

A Parent's Guide to Selecting Quality Day Care

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Smashwords Edition

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Dedication

“This guide is dedicated to my three sons, Ariel, Raffi and Shaya who light my path to understanding children and families, and who make me a better mother every day.”

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A Parent's Guide to Selecting Quality Day Care



First day of school photo, older infant room, including parents and teachers

“If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in.”

– Rachel Carson, biologist and conservationist.

The Benefits of Quality Day Care

There's no such thing as one size fits all childcare. Every family has a complex web of needs—financial realities, logistical hurdles, concerns about health and safety, and visions of early education—and these needs shape decisions about who will care for the new baby. For some families, the nanny offers a perfect fit, with flexible hours, personalized care and protection from childhood illnesses.

For others, day care is more attractive, presenting such a wide range of positives that the nanny seems to pale in comparison. Over the last five years, the concept of *QUALITY* day care, essentially schools for babies, has grown in New York City, and parents seeking full or part time care in a school-like setting now have some good choices.

As the Educational Director of a high-end infant toddler center in Manhattan, I spend my days coming face to face with the benefits of day care. I see six-month-old babies exploring each other's faces, one year olds eating together at the table with poise; I see two year olds singing from a shared book, working with focus in the art studio learning to use glue, walking to the local farm stand to make a salad, etc. In a social school environment, infants and toddlers learn tremendously from these novel experiences. They meet new people, use materials, and encounter challenging situations constantly, asking them to think, take risks, and develop preferences at a very young age.

By the time our three year olds apply to ongoing schools, these thousands of new experiences prepare them for the necessary high stakes playdates where a child's ability to play with others determines their acceptance to elite schools. At these playdates, our children present as incredibly well adjusted, confident, and focused students. That disposition for learning is the primary benefit of quality group day care. You may wonder how do day care centers prep children so they are ready to learn and they reveal school readiness to the outside world?

Much of the learning in day care begins with the creation of relationships and feelings of attachment across the community (parent to teacher, teacher to child, child to child, etc.) and then moves on to curriculum and exposure to materials and ideas. Here are some of the ingredients that comprise an outstanding early learning experience for infants and toddlers:

Relationships and Communities

Parents and Teachers

Those of us who work with infants and toddlers tend to fall in love with the children in our care and we like their parents a lot as well. We are the first adults outside the home that come into children's lives, and it takes time for families to get comfortable and find their place in the community. Once everyone starts to feel attached, and knows their needs will be met, the children are emboldened to explore on their own. They reach out to new friends, manipulate materials, and use all their growing physical skills to get around the classroom. The bond between teachers and families is in many ways what you pay for when you choose day care.



Teacher and child enjoy a book together

Children and Teachers

Great schools do a few things to deepen these feelings of connection. Centers hire teachers who are passionate about working with infants and toddlers specifically and who understand child

development. They may assign one teacher to be the primary caregiver for a specific child, establishing a more formalized, deeper child/teacher connection. Great centers also work hard to retain teachers from year to year by offering solid raises and engaging professional development. They also provide opportunities for children and teachers to stay together for three years as a class, what we call “continuity of care.” While some centers assign children to a new classroom upon their birthday or achievement of a milestone like walking, there are real learning benefits in keeping children together for several years. Taken together, these practices that strengthen relationships yield strong feelings of attachment, setting the stage for a thriving learning community, a happy place to be.

Children with Children

Perhaps parents feel the most attracted to day care because of the friendships their children will make from a young age. Children who are together for three years become extended family. We know that children learn the most from other children, so these ongoing relationships are incredibly beneficial to everyone.

Parents with Parents

Many parents turn to day care centers because they need the social support and they want to make friends who have children the same age. The joy of having a baby often comes along with feelings of loneliness and anxiety, and being together with other parents in a school setting can help new parents feel more secure. A positive, nurturing community is another benefit to the day care choice.

