

Quality Child Care for Toddlers

By Anne Stonehouse

You want to find the best possible care for your toddler*. Quality care can be found in both centre-based long day care services and in family day care, where children are cared for in a family home setting. This *Factsheet* will give you some information about what to look for and ask about when looking for quality care for your toddler.

To decide whether a child care service will be suitable for your child, you should consider visiting the service at least once, to spend some time in the children's environment and to talk with the child care professionals at the service. Visiting the service to observe what happens on a day-to-day basis can help you to build a clear picture of whether the service will meet your requirements.

Why does quality matter?

Research from all over the world shows that experiences in the early years, particularly in the first three years, are significant. Although human beings learn and change throughout life, early experiences form the basis for development, learning and wellbeing for the rest of their lives. It is important that all children have early experiences and relationships that help them to feel safe and secure and that give them many opportunities to use their skills, develop new ones and learn about the world around them.

The family is the most important influence on a toddler, but if they attend child care, the experiences and relationships that happen there are also important.

What does quality look like?

There are some characteristics of quality child care that apply whatever the age of the child and some that are more specific to toddlers. Although the characteristics of quality care are closely linked, some of the most important ones revolve around:

- relationships and interactions;
- experiences;
- planning and evaluation;
- environments; and
- health and safety.

Relationships and interactions

What is most important in the early years is for children to experience a caring and responsive relationship with at least one adult, and as they get older, to have friendships with other children.



Great importance is placed on the relationships between children and child care professionals, and there should be many warm, friendly interactions between them, in which adults show respect for children.

In addition, quality care involves child care professionals working in partnership with families and getting to know the child in the context of their family. There should be effective and ongoing exchanges of information between child care professionals and families about children's needs, routines and experiences. The process of consultation and collaboration should take place with the aim of working in partnership. Child care professionals should genuinely want to know what families know about their child and what they believe is important for their child.

Positive interactions should also demonstrate respect for the diversity of families' cultural, religious and language backgrounds, as well as for the different abilities, lifestyles, values, child rearing practices and composition of individual families.

* The term toddler is used in this *Factsheet* to refer to children aged from 12-16 months old to 30-36 months old. An age range instead of a specific age is given because there is a lot of variation in individual children's development and behaviour.

In quality care for toddlers, the following practices are particularly important:

- Child care professionals take full advantage of opportunities for one to one interactions with each toddler, often in care routines such as nappy changing, toileting, dressing and eating.
- Care is provided by familiar adults who get to know the child and whom the child gets to know.
- Adults show understanding of the special challenges that toddlers face as they gain a deeper understanding of their world, and a need to exercise their independence and power.
- Many playful social interactions take place, including conversations, songs, rhymes, finger plays, peek-a-boo games, sharing books and stories.
- Positive and affectionate physical contact between child care professionals and toddlers takes place throughout the day.
- Toddlers receive help to get along with other children, as child care professionals recognise that toddlers are generally very egocentric and can have difficulty in working and playing harmoniously with others sometimes.
- Positive, appropriate and effective ways of guiding behaviour are used, that help toddlers begin to learn behaviours that are approved of, and those that are not. Child care professionals should recognise that toddlers are still developing the skills required for self-control, and they support children sensitively when they are frustrated or acting impulsively.

Experiences

The kinds of experiences children have in care – how they spend their time and what is provided for them – are important. All times of the day and all experiences matter in the quality of care experienced by children. The service should be able to show that children have many opportunities to have experiences in small groups or with one other child or adult. In recognising that play and exploration are important ways for children to learn and develop, there needs to be many opportunities for children to play and explore.

Children in the toddler age group are beginning to develop an interest in others, and they often need adult support and reassurance to be able to interact and play appropriately with peers. Children should be encouraged by child care professionals to begin to appreciate being a member of a group, and to value and show care and respect for other children. Toddlers can also be supported to be comfortable with differences in people, to appreciate what people



have in common and to respect the contributions others can make. It is important that child care professionals help children to experience the benefits of collaborating and working together.

Children should also be supported and encouraged to take an active role in their own learning and development. They need many opportunities to follow their own interests and to gain new ones, to use their current skills and to learn from other children and adults. Child care professionals should provide experiences that show that they have expectations that fit each child's age and abilities and that take into account individual differences. Each child should have a variety of opportunities and experiences that support all areas of their development.

In quality care for toddlers, the following are particularly important:

- Toddlers' communication skills are valued and child care professionals recognise children and respond to their increasing ability to use language to communicate.
- The physical environment, materials and experiences discourage children from being in big groups and encourage them to spread out in the space available.
- There is a lot of support for children to develop self-esteem and confidence.
- Planned and spontaneous experiences are offered to take advantage of toddlers' curiosity and urge to find out, explore and investigate.
- Toddlers receive positive and sensitive support from child care professionals to develop their independence and self-help skills when they are ready.

Planning and evaluation

Quality practice happens when child care professionals make flexible plans and prepare for positive relationships and children's experiences. Where there is quality, child care professionals are continually evaluating what is happening – that is, thinking about how good the experience is for children and families and what improvements can be made.

