one star) and those that exceed minimum licensing standards (two to five stars, with five stars reflecting the highest child care licensing standard). When visiting a licensed child care program, ask to see a copy of its license (which should be posted within easy view). If the program you visit has a low star rating, ask why it received this rating, about its plan to increase the rating, and when the program will seek a higher rating.

Under a state law (effective January 1, 2006), all new programs that apply for a one- to five-star license must be assessed under a system that uses two components to determine the license points for the star rating: 1) Program Standards and 2) Staff Education.

- *Program Standards* reflects the quality of care children receive and assesses child/adult interaction, materials and equipment available for children, indoor/outdoor space per child and staff-to-child ratio.
- *Staff Education* reflects the education and experience of a child care program's staff, with higher points awarded to programs whose staff have higher education levels (which research indicates positively impacts program quality).

All child care programs are also required to have maintained a 75% Compliance History with state regulations during the previous 18 months. Finally, one "quality point" may be earned by child care programs that choose to meet additional education or programmatic criteria not addressed under the Program Standards or Staff Education components.

Child care programs licensed before January 2006 have the option of being assessed under either the new system or the previous, three-component licensing system. However, all programs must be assessed under the new system by January 1, 2008.

Rated licenses are awarded for a three-year period. A new child care center or a center under new ownership receives a temporary license from NCDLCD. A new family child care home receives a one star license. After six months, programs may apply for a rating of higher than one star. Programs can apply for rating changes at any time.

Staff to child ratios

A key program quality factor in a child care center is a low staff to child ratio, or number of staff compared to the number of children. The state considers this ratio when it calculates a program's star rating. The following chart shows the star rating ratio requirements for each age group. It also includes staff to child ratios for centers achieving national accreditation. Family child care homes do not have staff to child ratios because they are staffed by only one person (see page 3 for the definition of a family child care home and the number of children permitted).

| Staff-to-Child Ratios for Child Care Centers | | | | |
|--|---|------------------|--------------|-------------------------|
| Age Group | Ratio Requirements for the Star Rated License Program Standards Component | | | NAEYC Accreditation (D) |
| | 1 Point (A) | 2 - 6 Points (B) | 7 Points (C) | |
| Infants (Birth - 12 Mos.) | 1:5 | 1:5 | 1:4 | 1:3 |
| Toddlers (12-23 Mos.) | 1:6 | 1:6 | 1:5 | 1:4 |
| 2 Years Old (24 - 29 Mos.) | 1:10 | 1:9 | 1:8 | 1:5 |
| 2.5 Years Old (30 - 36 Mos.) | 1:10 | 1:9 | 1:8 | 1:6 |
| 3 Years Old | 1:15 | 1:10 | 1:9 | 1:8 |
| 4 Years Old | 1:20 | 1:13 | 1:12 | 1:9 |
| 5 Years Old | 1:25 | 1:15 | 1:14 | 1:9 |
| 6 Years & Older | 1:25 | 1:20 | 1:19 | 1:11 |

Under the Star Rated License system, a child care center may receive up to 7 points in each of two components: Program Standards and Staff Education (see page 6). To achieve 1 point in the Program Standards component (the minimum allowed), a center must meet the staff/child ratio requirement in Column A. To achieve 3-6 points in Program Standards, a center must meet the ratio requirement in Column B. (For 2 points in Program Standards, a center must meet the ratio requirement in Column B or meet specific classroom space requirements.) To achieve 7 points in the Program Standards component (the highest number of points available), a center must meet the ratio requirement in Column C.

Accreditation

Early care and education and school-age child care programs may apply for and receive national accreditation if they meet the quality standards set by the accrediting entity. These standards exceed the state's basic licensing requirements.

- *National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)* provides accreditation for center-based programs, part-day preschools and Head Start pre-K programs.
- *National Association for Family Child Care* provides accreditation for family child care homes.
- *National School-Age Care Alliance* provides accreditation for school-age child care programs.
- *American Camping Association* accredits day camps.

Four easy steps to choosing a quality program

Contact CCRI

How can CCRI help? When you call *Child Care Search*, a parent counselor will ask you questions regarding your child's and family's needs. You will then be provided with referrals to programs that meet those needs, including licensing and accreditation, hours of operation, program costs, type of care, preferred location and detailed program features. CCRI's comprehensive database of early care and education and school-age child care programs provides program information that is not available from the state.

