



Dimensions of Quality Child Care

Sean Brotherson, Ph.D.
Family Science Specialist
NDSU Extension Service

A high-quality setting is what many parents are looking for in making decisions about child care and education. What are the dimensions of high-quality child care? High-quality child care environments are typically positive, supportive, encouraging, engaging and safe. Key dimensions of a high-quality care environment for children include the teachers or caregivers, the setting and the activities.

Key Components of Quality Child Care

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has established guidelines to promote high-quality environments for child care and education programs. In this publication, we will use the term “quality” to refer to care and education that is of “high” or “good” quality. The NAEYC states the following:

“A high-quality early childhood program provides a safe, nurturing environment that promotes the physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of young children while responding to the needs of families.”

In other words, high-quality child care programs meet the needs of the whole child; they go far beyond just “caring” for the child. In addition, according to NAEYC standards, a number of key components contribute to the quality of child care. They are:

- Group size
- Teacher- or caregiver-to-child ratio
- Parent/caregiver or parent/teacher communication
- Developmentally appropriate setting and activities
- Care provider/teacher qualifications and/or training

These components each contribute to the quality of daily experiences that a child has in a child care and education setting. Why are they important?

Group size

Group size refers to the number of children cared for within a single group or setting. Children who are younger benefit more from a smaller group size because they are typically able to be in a calmer, quieter and more nurturing environment.

Infants and toddlers need the opportunity for more focused attention and individual care, which will be more available in smaller groups.

As children grow older, group sizes gradually increase and parents may want them in groups based on the age of the children and the size of the physical space. Also, group sizes affect the number of peers for children to interact and play with while in child care. An example of group size would be eight infants with two teachers within a consistent classroom.

Teacher- or caregiver-to-child ratio

The more adults in a child care environment, the more individual attention and support each child typically can receive. Of course, the minimum recommended number of adults to children depends on the child’s age. The NAEYC recommends one adult for each two to four infants. The required ratio of teacher/caregiver to children will vary depending on each state’s licensing regulations. Most states require one adult teacher or care provider for each three or four infants and toddlers. Also, two or more caregivers in a setting help provide extra support or attention to a particular child if it is needed.

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Fargo, North Dakota 58108

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Parent/caregiver communication

Parents should feel welcome to share information about their child and ask questions of their caregiver. Also, in a home or classroom setting, parents should feel welcomed into the child's environment. This process allows for a trusting relationship to build between the teacher/caregiver and parent, which extends to the bond between the teacher/caregiver and child.

Regular, open communication through conversations, phone calls, e-mails, written notes or other means is important to building relationships and dealing with concerns. Also, parents and caregivers in a quality setting are able to openly communicate about priorities, discuss a child's strengths and needs, develop individual developmental goals and resolve concerns that may arise.

Developmentally appropriate setting and activities

Activities and guidance in high-quality child care and education programs are designed so they are appropriate to a child's age, interests and level of development. The topic of developmentally appropriate settings is treated more extensively in a related NDSU Extension publication (see "Developmentally Appropriate Care for Young Children").

Teacher/caregiver qualifications, training and professional development

Professional development and education, licensing and active participation in regular educational programs on early childhood development and other topics are important for child care and education providers. These are not the only indicators of a quality caregiver, but they provide a specific credential that can be checked out by parents.

Licensing of a child care program indicates that minimum requirements are met and maintained. Licensed programs are regulated by state or county agencies.

However, parents should seek recommendations from trusted sources to locate child care providers or teachers with training or characteristics that meet their needs or interests. For example, infant-child CPR certification and pediatric first aid certification are important qualifications for child care and education providers.

A Quality Teacher/Caregiver

Qualities and abilities of the teacher/caregiver who is providing care for children are a critical dimension of high-quality child care. Some items to consider are shared below.

