A Parent's Guide to Choosing Quality Child Care

Building relationships with families to encourage development of Pennsylvania's children and stability of care for Pennsylvania's families. We believe in quality care and early learning experiences.

Dear Parents,

The quality of child care has a direct impact on your child's ability to learn, to build healthy relationships and become the best he or she can be. However, the important decision of where to place your child is often difficult and confusing. The Office of Child Development has developed this guide to educate and empower parents to make smart decisions when choosing child care.

As a part of resource and referral services for parents, Pennsylvania has three goals to help support your decisions about early childhood programs:

1. **To educate families on the benefits of quality care.**

2. **To match families with care and services that meets their needs.**

3. **To develop a relationship with families in order to provide continuing service.**

TAKING THE FIRST STEPS

- Write down what you want from your child care program. Think about what your child may also want. Ask your child, if he or she is old enough.
- Talk to the staff at your local Child Care Information Services (CCIS) agency.
- Think about what you can afford. Check into any child care financial assistance through the state or your employer.
- Interview caregivers on the phone. Ask about staff-to-child ratios, costs, certification, learning opportunities offered and if the provider is participating in Keystone STARS.
- Use the steps and checklist provided in this guide (pages 11-14) to help you make your choice.

TYPES OF CHILD CARE

You should choose the most appropriate child care program that meets your child and family needs.

Child Care Center

- Serves seven or more children unrelated to the child care operator.
- State certification required, based on health and safety.
- Voluntary participation in Keystone STARS or other types of accreditation at discretion of the program.

Group Home

- Serves between seven and 12 children unrelated to the child care operator.
- State certification required, based on health and safety.
- Voluntary participation in Keystone STARS or other types of accreditation at discretion of the program.

Family Home

- One caregiver who serves between four and six children unrelated to the caregiver.
- State registration required, based on health and safety.
- Voluntary participation in Keystone STARS or other types of accreditation at discretion of the program.

Relative/Neighbor care

- One caregiver who cares for one, two or three children who are not related to the caregiver and up to three additional children who are related to caregiver.
- No state oversight. No health and safety requirements.
- Unable to participate in accrediting programs.

ABOUT CERTIFICATION

The state Department of Public Welfare (DPW) certifies child care providers. At least once a year, DPW inspects Child Care Centers, Group Homes and on a random basis, inspects Family Homes that serve four to six children. DPW is also responsible for investigating complaints about child care facilities.

Child care is an important partnership between parents and child care providers. Both partners play a key role in achieving the well-being and healthy development of children.

For more information about requirements and who is considered to be related to the child care operator or if you have questions or concerns regarding child care, call your regional child care office (listed on page 15) or contact your local Child Care Information Services (CCIS) for more information.

DEFINING QUALITY CHILD CARE

Quality child care will offer your child a stimulating, nurturing environment which should help prepare them for school and to reach his or her full potential. Quality care environments far exceed minimum standards set by the state and provide a stimulating, loving atmosphere in which your child will mentally, socially, emotionally and physically thrive.

CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITY

- Small group sizes and adult-to-child ratios encourage the best opportunities for a child's development.
- Caregivers or teachers who have experience and education in early childhood development.
- Opportunities for meaningful parent involvement.
- Learning materials and teaching styles that are age-appropriate and respectful of children's cultural and ethnic heritage.
- Learning opportunities that promote your child's success in school.
- Participation in accrediting programs such as Keystone STARS.

10 REASONS FOR PARENTS TO CHOOSE QUALITY CHILD CARE

1. **SCHOOL READINESS!**
   Children in a quality setting will not only gain intellectual skills, but also social sills that will prepare them for the school environment.

2. **ATTENTION!**
   Lower staff-to-child ratios increase your child's individual attention while in care.

3. **PROFESSIONAL STAFF!**
   A quality care setting includes a staff trained to care for children and their needs

4. **GOOD RELATIONSHIPS!**
   Quality care promotes a positive relationship between parents and the caregiver. Parent involvement is a priority.

5. **OPPORTUNITY!**
   Age-appropriate learning materials and activities give children the opportunity to learn and grow.

6. **RESPECT!**
   A quality program will be respectful of children's and parent's cultural, ethnic and special accommodations.

7. **PROFESSIONALISM!**
   A quality program will have business practices and policies in place so parents know what to expect in various situations.

8. **SAFETY!**
   The basic need of a quality child care setting is to ensure that the children in care are in the safest environment possible.

9. **STABILITY!**
   Parents have assurance that their child is in a safe, positive environment without jumping from provider to provider.

10. **PARTICIPATION!**
    Quality providers participate in accrediting programs (such as Keystone STARS), to continue striving for higher quality early learning experiences for children.

WHAT DOES KEYSTONE STARS MEAN?

