

Quality Childcare - Playgroups

There's a huge range of childcare available these days – crèches, playgroups, daycares and nursery classes, it can be overwhelming for new parents. When choosing a high quality early years setting you should be looking for the following aspects.

A welcoming atmosphere: You and your child should be greeted and welcomed personally. If your child has special needs, staff should have the knowledge and skills to give the support needed. You should be offered the opportunity to stay with your child, especially while they are settling in.

Staff and children

- The adults should enjoy being with the children and take an interest in their ideas and activities.
- All workers should be warm towards the children and treat them sensitively if they are upset.
- You should see the children talking to the adults, and the adults should be listening carefully allowing plenty of time for children to explain themselves and give thoughtful replies.
- Workers should speak calmly and quietly, and should explain the routines clearly and check children understand.
- Workers should give positive encouragement for good behaviour, and notice when a child tries hard.

Premises and safety

- Premises should be bright, attractive, well kept, and airy with good natural light.
- The children should have a quiet comfortable area to relax and rest.
- There should be enough indoor space for children to do large-scale building and to work at different levels, on the floor, at a table or at an easel.
- Toilets should be nearby and easy for children to use on their own.
- Doors and windows should be childproof, workers should know where children are at all times.
- If equipment has to be cleared away at the end of the day, this should not limit the activities they can provide for children.
- There should be clear, written procedures for emergency medical treatment.
- Fire drills should be carried out regularly and fire equipment checked.

Books, materials and equipment

- Books, displays and play equipment should reflect different races, cultures and lifestyles.
- Children should have the opportunity to learn about their own and other cultures.

The following equipment should be available for children to use;

- Home corner and dressing-up clothes
- Illustrated story books and factual books
- Equipment for climbing, sliding and balancing
- Living things to grow, look at and take care of
- Small work materials – dolls house, garage, farm – for imaginative play
- Musical instruments, real and homemade
- Materials for cutting, sticking, drawing, writing and paint
- Sand, water and clay with different tools to use with them
- Woodwork and junk materials
- Different kinds of bricks and blocks; Lego, Duplo and so on
- Resources for science and technology
- Table-top games and puzzles

Staff and parents

- Parents should have the opportunity to arrange a convenient time and place for private discussion about their child.
- Parents should have the opportunity to talk about family events that could be affecting their child.
- There should be arrangements to contact a parent or carer in an emergency or if a child becomes really upset.
- Parents should be aware of any records being kept on their child's progress and should be able to see their child's records.
- Parents should be consulted about arrangement, events and activities.
- If parents are interested in helping to run the group, they should have the opportunity to join the management committee or parents rota.
- There should be a newsletter and information board for parents telling them what is happening in the group.

Meals and snacks

- All food should be healthy and varied.
- If your child has a special diet, suitable food should be available.
- The workers should eat with the children and it should be an enjoyable time.
- Workers should use snack time to encourage the children's independence, e.g. getting them to butter their own toast.

These are just some of the areas of good practice you should be looking for in your child's playgroup. You can also ask the group if they are an Early Years member, and do they have Early Years accreditation. The Early Years Accreditation Programme is a comprehensive set of quality benchmarks that groups have to meet to ensure that all areas of their provision follow recommended practice.