More particularly:

- Experiences are planned and offered that take into account the interests, needs and abilities of each child.
- The service has in place a variety of ways, both informal and more structured, of evaluating every aspect of the service with the aim of improving.
- Planning takes place that gives children choices and builds flexibility into the schedule, the way the day is organised and the routines or daily living experiences, so that adjustments can be made that take into account unexpected events and the needs of individual children.

The environment

The physical environment plays an important role in children's experiences. This relates not only to the materials and equipment provided, but also to how these are placed, how the environment is organised, its attractiveness, how much and what kind of noise there is and how much the environment changes or stays the same. All of these factors affect the quality of care experienced by children.

The child care environment should be rich with language and print, and child care professionals should talk with children about what is happening around them. It is important that child care professionals encourage children to communicate, and that adults respond positively to the communications of children.

Resources are a key aspect of the child care environment, and there should be a variety of play and learning materials, equipment and resources that can be used by children in many different ways. The materials provided for children should encourage them to explore, think and solve problems, as well as supporting children's creativity and stimulating their curiosity. Children need equipment and resources that ensure that they are sometimes challenged to extend their skills as well as having many experiences of being successful.

Children should be able to spend time outdoors, engaging in a range of experiences, some of which are similar to what they do indoors and others that take advantage of the natural environment.

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In quality care for toddlers, the following practices are particularly important:

- The human and physical environment is rich and stimulating, while at the same time being predictable and not overwhelming or overly busy.
- There is a pleasant and comfortable level of noise and activity and some moments of peace.
- Natural materials as well as commercial materials are used to support toddlers' play and learning.

Health and safety

Maintaining children's health and keeping them safe is the most fundamental responsibility of a child care service. Children in child care settings are more likely to come into contact with contagious illnesses than they are in their home environment. It is particularly important that child care professionals have current knowledge about infection control and communicable illnesses, including immunisable diseases.

In a quality child care setting both the environment and the practices of child care professionals should promote children's health and safety. The service should have a thorough understanding of the recommendations of recognised health and safety authorities, and there should be written policies that reflect and support best practice.

While considerations of safety are important, child care professionals must approach this in a balanced way to ensure that children can still explore and challenge their skills in a stimulating play environment.

A quality service should:

- implement recommended sun safety practices;
- supervise children effectively, and ensure that children do not have unsupervised access to animals;
- ensure the environment is smoke free;
- have a policy to promote children's nutritional health, either through the food provided at the

service, or by supporting families to make healthy food choices in the food they provide for their children; and

- have clear procedures for minimising cross infection through hygiene practices, excluding ill children and keeping up to date records of individual children's immunisation status. The service should also ensure that families are provided with the service's current policies on health, nutrition and illness.

In quality care for toddlers, the following practices are particularly important:

- There should be safe areas, indoors and outdoors, where toddlers can safely practice their developing physical skills such as climbing, balancing, running and jumping. It is also important that equipment and spaces can provide an element of challenge for toddlers.
- Toddlers should be within sight and/or hearing of child care professionals at all times, and sleeping children should be monitored closely.
- Child care professionals should work in partnership with families to support children during toilet training.
- There needs to be an effective process for exchanging information with families about children's health and wellbeing throughout the day.

Choosing quality care for toddlers

It is important that you feel comfortable with the care you choose for your child. To gain the information needed to make an informed decision about the child care service you wish to use, it is important that you and your family think about what matters to you. This will help you to decide

upon the best questions to ask in order to get all of the information you need to feel good about your choice.

Some questions that you may find helpful when considering child care for your toddler include:

- How will the child care professionals comfort my child if they become upset, or have difficulty separating from me when they start care?
- How will I be informed about my child's eating, sleeping and toileting during the day?
- How will my child be supported when they are toilet training?
- Which child care professional will be my child's main carer?
- Will my child be able to follow the same routine they have at home?
- What experiences will be available to stimulate my child's interest and support their development?
- How will the child care professionals guide my child's behaviour?

Child care services will vary in many ways, but all quality services have child care professionals who are interested, knowledgeable and enthusiastic about caring for children and working in partnership with families.

NCAC produces a free *Family Information Kit* that outlines what to look for in quality child care. To request one, please visit the 'Families and Children' page on the NCAC website (www.ncac.gov.au), or telephone 1300 136 554 ■

References and further reading

- Parenting and Child Health. (n.d.). *Choosing Child Care*. Retrieved 16 January 2008 from <http://www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=114&np=122&id=1509#4>
- Eaton, J. & Shepherd, W. *Early Childhood Environments*. ACT: Australian Early Childhood Association Inc.
- Greenman, J. & Stonehouse, A. (1997). *Prime Times: A Handbook for Excellence in Infant and Toddler Programs*. Melbourne: Addison Wesley Longman Australian Pty Limited.
- Gonzalez-Mena, J. & Widmeyer Eyer, D. (1997). *Infants, Toddlers and Caregivers*. California: Mayfield Publishing Company.

Useful websites

- Raising Children Network (raisingchildren.net.au)



For more information on Child Care Quality Assurance please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.

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