- **Educational background of the caregiver.** A quality teacher/caregiver often will have an educational background that includes coursework in child development, early childhood education, elementary education or special education. Experience with the specific age of the child they care for or efforts to further educational awareness of child development also can be important indicators. Such teachers or care providers usually will have increased skills to appropriately support young children across their developmental stages. As a parent and consumer, do not be afraid to ask for evidence of education, experience, CPR and first aid training, or other training related to child development and early childhood care or education programs as you seek a quality caregiver.
- **Activities provided by the teacher or caregiver.** The activities and environment provided by the teacher/caregiver should appear to be interesting, challenging, inviting and appropriate for children. What does a child do during the time he or she is in the care setting? Does he or she have a flexible routine? Are both teacher-initiated activities (structured time) and child-initiated activities (free time) planned throughout the day?
- **Respect for children and parents.** A high-quality teacher/caregiver will respect all children and the feelings or views of parents. This quality will be expressed through the caregiver's willingness to obtain ideas from the children or parents, and also to interact with children in a positive, caring manner.
- **Management of children's feelings.** Care providers and teachers need to be aware of and sensitive to the feelings and personalities of children in their care. They will help children use words to express feelings, negotiate solutions and solve problems. Teachers or caregivers who validate children's feelings and equip them with problem-solving strategies will help your children become emotionally and socially competent.
- **Play guides and companions.** Play is an important part of a child's growing experience. Watch for teachers or caregivers who guide children to positive play opportunities or who act as partners in play with the children they serve. This type of involvement helps the caregiver know your child's developmental level. Also, they should provide a variety of toys or materials for use that are rotated regularly to keep children's interest.
- **Knowledge of children they are serving.** Teachers/caregivers who understand the children they care for can help them overcome difficulties and challenge them to learn and grow. Also, they can provide positive adult support and assist children in growing to new levels socially, cognitively, verbally, emotionally and physically.

Education cannot teach a caregiver to express warmth and love, but you should be able to see this ability when looking for care for your children. Do you observe children who enjoy being with the caregiver? Is everyone content and engaged in some kind of activity? Is the classroom or setting mostly children's happy voices? These and other qualities can help you select a teacher/caregiver who meets your child's needs.

A Quality Setting

Children who enter a child care setting or early education program usually will spend anywhere from 30 minutes to several hours in that setting on a regular basis. The quality of a child care setting is another essential dimension of a quality child care and education experience. Some items to consider as indicators of a quality setting are shared below.

- **Safe and healthy environment.** The safety of a child care and education environment is the first item of concern. Also, the setting should show attentiveness to the health and wellness of children. Child safety guidelines should be followed and the setting should be clean and sanitary. Talk to your local Child Care Resource and Referral office for specific health and safety guidelines in child care settings.
- **Appropriate toys and equipment.** The equipment, toys and furniture in a care setting should be clean, in good repair, sanitized and developmentally appropriate for the ages of children being served in that environment.
- **Healthy caregiver-to-child ratio.** The number of children in the program or care setting should be small enough to allow each child to receive the attention he or she may need. Licensed programs must comply with standards relating to appropriate child-to-caregiver ratios. This allows for individual attention to children's needs.
- **Licensing status.** Not all child care and education settings will be licensed, particularly if informal care arrangements with family members or others are being used. However, Child Care Resource and Referral and your local county social services office can provide parents with a listing of licensed programs in the community where care is needed. A licensed child care and education program is expected to meet minimal standards of child care safety, health and operation.
- **Location and type of program.** The location and type of child care program is important in making your child care choice. Different programs are helpful for families with differing needs. Costs will vary depending on

the type of care you select and the days and hours of care provided. However, whether you select family child care or center-based care, *quality* should be your highest priority.

- **Sense of community.** In a real sense, a child's care and education setting is his or her "home away from home." Look at the walls. Are the children's thoughts, words and pictures recorded and/or displayed? A sense of community can be recognized by a room that displays the children's words, stories and photos. Look for these to be displayed at the child's level.