Keystone STARS is a continuous quality improvement program. It has four STAR levels. Each STAR designation has its own research-based performance standards. These standards measure four areas that make a difference in the quality of care your child receives:

1. **The educated and well-trained staff**
2. **The environment your child is in everyday**
3. **Leadership and Management**
4. **Family and Community Partnerships**

As a program moves from STAR 1 to STAR 4, the requirements in these areas increase.

AT A KEYSTONE STARS PROGRAM YOU SHOULD FIND:

- Department of Public Welfare Certificate of Compliance for Centers or Certificate of Registration for Family Homes.
- A comfortable place where your child can explore and learn.
- Laughing, reading and talking which builds language skills.
- Teachers learning new ways to help your child succeed.
- A safe, healthy and exciting place.
- Music, art, science and play activities that increase school readiness.
- Your child feeling good about himself or herself.
- Family involvement.
- Teachers that listen to children and parents.
- Children having fun together and being respectful of each other.

KEYSTONE STARS: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: Why should parents care about Keystone STARS?
A: Your child's Early Education is critical to his or her development and future success in school and life. Keystone STARS sets requirements for early childhood educators to promote the best learning environment and safest setting possible for your child.

Q: What are the requirements set by Keystone STARS?
A: Quality ratings are based on four areas:

1. Staff education – early childhood educators have the training and knowledge to interact properly with children.
2. Learning environment – program has appropriate materials for a variety of ages and provides opportunities for children to learn on a daily basis.
3. Leadership and management – a well-run business has policies and plans in effect to not only optimize safety, but also for parents to know what will happen in certain situations.
4. Family and community partnerships – Parents and community stakeholders are encouraged to offer ideas and feedback regarding the learning program.

Q: How does Keystone STARS rate a program?
A: A program begins Keystone STARS with a "Start with STARS" rating and can work it's way to a STAR 1, STAR 2, STAR 3 until it becomes a top-rated STAR 4 program.

Q: What is the difference between a STAR 1 and higher STAR ratings?
A: Programs are rated using the four quality areas, but the requirements increase in each area for each STAR level. Please speak with your local Child Care Information Services (CCIS) for details of STAR level requirements.

Q: The Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW) certifies programs. Isn't that good enough?
A: A certified center does meet Pennsylvania's minimum requirements for safety. However, certification does not address Early Education. Keystone STARS programs combine these safety requirements with Early Education standards to give children a safe and an educational environment.

Q: Does it cost more to enroll my child in a Keystone STARS program?
A: Providers enroll voluntarily in the Keystone STARS program and there are no charges for the provider to enroll. Costs to parents are set only by the provider themselves.

Q: What will my child get out of being enrolled in a Keystone STARS program?
A: Many things! Individual attention, daily learning activities, a safe, friendly and respectful environment, feeling good about himself or herself, a well educated staff, parent involvement and more.

Q: What do parents get out of enrolling their children in a Keystone STARS program?
A: Knowing that your child is safe and respected, that your child is learning something new every day, and the security of knowing what to expect from your provider in certain situations. Most of all, giving your child the best opportunity to succeed today and in the future.

INFORMATION ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT

The benefits of Early Learning programs are numerous. A child's ability to think, form relationships, and live up to his or her full potential is directly related to the connected effect of good health, good nutrition and appropriate stimulation and interaction with others. Scientists have shown the importance of early brain development and the need for positive stimulation, good health and nutrition.

Children who participate in early learning programs tend to be more successful later in school, are more competent socially and emotionally, and show higher verbal and intellectual development during early childhood than children who do not participate in early learning programs.

Ensuring healthy child development, therefore, is an investment in your child.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "the brain undergoes its most rapid development in the first three years of life, and in this development the environment plays a central role. Nerve connections that are associated with specific skills such as language are developed during this critical period." Children need quality care and education in the first years of life to develop to their full potential.

BASIC DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONES

AGE	DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONES
Birth to Six Months	Smiles spontaneously Can grasp a rattle Vocalizes Rolls over
Six Months to One Year	Sits without support Thumb-finger (pincer) grasp Waves "bye-bye" 2-3 word vocabulary
One Year to 18 Months	Removes clothes Walks without support Drinks from cup Knows 5-20 words
Two Years	Puts on clothes Knows 6 or more body parts Understands 2-step commands Knows at least 50 words
Three Years	Knows name, age and gender 250+ word vocabulary Goes up and down stairs without support Pedals tricycle
Four Years	Can play board/card games Draws a person with 3 parts Can name at least 4 colors Almost all speech is understood
Five Years	Ties shoes Prints first name Understands the concept of time Abides by rules

4 STEPS TO SELECTING A CHILD CARE PROVIDER

1. Interview Caregivers

CALL FIRST
Ask:

- Is there an opening for my child?
- What hours and days are you open and where are you located?
- How much does care cost? Is financial assistance available?
- How many children are in your care? What age groups do you serve?
- Do you provide transportation?
- Do you provide meals (breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks)?
- Do you have a certificate of compliance/
- Other accreditations?
- Do you participate in Keystone STARS?
- When can I come to visit?