Administrators and Parents

When parents have concerns about their child, they want to talk to someone who really knows kids and usually the school director offers that support. Directors have been teachers, sometimes they are also experienced parents, and they offer a broad long-range view, and hopefully some parenting wisdom. Sometimes the teaching team will sit down with parents and an administrator to talk about what is happening and recommend a course of action that could include changing behavior, seeking help from a professional or having a child evaluated. Those administrators and teachers who have a master’s in early childhood can offer insights that come out of their training, and this is a direct benefit to being in a quality day care setting as well.

One of the greatest stressors for parents of young children is the process of applying for ongoing schools in New York City. Whether parents are seeking a nursery school (serving children three to five), deciding between public and private Pre-K, considering gifted and talented, or seeking admission to an elite private school, they rely on day care administrators to provide information, contacts, and expertise in writing letters of reference (yes, for three year olds!). New parents know little about the admissions process in New York City, and they benefit tremendously from working with administrators who understand details of timing, school culture, and how to

manage the system. If a day care administrator can reduce stress around the application process, the whole family benefits.

What Are Kids Learning in Day Care?



Teacher explores the inside of a gourd with some two year olds

Infants and toddlers in day care are learning all day every day. New parents often need help understanding how babies learn, since they aren't doing anything that looks like traditional school learning and they can't yet talk. Instead, infants and toddlers are building essential skills that get them ready for school, such as being part of a group, developing a plan, solving problems independently, manipulating tools, and focusing attention. Parents take these skills for granted, but infants and toddlers learn them through lots of practice. In quality day care centers, children are learning:

1) To manage routines and transitions

Every classroom in day care has a schedule of the day, which consists of care routines, exploration or work time, trips outside, eating, diapering, and resting. Infant rooms have the most flexible schedule because babies need to sleep and eat on demand. As children get older, and certainly by the time they are over a year, they benefit from a routine that is largely the same every day. This stability and predictability create a framework that makes children feel safe at school, and enables them to expect what comes next, preparing their body and mind.

These predictable transitions, for example, moving between indoors and outdoors, working and cleaning up, being awake and falling asleep, all involve a physical and mental shift, which we call self-regulation. The ability to accept transitions and to shift gears seamlessly, are crucial for school success. In a day care environment children practice self-regulation many times throughout the day, preparing them for ongoing schooling and the demands of work life ahead.

2) *To take risks and get messy*



Sitting infant works with clay and sticks in art studio

Imagine that it's fall and time to open up a pumpkin and feel the goop inside. Children have different responses to the experience. Some dive in with enthusiasm, others observe friends and tentatively proceed, and still others refuse to try. Day care centers encourage children to embrace these new experiences, and because children are so curious, we want to see them develop the confidence to try. Day care centers cultivate a spirit of adventure practically from birth.

One area that holds particular appeal for parents and children is sensory exploration. Very young children learn best through the senses, which often involve messy hands, wet clothes, playing in sand, using shaving cream, etc. Some of our most potent childhood memories include running in the rain, good smells wafting from the kitchen, or working on a messy art project. Parents often hesitate to welcome this mess at home, and they depend on day care centers to embrace the mess, which benefits everyone in the family.

3) To Get Moving

In a center environment, where there are so many new things to see and do, children are inspired to move. Infants on their backs will work hard to turn when an interesting object is just out of reach. A toddler will eagerly try to climb a challenging piece of playground equipment. Children painting a large mural will reach and swirl their arms, pound clay, and lift heavy blocks. Across the day, school environments ask children to use fine and gross motor skills, and to challenge themselves constantly.

4) To Learn Empathy, Compromise and Collaboration



Children manipulate keys on the saxophone, being gentle, taking turns

If children are part of a group from infancy, then from birth they are building skills of living as a member of a community. They quickly recognize when someone is hurt and come close to see if they can help. They listen to what someone else is saying. They learn to advocate to get what they need, first using gestures and later words. They eventually share ideas, make compromises and start to collaborate. By the time a child is four, they can suggest we build a castle, or, no, let's make a farm, and work out a way to move forward with a combined plan. We build these collaborative skills in day care, and they enable children to be part of an athletic team, an orchestra, or productive members of the staff at work. Day care kids know they aren't alone, as they've always been a valued member of the group.