Call programs

Once you have your list of early care and education and school-age child care program options from CCRI, call each program to confirm the information and check the availability of openings for your child. This is the fastest way to build on the referral information CCRI has provided and narrow down your options! Questions to ask each program include:

- How many children are in my child's age group and in the class my child will attend?
- Can you describe a typical day?
- How many children are currently in your program?
- Is there a waiting list? If so, is there a fee to be on it?
- What is the staff-to-child ratio for the classroom my child will attend?

In general, look for the following features when searching for a quality program.

- ◆ **Few children per staff**
There is a small number of children for each staff member so each child receives individualized attention and care (see page 7).
- ◆ **Small group size**
The size of the groups is kept small to promote a nurturing, secure setting.
- ◆ **Developmentally-appropriate curriculum**
The program uses a plan to encourage learning and involve children in different activities that suit their ages and stages of development.
- ◆ **Positive interaction**
Children communicate with and learn from staff and each other.
- ◆ **Consistent supervision of children**
Each staff member is responsible for the same children each day.

Visit programs

The most important step in your search is to visit at least *three* of the programs on your list and look for clues that show each program's quality. While there, tour the program and observe the children and the staff. Ask questions -- about the staff and children, about safety and health issues, and about the setting and programming. Use the checklist in the next section to track the important information about each program you visit.

Compare and decide

After your visits, review the checklist and compare what you've seen and heard at each program and determine which is best for your family's needs. Because your child may stay with a program for many years, it is important to know about your child's progress as he or she grows.

Consider the program's star rated license. If it's low, why is it low and what are its plans to achieve a higher rating? Get references from other parents using that program. Ask if their children enjoy the program. What do they like most and least about the program? Would they use this program again?

Above all, think about what is best for your child, use your instincts, and know that choosing quality is an important responsibility that will have a lasting impact on your child's life.

Choosing for a quality early care and education program.

- ◆ **Well-trained, dedicated staff**
Staff is well-trained in child development and early education. The program has little staff turnover.
- ◆ **Ongoing family-staff communication**
Families are well-informed about their children's activities and progress and are encouraged to be involved in the program.
- ◆ **Clean, safe surroundings**
The program has clean indoor and outdoor areas with room for children to play and interact safely.
- ◆ **Healthy, safe and nutritious habits**
The program pays close attention to the health, safety, and nutrition needs of children and teaches them about healthy practices and good eating habits.

The Next Steps

Once you have selected a quality program that best suits your family's needs, it's up to you to remain involved.

- Share vital information about your family and child and keep it up to date. Tell the staff about any special needs, fears, or physical problems your child may have.
- Keep important information about the program handy (vacation/holiday schedules, telephone numbers, emergency procedures).
- Be sure to read and understand all policies, paperwork, and mail you receive from the program. Read the parent bulletin board for important information.
- Let your child know you are interested in what he or she does at the program by visiting the program periodically during the day, helping with projects, and attending family events and parent conferences.
- Respect the program's staff as knowledgeable professionals. Remember, you are entrusting them with the care of your child.
- If you become concerned about something that's happening in your child's classroom or family child care home, talk it over with the program director or owner. If you think the program is not following state regulations, call the **North Carolina Division of Child Development at (800) 859-0829**.

child care search

Questions or concerns?
Call our referral counselors at
ChildCareSearch.
Help is just a phone call away.
See back page for individual
county numbers



child care e-search

Do your own child care search
online with ChildCareeSearch.
Find it at CCRI's website at
www.childcaresourcesinc.org



Quality Checklist

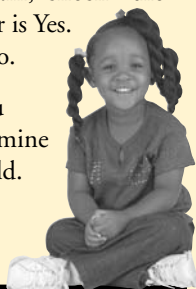
Use the following checklist to keep track of the answers you receive during your search for quality programs. You may need to make additional notes as you ask questions.

The checklist is broken down into several categories covering a wide range of topics, from general program information to the needs of your child.

First, complete the *Program Information Chart* below for each program you visit. Then, use the checklist as you visit each program. Next to each question on the checklist are three numbered check boxes: The numbers match the program numbers in the *Program Information Chart* below.

