

When Babies and Toddlers Are in Child Care, Accreditation Is a Key to Quality

National Association for the Education of Young Children

New research on brain development underscores the importance of the first few years of life for children's development and learning. New studies also confirm that when very young children are in child care, quality matters. With roughly half of all children younger than age 3 regularly participating in non-parental care arrangements, the quality of these settings is even more critical. Yet studies of center care and family-based care by relatives and non-relatives alike suggest that as many as 40% of infant and toddler care settings may be potentially harmful to children's healthy development.

What can be done to improve the quality of child care settings, especially for babies and toddlers? Voluntary program accreditation is one important strategy. NAEYC sponsors a national accreditation process by which centers demonstrate their commitment to providing high quality to children and families. (The National Association for Family Child Care accredits family child care homes.) NAEYC accreditation looks at all aspects of a program, but focuses on what really happens to children over the course of the day. For example, ask these questions of NAEYC-accredited programs and the answer should be YES:

- Are the teachers and caregivers loving and responsive? Do they actively encourage and extend children's developing language?
- Do teachers and caregivers encourage children's play and view caregiving routines as opportunities for learning?
- Do the adults respect children's individual characteristics as well as families' preferences for their children?
- Do teachers and caregivers understand principles of child development and learning and know how to apply them to specific situations?

- Are the groups small enough to provide the individual attention very young children need? (For babies, look for groups of no more than 6 to 8 children with at least 2 adults; for toddlers, groups should not exceed 8 to 12 children with at least 2 adults.)
- Are groups of children and adults consistent over the course of the day and over time, fostering good relationships?
- Are there plenty of toys and learning materials that offer interesting and challenging activities to children that are also safe and achievable?
- Do parents and teachers and caregivers regularly share information about children and work together effectively on behalf of children?
- Is careful attention paid to children's health and safety, for example, by paying vigilant attention to hand washing and sanitation in conjunction with diapering and eating?

NAEYC accreditation is voluntary, and to date, about 5,000 programs (or roughly 5% of the market) have achieved it. An additional 10,000 programs are working toward accreditation.

The process involves a self-study through which program staff identify areas needing improvement; validation in which program information is verified during a site visit by a team of trained volunteers; and a review by a national commission of recognized experts who judge whether the program is in substantial compliance with the accreditation criteria. If so, programs are granted accreditation for 3 years. They agree to follow up the commission's suggestions regarding areas of marginal compliance and to submit annual written reports documenting improvements and continued compliance.

When visiting a program, ask if it is NAEYC-accredited. Look for the torch—the symbol of NAEYC accreditation—on stationery and promotional materials. NAEYC-accredited centers also display a certificate and large colorful poster depicting characteristics of accredited programs. If your child’s program is not accredited by NAEYC, encourage them to get involved in the process.

Call NAEYC at 202-232-8777 or 800-424-2460, extension 333 to request a list of NAEYC-accredited centers by mail.

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