One of the unsung benefits of day care is the overall resilience it cultivates in young children. Waiting your turn, accepting limits, picking yourself up when you are hurt, tenaciously trying something many times in order to get it right, are all things we learn when we become part of a group. In addition, day care exposes children to many illnesses that help build a resilient immune system, strengthening the child for a healthier adulthood. Many parents hesitate to enroll in day care precisely because they want their babies to stay healthy, not realizing how important it is for infants and toddlers to have contact with germs, and to fight off early childhood sickness. Let them play in dirt, let them mouth toys—germs are good for kids!



Teacher and child learn to care for small animals in our classroom

The first three years of life are a miraculous time of growth and brain development. Quality day care centers with trained early childhood professionals provide a very good option for parents who need full time care and/or want a social experience for their child. Look around with a discerning eye, as not all day care centers provide nurturing and intentional care. Those that do, however, offer children an enriched educational experience, reduce stress, and help new parents carve out a strong, confident, relaxed approach to parenting. Excellent infant toddler care serves as a launching point for a child's lifelong education, instilling countless attitudes, positive sense of self, and a solid disposition for learning.

How to Choose the Right Day Care for Your Baby

Selecting a day care center can be a family's first and most consequential parenting decision. After staying home with a precious baby for three months, suddenly you have to return to work and decide who will spend their days with the baby, who will comfort him when he's upset, who will watch her walk for the very first time? For some, the one-on-one attention of a nanny offers an attractive solution.

For others, who may want a degree of supervision and accountability, a day care center may feel like a better fit. Families who are seeking an educational setting, where teachers work intentionally with children, developing curriculum, helping to support early friendships, and instill good learning habits, may learn towards a day care environment. But how do we know which one is right for us?

As the director of an infant and toddler center in Manhattan, I spend a lot of time talking to parents who are making their way through the maze of early learning options. I've visited countless centers, and have developed an eye for what to look for when you start visiting schools, which, in New York City, you should start to do right away, even before your baby is born! Wait lists can be notoriously long and if you find a center you love, it often makes sense to place a deposit on a spot even before the baby has arrived. It sounds insane and it is insane, but this is a New York reality so take a few deep breaths, and try to look through my eyes as an experienced early educator. Here are some important things to consider:

1) Is the center licensed by the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOH)?

Limit your search to centers that are licensed. The DOH sets basic standards for teacher qualifications, adult/child ratios, and health and safety precautions. Licenses must be posted in the center and must be up to date. Make sure the center has no DOH violations by checking online at NYC Child Care Connect at <https://a816-healthpsi.nyc.gov/ChildCare/ChildCareList.do>

2) The school must have a mission statement.

You can find the mission statement in any literature published by the center. The mission is a statement of core values and philosophy. When you read it you should feel a sense of alignment, or I'd like to be part of that. For example, if the school says that they believe in the value of open-ended play and you think that your child should be doing algebra by the time they are one, this probably isn't the right fit. Once you visit a few centers, you will have a sense of: "I prefer this to that, I'd like more of this and don't feel so comfortable with that." If there's no mission statement, it's probably best to look at other centers.

3) The center should hire and retain well-trained staff

The director and as many teachers as possible should have formal expertise in early childhood education and/or child development. Knowing how to talk to children, what typical development looks like and how to foster learning are all crucial. Staff stability from year to year is also important.