As you ask questions about each program, check the appropriate numbered box when the answer is Yes. Leave the box unchecked if the answer is No.

When you have visited all the programs you want to see, compare the answers and determine which program is best for you and your child.



Program Information Chart

Program: 1

Contact:

Phone:

Hours:

Fees:

Star rating:

Referral #1

Phone:

Referral #2

Phone:

Program: 2

Contact:

Phone:

Hours:

Fees:

Star rating:

Referral #1

Phone:

Referral #2

Phone:

Program: 3

Contact:

Phone:

Hours:

Fees:

Star rating:

Referral #1

Phone:

Referral #2

Phone:

Quality Checklist



Setting

- Do children have a place to store personal belongings? 1 2 3
- Are there toys on low shelves within in reach of infants, toddlers and preschoolers? 1 2 3
- Are the furnishings the right size for the ages of the children in care? 1 2 3
- Is the children's work displayed at their eye level? 1 2 3
- Are there science or sensory activities that encourage the children to experiment and observe? 1 2 3
- Does indoor and outdoor equipment such as low slides, push/pull toys and low climbing equipment promote physical activity? 1 2 3
- Is there sufficient floor space in infant classrooms for cribs, and for infants to crawl and engage in nurturing activities? 1 2 3
- Are learning centers and planned activities available outside? 1 2 3
- Are there activity areas that allow for different types of play (such as a housekeeping area, cozy book corner, art area, blocks, etc.)? 1 2 3
- Is the program accessible to and does it meet the needs of children with disabilities? 1 2 3



Programming

- Are learning goals set for each child? 1 2 3
- Is there a curriculum that is followed? 1 2 3
- Are infant activities (such as play, meals or napping) individualized? 1 2 3
- Is a daily record kept on feeding, naps and diaper changes? 1 2 3
- Is the children's work creative and individualized as opposed to looking the same? 1 2 3
- Is there a variety of clean, developmentally appropriate materials and equipment for the children, both indoors and outdoors? 1 2 3
- Are there strollers or buggies to make outdoor visits easier? 1 2 3
- Is there a variety of toys? 1 2 3
- Are duplicates of toys available? 1 2 3
- Is there a record, CD or tape player? 1 2 3



Health & Safety

- Are nutritious snacks and meals planned and served? Is there a menu posted for parents? 1 2 3
- Are foods, bottles and medicines labeled with child's name and date and stored safely and appropriately? 1 2 3
- Is there a staff member trained in first aid/CPR at the facility at all times? Is there a first aid kit? 1 2 3
- Do staff follow health precautions such as using gloves and washing their hands and children's hands frequently. 1 2 3
- Are the toys cleaned daily or as needed? 1 2 3
- Can the diaper-changing surface be easily cleaned? 1 2 3
- Are there clean and easily accessible bathrooms? 1 2 3
- Is the outdoor play area fenced? 1 2 3
- Are the children able to move between indoor and outdoor play areas safely and without difficulty? 1 2 3
- Are the program's indoor and outdoor areas safe, free from hazards, and large enough for easy movement? 1 2 3
- Are there separate outdoor areas for infants that include a variety of safe equipment? 1 2 3
- Are safety gates used properly? 1 2 3
- Are electrical plugs and radiators covered or protected? 1 2 3
- Are fire drills conducted monthly? 1 2 3
- Are there smoke and carbon monoxide detectors? 1 2 3



The Children

- Are the children allowed to select learning/play activities and toys by themselves? 1 2 3
- Can the children choose not to participate in activities? 1 2 3
- Do the children have the opportunity to develop self-help skills as they grow, such as zipping, buttoning and tying shoes? 1 2 3
- Are the children encouraged to solve problems constructively? 1 2 3
- Do the children appear actively involved and interested? 1 2 3