VISIT NEXT
Look for:

- Responsive, nurturing, warm interactions between caregiver and children.
- Children who are happily involved in daily activities and comfortable with their caregiver.
- A clean, safe and healthy indoor and outdoor environment, especially napping, eating and toileting areas.
- A variety of toys and learning materials, such as books, puzzles, blocks and climbing equipment, that your child will find interesting and that will contribute to your child's growth and development.
- Children getting individual attention.

Ask:

- Can I visit anytime?
- How do you handle discipline?
- What do you do if a child is sick?
- What would you do in case of emergency?
- Do you have a substitute or back-up caregiver?
- Where do children nap? How do you ensure that babies sleep on their backs?
- What education have you (and other staff) had? What ongoing professional development is available?
- May I see a copy of your state certificate of compliance?
- May I see a copy of additional accreditations?
- May I have a list of parents (current or former) who have used your program?
- What kind of parent involvement do you have?

2. Check References

Ask Other Parents:

- Did your child learn new things while enrolled in the program?
- How did the caregiver discipline your child?
- Did your child enjoy the child care experience?
- How did the caregiver respond to you as a parent?
- Do you feel that this program has helped prepare your child for school?
- Would you recommend the caregiver without reservation?
- If your child is no longer with caregiver, why did you leave?

Ask the Local Child Care Information Services (CCIS) Agency or Certification Office:

- What regulations should child care providers meet in my area?
- Is there a record of complaints about the child care provider I am considering and how do I find out about it?

3. Make the Decision for Quality Care

From what you heard and saw, ask yourself:

- Which child care should I choose so that my child will be happy and grow?
- Which caregiver can meet any special accommodations for my child?
- Are the caregiver's values compatible with my family's values?
- Is the child care available and affordable according to my family's needs and resources?
- Do I feel good about my decision?

4. Stay Involved

Ask yourself:

- How can I arrange my schedule so I can….
    i. Talk to my caregiver every day?
    ii. Talk to my child every day about how the day went?
    iii. Visit and observe my child in care at different times of the day?
    iv. Be involved in my child's activities?
- How can I work with my caregiver to resolve issues and concerns that may arise?
- How do I keep informed about my child's growth and development while in care?
- How can I promote good working conditions for my child care provider?
- How can I network with other parents?

QUALITY CHILD CARE CHECKLIST:

What to look for in a quality child care program

When visiting a program, ask these questions.
Your answers to these questions should be "yes."

Facility:

____ Is the provider certified by the Department of Public Welfare and is it posted?
____ Does the provider participate in Keystone STARS?
____ Are there appropriate toys and materials for children of all age groups?
____ Does the provider encourage you to drop in and visit at any time/

Staff:

____ Does staff communicate daily with parents about their child's progress?
____ Does staffing allow for each child to receive individual attention?
____ Does staff sit and read to the children?
____ Does staff seem patient and receptive to children's needs?
____ Is staff respectful of children?
____ Is staff respectful of parents?
____ Does staff encourage children's sharing, manners, and other good behaviors?
____ Does staff appear lively, smiling and interacting in a positive manner with the children?
____ Does staff involve children in daily learning activities?

Safety:

____ Does the facility appear orderly and clean?
____ Are hazardous materials locked away?
____ Is there an emergency plan and is it posted?
____ Are there security measures in place?
____ Is there a policy for sick children and other circumstances?

Children:

____ Do the children have a consistent routine that they can understand and follow?
____ Do the children seem occupied and engaged?
____ Are the children involved in activities that promote learning?
____ Is there a policy on discipline?
____ Do the children seem happy?

Feelings:

____ Is your initial reaction upon entering the site a positive one?
____ Is this a place my child would enjoy?
____ Would my child be safe here?
____ Would I/we feel comfortable using this program?
____ Would my child learn new things every day at this program?

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT CHILD CARE, CALL THE CHILD CARE OFFICE IN YOUR REGION

Western Region: **1-800-222-2149**

Counties:
Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Cameron, Clarion, Clearfield, Crawford, Elk, Erie, Fayette, Forest, Greene, Indiana, Jefferson, Lawrence, McKean, Mercer, Potter, Venango, Warren, Washington, Westmoreland

Central Region: **1-800-222-2117**

Counties:
Adams, Bedford, Blair, Cambria, Centre, Clinton, Columbia, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Fulton, Huntingdon, Juniata, Lancaster, Lebanon, Lycoming, Mifflin, Montour, Northumberland, Perry, Snyder, Somerset, Union, York

Northeast Region: **1-800-222-2108**

Counties:
Berks, Bradford, Carbon, Lackawanna, Lehigh, Luzerne, Monroe, Northampton, Pike, Schuylkill, Sullivan, Susquehanna, Tioga, Wayne, Wyoming

Southeast Region: **1-800-346-2929**

Counties:
Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, Philadelphia

Or, call 1-877-4-PA-KIDS (1-877-472-5437).