4) The school should provide a clean environment and developmentally appropriate materials

The space should be beautiful, light, inviting and smell good. See some dust bunnies and chances are there are some cleaning problems. Rely on your gut feelings. There should be nothing distasteful about the space. In addition, materials should be inviting. Quality centers feature classic open-ended materials that you will likely recall from your own days in school. Blocks, paint, clay, library books, sand and water are all staples. As the seasons change, so should objects in the classroom. Leaves, rocks, shells, snow—the wonders of the outdoors welcomed inside.

5) A day care center must have a detailed safety plan, approved by the DOH

The center should have formal and published safety plans and policies. They should outline monitoring of drop off and pick up of children; systems for guaranteeing that only approved people have access to your child; how and when practice drills are conducted for fire and other emergencies; and the location of the emergency pick up point outside the center in case communications are down. Staff should be trained in safe sleep practices and what to do if a child gets lost.

6) The school must have clearly stated health policies and procedures

The center should follow all DOH policies around tracking student and teacher immunizations, it should be clear about dismissal procedures when a child is sick, how information is communicated when there is contagious illness in a classroom, etc. The center should also use developmental assessment tools to make sure children are meeting their milestones.

If students experience a physical, linguistic or cognitive delay, the school should assist parents as they seek educational support services from Early Intervention, and should welcome therapists in the school to work with children as necessary. As the first adults children interact with outside the home, teachers are often the first to notice when something isn't quite right developmentally. Be sure that the director and administrators have experience helping parents address children's challenges.

7) Curriculum should be intentional and address the growth of the whole child



Child touches and looks closely at a real violin in school

Infant and toddler centers usually acknowledge a close relationship between care (diapering/toileting, feeding, sleeping) and curriculum (exploring, play, problem solving, creating and learning about the world). Some centers produce regular lesson plans, others keep a more flexible planning calendar. All quality centers operate with intention. Usually the administration and teachers meet to create a weekly or monthly plan together.

As the child moves into toddlerhood, you should notice learning centers in the classroom that include blocks, art studio, dramatic play, sensory exploration (sand, water), music and library. Teachers should also see a child's social and emotional development as part of the early learning curriculum, helping them name and manage their feelings, learn to regulate and transition with greater ease, and eventually collaborate and negotiate with friends as they enter preschool.

The best centers offer parents the option of having a home visit with teachers, a first step towards making a home/school connection that serves to make everyone feel more comfortable at school, and ready to branch out and explore. Additionally, the school should offer your family a transition schedule, involving a gradual increase of hours spent at school over the first two weeks, building towards eating and napping as part of the group.

Nothing is more important than the way the teachers talk to your child. Ask yourself, does this teacher respect my child? If you hesitate, then this center probably isn't for you.

8) The school is welcoming to parents

The center should have an open door policy for parents to stop by at any time, with mothers welcome to nurse in the center. Additionally, there should be regular communication between the center and home, parent teacher conferences, newsletters from teachers and notes from the director. When you have concerns, you should feel heard even when you disagree with a teacher or director. Once you make an appointment to talk about an issue, you should feel you have the staff's full attention, and that you are unrushed and heard when talking about your concerns.

9) The center offers a network of professional support

Children, families and centers face different challenges and there are times when you need advice from an outside expert. Great centers have contacts with therapists, doctors and others who can get involved. Strong centers provide parenting workshops where families get together with professionals to talk about issues relevant to young children. Parenting can be scary, and parents need each other in order to make good decisions and stay sane sometimes.

10) The relationships feel good. I trust this place.

More important than philosophy, more important than materials, are the relationships you establish in the center—they must feel good to you. You need to trust that your most precious person, your little baby, will be comfortable and cared for here. In the first three years of life, children must establish firm attachments with their caregivers, growing to love them almost as much as they love you.

To achieve this goal, many centers employ a system called “primary care,” in which a single teacher is assigned to be the main caretaker of your baby, your first point of contact when you need to communicate with the school. This person will know your child extremely well. They will change their diapers, feed them, call you when they are sick, and write their developmental reports. You should sense that your baby is relaxed in their company and can be soothed when distressed. This teacher should become very adept at distinguishing between hungry and wet cries, should know what foods the child likes, who are their friends, etc.

