

Choosing an Early Learning Program for your Child

Summary

Choosing an early learning or childcare program for your child should be carefully considered. Before you enroll your child in a child care program, there are a number of things to consider:

- 1) Do I require full day or part day?**
- 2) How much will it cost**
- 3) What is the location/environment like?**
- 4) What program /curriculum/structured experience is in place?**
- 5) What is the philosophy of the program?**
- 6) What qualifications does the staff need?**
- 7) What is the staff to child ratio?**

Above all, tour the child care centres that you are considering, with your child if possible. The closest child care centre may not be the best for your child's development. It is important to determine what curriculum you would like for your child, how many other children will be in the child care centre, and whether or not your child will have an opportunity to develop his/her language skills. Meet with the Supervisor and ask lots of questions. If you need more information about the child care centres in your area, be sure to look them up on the local Child Care Information Registry and see if the child care centres on your list have registered.

Choosing a Childcare Provider/Early Childhood Educator

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In Ontario, more than 70% of women with children work outside the home and need either part or full time childcare (Ontario Human Rights Commission). There are many factors to be considered when choosing the right childcare for your child. For most of us living in metropolitan settings, it is usually easy to have a wide variety of child care choices. In Ontario, for instance, the government is introducing full day kindergarten. This means that programs for older preschoolers will now take place within public schools, if parents choose. Many parents still need care for their children under the age of 4. Ontario's child care and early childhood education providers fill that need.

When choosing a child care program, one should consider several factors:

1) Do I require full day or part day ECE?

You must first decide whether: a) you need full or part time child care, and, b) if they have flexible hours. This means that if you have a late meeting, or are unable to pick up your child due to traffic snarls or other unexpected circumstances that the child care program can accommodate your child until you can pick them up. It is important to determine if there is an additional cost in these cases, or if the child care centre occasionally has children staying for longer.

2) Cost

Identify the amount that you can pay on a daily basis for your child care program. In Toronto, for example, the cost of licensed child care can range from approximately \$500 to \$1500 per month, or more depending on the type of care and the age of the child. The average cost is \$783 per month according to report from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Naturally, care for infants is the most expensive. The child care centre may charge an hourly rate that is greater than the rate for regular hours. Be sure to ask up front so there are no surprises. It is no use putting your child in an expensive child care centre if it means too much financial sacrifice for your family. Make a list of centres within your price range before you visit any centres and be sure to get a full breakdown of extra costs.

Some families may be eligible for fee assistance ('subsidy') through their municipal government. Be sure to ask the supervisor of the child care centre if they accept subsidy and what the process is to apply for subsidy.

3) Location and Environment

Location is another important factor. It is important to be able to pick your child up on time, and reach your child should there be an emergency. It is no fun being stuck in traffic in danger of missing the appointed pick-up time.

The environment in which the child care centre is situated is also important. Is it easily accessed? Is there a play area outside that is fenced in and protected? Is the interior environment open and engaging? Is it stimulating? Do you think your child will be comfortable with the environment? Is there ample room for the children and the adults? Is it away from a major source of noise? These are factors to consider.

When you see the child care centre notice what the kids are doing. Do they seem relatively well behaved and engaged in an activity? Do they look engaged with the early childhood educators? Do they seem happy? These are things to pay close attention to on a site visit.

It is a good idea to bring your child along when you visit, and gauge his or her response to the environment. While most children are relatively shy when they are about 3 years old, you can assess your child's response to the various centres to help make your decision.

4) Program/Curriculum

Each child care centre has a curriculum or set of planned activities for each day. It is important that you view the curriculum and make sure that it is stimulating and provides many opportunities for your child to interact, cooperate and especially, develop his/her language skills. Avoid centres where "baby talk" seems to be the norm. Look to see that the adults at the center do not "dumb things down" too much. There should be a nice mix of noisy activities like singing, dancing or discussing and quiet activities that involve listening and paying attention. Look to see that the activities are not too long and do not bore the children. It is important that the child be engaged in activities that mimic real adult tasks like building, digging and cooking. It is also very important that the child is in an atmosphere where he or she can express him/herself in a creative manner, and that creativity is encouraged. Finally, the curriculum should be focused on preparing children for school. The child care centre should follow an established program that provides children with the skills to integrate easily to the kindergarten environment.

5) Philosophy of the program

Most child care centres have a mission statement and/or a statement of philosophy and values. This is a statement of their deeply held beliefs about early childhood education and their reasons for running a child care program. Their philosophy on early childhood education should reflect their aims in providing an educational and creative environment for children while endorsing the rights of the child.

6) Staffing

It is important to find out what the staffing requirements are for Early Childhood Educators as set by the province and make sure that the child care facility has the required number of Early Childhood Educator (ECE) personnel specified. Check out the staff in action. Are they kind, caring and genuinely love children? Do they handle behavioural issues effectively and without being punitive? Do they operate in a manner that ensures the safety of the children? It is important to be comfortable with their disciplining procedures, and that they are not too different from your own, as this will only confuse your child.

Does the staff interact well with the parents? Do they get along and encourage parents to come and interact? Assess these answers from your own tour of the facility. Does the staff seem irritated that you are there? Are they knowledgeable? Are they happy to volunteer information about the child care centre, or do you always have to ask?

Try to be there at opening and closing time to see how the children interact with their parents when they arrive. Are the majority of the children unenthused about having to spend another day at the child care centre, or are they eager to get in and meet their

classmates? Also, find out how involved parents can be with their children, and determine whether you are able, even if occasionally to be an involved parent.

7) Child to Adult ratio

Make sure that there is a good child to adult ratio, and make sure that you are comfortable with the gender ratio at the child care centre.

Conclusions

The government of Canada maintains a website that is designed to help parents choose the appropriate childcare: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/childcare/choosing.html>
Remember that in the end what is most important is your child's adjustment and satisfaction with their early educational experience. If you see your child consistently unhappy to go and lethargic or moody upon return, or if he/she does not seem to be making progress in his/her language and interpersonal skills, it might be a good idea to consider changing child care centres, or having a talk with the centre supervisor to see if any changes can be made for your child.

References

Ontario Human Rights Commission

http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/resources/discussion_consultation/FamilyStatus1?page=FamilyStatus1-THE.html

Average childcare costs per month in Canada:

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/daycare/daycarecosts.html>

Choosing Childcare for Your Child: Government of Ontario

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/childcare/choosing.html>

Association of Day Care Operators of Ontario

- The Association of Day Care Operators of Ontario helps you as a parent become more informed about the child care industry in order to make choices that are appropriate for your child. There is a section for parents and one for providers.
- <http://www.adco-o.on.ca/>

Childcare Resource and Research Unit

- The Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CRRU) provides you with research and resources on early childhood education and child care in Canada.
- <http://www.childcarecanada.org/>