Quality Activities

A third essential element of quality care involves the type of activities that are provided for children in a care setting. When choosing quality care for children, you can assess quality by observing:

- The different areas of the room (or centers within a classroom)
- The activities or toys/materials available or presented in each area

Many child care and education programs will have a daily schedule of activities available to children during their time in care and welcome inquiry into how they operate as a program and interact with children. As you consider the value of materials or activities for children, think about the developmental level of the children being served. Consider the following:

- **Age appropriateness of activities.** Are the activities and toys offered to children interesting and age appropriate? For example, early childhood guidelines suggest that children under 2 years of age should have very limited exposure to television. Is this a routine activity for children of that age in the setting? If the answer is yes, you may want to ask more questions about other activities.
- **Interest to children.** Children are naturally curious and benefit from hands-on activities and materials that allow them to explore and learn. Are the activities and materials available in the program interesting and inviting to the children? Are the children allowed to explore and interact with materials? Are toys rotated on a regular basis?

- **Individual opportunities for creative expression.** Do the activities and toys in the setting allow for creative expression? Children gain confidence as they are allowed opportunities to express their interests or abilities. The activities and toys available should encourage and reinforce such creative expression.
- **Developmentally appropriate activities.** Similar to age appropriateness, think about whether activities and materials/toys will meet the developmental needs and interests of a child. Developmentally appropriate care provides children with activities that are:

- Active
- Hands-on (children touch, talk about and explore rather than watching only)
- Relevant (to the children and their interests – children are able to understand and learn from activities)
- Independent (children can interact freely)
- Exploratory (encourage curiosity and exploration)

Conclusion

A number of factors affect the selection of child care and education programs, but parents should put high quality at the top of their priority list when making such a choice. High-quality child care and education arrangements yield benefits for both parents and children.

Quality child care provides parents with peace of mind and reassurance. Quality child care broadens a child's experience and nurtures healthy development. Quality child care enhances trust and security for both parents and children. Quality child care rests upon teachers and caregivers with education and experience with children.

Research on child care and child outcomes suggests that the quality of child care, not the type, is most important for healthy children and positive development. Consider your choices carefully and do your best to furnish a high-quality care setting and experience for your child.

Recommended Resources

■ Books and Pamphlets

Child Care Resources from the University of Minnesota. (2006). Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Extension.

A series of 15 short publications designed for parents providing information on a variety of issues related to child care. These publications can be accessed on the Internet at www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/familydevelopment/DE7268.html.

■ Videos/DVDs

Quality Child Care: Making the Right Choice for You & Your Child. (27 minutes). Parents' Action for Children (formerly I Am Your Child), P.O. Box 2096, Culver City, CA 90231. Telephone (888) 447-3400. (Cost: \$10). Can order online at <http://store.parentsactionstore.org/prostores/servlet/StoreFront>

■ Web Sites and Organizations

Child Care Resource and Referral. The national network of child-care resource and referral offices is available in most counties and states across the nation. These groups have a great deal of information on child care availability and quality. For further information, simply contact your local resource and referral (often called "R and R") agency.

Child Care Online. A rich online resource with information for parents, care providers and others seeking to learn about child care issues and options. Can be located at <http://childcare.net>

National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies. This national organization provides a rich menu of resources and information on child care in the United States for everyone from the advocate to the parent to the care provider. It operates the Child Care Aware initiative, a national consumer education parent hotline at (800) 424-2246 and Web resource. The organization's Web site can be accessed at www.childcareaware.org.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. This national organization serves parents, teachers and others in sharing information about the care and education of young children. Many resources are available from NAEYC, and the organization Web site can be accessed at www.naeyc.org.

National Child Care Information Center. NCCIC, a service of the federal government's Child Care Bureau, is a national clearinghouse and technical assistance center that links parents, providers, policymakers, researchers and the public to early care and education information. Its Web site can be accessed at: <http://nccic.org>.

National Network for Child Care. This network and resource of the national Cooperative Extension System provides dozens of resources on quality child care. The organization's Web site can be accessed at www.nncc.org.

■ References

- Child Care Resource and Referral. *Child Care Program Evaluation.* 715 11th St. N., Suite 402, Moorhead, MN 56560. Phone: (218) 299-7025 or (800) 452-3646.
- Child Care Resource and Referral. *Choosing Quality Child Care (ND & MN).* 500 Stanford Road, P.O. Box 13453, Grand Forks, ND 58208-3453. Phone: (800) 543-7382.
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