Once you feel confidence in this person, the teaching team and the center, your baby will relax and feel confident too. Be aware that your baby is watching and learning from you. As much as you might feel like crying when you say goodbye, try to hold it together for a peaceful separation, at least until you get outside the classroom door. It takes time, but leaving the baby will become simply a part of your morning routine, smooth and dependable.

Let's Get Ready to Enroll

After you've seen a number of centers, you and your partner should be able to lay out the pros and cons of each. Firstly, you have to determine what you can afford to pay for care. Whether it's a nanny or a day care center, you must be able to make the finances work from month to month. If you decide that center based care is right for you, spend time using the following questions to assess whether each center is a good fit for your family. Go back twice, go back a third time, attend a special event, call up some of the parents to ask more questions. You can never gather too much information. Once you feel sure that this is the best community for your baby, go ahead and enroll. Soon enough, your baby will settle in just fine and you'll go to work each day with a lightness in your step knowing the baby is in very good hands.

What to Ask on Your Day Care Tour



Children observe a moth gently cupped in teacher's hands

The first sign of a great center is when the tour begins with an invitation to share information about your family and to ask YOUR questions. What do you need? When thinking about your child's care, what do you imagine is most important? Directors and admissions officers that listen, and who make sure that the environment is a good match for your family, are more likely

to be sensitive and open when you have a concern about your child, a teacher, or something going on at the center.

During the admissions process, you will likely meet the director or an admissions officer, either privately or on a group tour. The more private time you have, the more questions you can ask. If you tour a center in a large group, you will need to focus on one or two questions. Make an appointment to meet or speak again by phone so the school answers all of your questions.

Directors remember parents who ask good questions. I recall a parent in a large group who asked, “What kinds of professional development do you offer your teachers?” Wow, was I impressed! He knew that professional development would affect teacher satisfaction and, in turn, the quality of a child’s experience. Not only did I want him in my school but I also asked him to sit on our board. Parents communicate a lot through questions so it pays to take the time to consider what you really want to know.

Most directors see the center tour as an opportunity to highlight the strengths of the program. They put their best foot forward and therefore might not address what is important to you. In fact, the presentation may avoid topics that would expose weaknesses in the center. The list of questions I provide here is thorough and covers many aspects of life in a center. It should prepare you to get a global sense of the culture, educational values, quality of care, and financial stability of the program.

As the Educational Director in an infant toddler center, I meet with parents every day, so I have a good sense of what they want to know and what I think they should want to know. I have organized their questions into categories to help focus your thinking. As you read the list, jot down the questions that speak to you, as those are the ones you should ask if time is limited. However, follow up with a phone call to ask all of your questions and make an informed decision. Gauge the way the director receives your request for a longer conversation, as this will indicate their commitment to spending relaxed time with parents in their community.

Life in the Classroom



Teacher and child play music together

- 1) What are the qualifications of head and assistant teachers? Does the head teacher have a master's in early childhood education? Does the head teacher hold New York State certification in early childhood education? FYI, most day care centers have head teachers with a bachelor's in education who may hold certification in the state. These teachers have knowledge of child development and curriculum but they do not have the same depth of knowledge or classroom experience as those who have a master's degree.
- 2) Do the teachers have prior experience working with the infant or toddler population? Or is their prior experience with preschool students who have different needs?
- 3) What is the school's philosophy? How will it impact my child's daily life?
- 4) Do teachers meet regularly as a team, and/or with the director? What happens at those meetings?
- 5) What should a child be able to do when they leave your program? What are the learning goals?
- 6) What is the child/teacher ratio in your infant and toddler classrooms? Do you follow or exceed NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene guidelines?
- 7) How do I know the teachers have not been accused or convicted of a crime?
- 8) How would you generally categorize teacher morale in the school? Are teachers happy here? Do they get health insurance and sick days?
- 9) Do children change classrooms mid-year (for example, when they have a birthday or when they start to walk), or do they stay in the same classroom from September to the summer? Do teachers move up with their students from year to year?