Quality Checklist



The Staff

- Does a staff member greet children warmly when they arrive? 1 2 3
- Do staff seem to like and relate well to the children, to families and to each other? 1 2 3
- Do staff use a warm and pleasant tone of voice with the children? 1 2 3
- Do staff welcome questions and share information with families? 1 2 3
- Do staff discipline the children in a caring, consistent and calm manner? 1 2 3
- Do staff encourage the children to talk to teachers and each other? 1 2 3
- Do staff respond to children's individual needs and do they provide one-on-one attention? 1 2 3
- Do staff encourage self-help and independence? 1 2 3
- Are staff actively involved with the children (i.e. on the floor with the infants)? 1 2 3
- Are staff members required to have special training in early education and child development? 1 2 3
- Is there an in-service training program and/or other opportunities for continuous staff training? 1 2 3
- Does your child's prospective teacher/provider have a degree from a college or university? 1 2 3
- Have the majority of staff members worked at the program for more than two years? 1 2 3
- Has your child's prospective teacher/provider been there for more than two years? 1 2 3
- Is there a diverse staff? 1 2 3
- Do staff accept and respect cultural differences? 1 2 3



Activities

- Are the planned activities appropriate for the ages and developmental stages of the children? 1 2 3
- Are activities planned that help children solve problems, express ideas and learn about the real world? 1 2 3
- Do you see books, materials and artwork that reflect cultural diversity? 1 2 3
- Are daily activity plans posted and followed? 1 2 3



Activities (cont'd.)

Do activity plans provide for active *and* quiet play? 1 2 3

Does the activity plan include an opportunity for music, fingerplays, books, art activities and outside play? 1 2 3

Is there an opportunity for large group, small group and individual activities? 1 2 3

Do activities encourage children to solve problems and think creatively? 1 2 3

Are children talked to, read to, and sung to? 1 2 3

Do activities give children opportunities to learn new physical skills? 1 2 3

Are children taken outdoors daily, if weather permits? 1 2 3

Does the program schedule field trips and have written procedures? 1 2 3



Program Policies

Does the program have a written statement that describes its philosophy and are you comfortable with it? 1 2 3

Does the program have a parent handbook with policies on discipline, illness, medicine and accidents? 1 2 3

Does the program keep records on children and their development? 1 2 3

Does the child/staff ratio meet state standards? (see page 7) 1 2 3

Is the group size small enough so children are not overwhelmed? 1 2 3

Is there a safe sleep policy? 1 2 3

Are there staff benefits (i.e. sick leave)? 1 2 3

Is there a plan for substitutes when staff are sick or on vacation? 1 2 3

Does the program have a policy on toilet learning? 1 2 3

Does the program have a plan for when a child is bitten? 1 2 3

Does the program have policies/procedures in case of accidents, injuries or emergencies? 1 2 3

Does the program have a plan and resources for children with special needs? 1 2 3

Are children's families allowed to visit at any time? Is there an "open door" policy? 1 2 3

Are family members actively involved in the program (i.e., members of an "advisory committee" or through teacher conferences)? 1 2 3

Does the program offer children's accident insurance? 1 2 3

About CCRI

Founded in 1982, Child Care Resources Inc. (CCRI) is a private, nonprofit, resource and referral agency that works with families and communities to ensure that all children have access to affordable, high quality early learning and school-age child care opportunities which enable them to succeed in school and in life.

CCRI's services include:

- consumer education and referrals to families searching for early care and education, school-age child care, as well as other family and child support services
- training, technical assistance, on-site consultation and professional development to improve program quality
- financial assistance for income-eligible Mecklenburg County families to offset the cost of child care
- outreach to families to promote involvement in their children's development, learning and education
- Child and Adult Care Food Program sponsorship for family child care homes
- supply and demand trends analysis leading to the development and implementation of targeted strategies to fill gaps in services
- consultation to employers on work-life policy development and early care and education and school-age child care community investment strategies
- public education to increase community awareness about and support for the needs of young and school-age children and their families

Contact CCRI

Main/Mecklenburg Office

4601 Park Road, Suite 500, Charlotte, NC 28209

Child Care Search (704) 348-2181

Other calls..... (704) 376-6697

Fax line..... (704) 376-7865

Cabarrus County Office

2353 Concord Lake Road, Suite 160, Concord, NC 28025

Child Care Search (704) 786-1024

Other calls..... (704) 786-1023

Fax line..... (704) 786-1034

Union County Office

105-A Cedar Street, Monroe, NC 28110

Child Care Search (704) 238-8800

Other calls..... (704) 238-8810

Fax line..... (704) 238-8811

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