- 10) What is the curriculum and how do teachers plan week by week? Does the director oversee the planning?
- 11) How much language will my child hear throughout the day?
- 12) What is the school's attitude towards play as a vehicle for learning?
- 13) What are children's daily experiences in the arts?
- 14) Are children encouraged to get messy here? Should they dress for mess?
- 15) Do you teach children about feelings? If so, how?
- 16) Will you support my child to learn how to be a good friend?
- 17) Do children have access to books each day? Do teachers read throughout the day?
- 18) What is your approach to challenging behavior? What is your biting policy? Would you ever dismiss a child for biting? Biting is probably the most challenging age appropriate behavior you will encounter in infant/toddler care. You should be prepared that your child will bite and/or be bitten and it is important to understand the center's approach to handling these situations.
- 19) What professional development do you provide teachers at the center? What's the budget for professional development? Schools that provide ongoing professional development invest in teacher growth, the creation of a learning environment, and overall happiness of staff. Professional development sessions provide opportunities for teachers to improve performance.
- 20) Is there a school library? Is there a class library?



Routines of the Day (Napping, Eating, Diapering, Etc.)

- 1) What is the daily routine in an infant room? What is the daily routine in a toddler room?
- 2) How is the child's care an educational experience? How is diapering, eating and sleeping part of the curriculum?
- 3) Do the children go outside every day and where do they go? When do they start going on walks or trips? Does the adult/child ratio change when they leave the building?
- 4) What is the napping schedule for infants and how does it change across the year and as they get older at the center? Infant rooms should allow sleeping and eating on demand. As the children get older, and after the first birthday, they begin to get on a more routinized classroom schedule. It is important for the center to be open to the needs of your family, especially when the child is under a year.
- 5) Who provides food, the school or the parent? In some centers, you can pay a fee for your child to receive meals. Other schools expect parents to provide all meals and snacks. When children are young, and have not yet tried many foods, some parents feel more comfortable providing all food.

- 6) What if my child has allergies or follows a special diet (no sugar, kosher, etc.)? How will you celebrate birthdays in school?
- 7) What happens when a child is sick? How do you keep the group healthy?
- 8) Can I come in to nurse my child?
- 9) What if I want to use special diapers in school?
- 10) What if my child needs medicine during the school day?

Parent Interactions

- 1) How often do parents communicate with teachers and what is the preferred mode of communication?
- 2) If I send my teacher an email, how long should it take the teacher to respond?
- 3) Are there parent/teacher conferences? Does the school provide parents with student reports?
- 4) Do teachers share documentation of children's work with parents? How often? Are there newsletters, portfolios for individual children?
- 5) Do you offer parenting workshops? Who leads them and what are some past topics?
- 6) How do you support parents who have concerns about a child's development?
- 7) How do you support parents when they disagree with teachers?
- 8) Are there social events that bring parents and teachers together? How often?
- 9) Does the school support parents when they apply to other schools? If so, how?
- 10) Do parents usually make friends at the center? Do children have playdates outside of school and how do parents arrange playdates?

Possible Challenges at the Center

- 1) Have you ever had any violations from the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene? If so, what were they and how were they addressed?
- 2) Do you hire substitute teachers? Where do they come from and how do you know they have not been convicted of a crime?
- 3) What is security like at the school?
- 4) Is the school financially stable? Have you ever had to miss a pay cycle for teachers?

- 5) Do you evaluate teachers during the school year? What happens if a teacher receives a poor evaluation?
- 6) Are you able to retain teachers for more than two years? How often do teachers leave mid-year?
- 7) What happens when my child gets sick in school?
- 8) What happens if I need someone to pick up my child in an emergency?
- 9) Am I allowed to hire one of the teachers as a babysitter?
- 10) What if we suddenly need to leave the school because we are moving or changing jobs?

Asking questions and sharing your needs are the best ways to get to know a school. At the very least, you have to feel comfortable with the setting in which your child spends his days. At best, you will love your teachers and be inspired by the environment you've selected for daycare. The best way to deepen your understanding of what your child will experience is to spend as much time in the center and ask all your questions before you enroll. The best center can become a home away from home, filled with fun and inspired learning, as well as trusted advisors who offer valued parenting advice in the early years. There's no question too big or too small, just ask away.

Day Care Practice and New York City Law

Who governs NYC day care centers to make sure they are safe and healthy places for kids?

The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOH) oversees all licensed day care centers in New York City. If you are looking for a high quality center, you can begin your search by acquainting yourself with Article 47, the rules and regulations that determine the baseline for licensure.

The code addresses many issues, from teacher/child ratio, to teacher qualifications, safety and health standards and even what animals you can have as a class pet. While the DOH does not provide guidance on curriculum, the rules set the stage for a clean, well-lit, illness-free space for learning. To see if an individual center has had any violations, you can visit NYC Child Care Connect at <https://a816-healthpsi.nyc.gov/ChildCare/ChildCareList.do>. If you plan to visit a center and you find it has violations, think again.

What regulations are the most important for parents to know and consider when they visit centers?

Article 47 is a lengthy and detailed document and is hard for parents to know which regulations are the most important. In my experience as an infant/toddler center director, here are the three areas that often seem most pressing to parents:

(1) How do I know my child's teacher hasn't been accused of a crime?

All adults in the center are required, under Article 47.19, to undergo fingerprinting by the NYC Department of Investigation and receive clearance from the Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment (known as SCR clearance) unit. The center will receive a letter indicating whether a prospective employee has been accused or convicted of any crimes. If so, the code lays out who can and cannot be hired, and the DOH follows all indicated cases through a Corrective Action Plan to make sure children are safe. All staff must file this paperwork every two years in order for a center to maintain licensure.

(2) How many adults are in the room with how many children?

Most parents aim to select a center that provides the most intimate adult care to their child. One easy way to determine the level of one-to-one care your child will receive is by asking the director what the ratios are in each classroom and observing the ratio when you visit the school. The DOH Article 47.23 provides specific guidelines for adult/child ratios in infant and toddler classrooms. They are as follows:

Age of Children	Staff/Child Ratios	Maximum Group Size
Under 12 Months	1:4 or 1:3	8 children per room
12 months to 24 months	1:5	10 children per room
2 years to under 3	1:6	12 children per room
3 years to under 4	1:10	15 children per room

You may notice that in a mixed age room, the numbers may be higher or lower than you would expect, simply because the rule is determined by the majority of ages in the classroom. Therefore, if your child is in a classroom where a majority of children have turned one, and a few are under a year, you might find ten children in the class and this would be legal.

All day care centers struggle to maintain ratios when staff members call out sick or go on vacation. Ask the director how substitutes are provided and whether the school hires permanent substitutes who children know well.

(3) Does my child's teacher have a degree in early childhood education?



Article 47.13 addresses qualifications for directors and teachers in infant and toddler classrooms. The DOH does not require directors or teachers to hold a master's degree in Early Childhood Education. The bachelor's degree, certification in New York State, and a high school diploma set a low bar for teacher educational background and have a significant impact on the educational culture of infant/toddler centers in New York City, essentially de-professionalizing the field. However, the cost of childcare would go up substantially if centers were routinely employing teachers with a master's in early childhood education. If you are able to locate a center where the director and some head teachers have a master's in early childhood, this would indicate that teachers know something about child development and provide age appropriate care and curriculum.

What else should parents know?

Health and Communicable Diseases

DOH regulations work to keep students and teachers healthy so they can attend school daily. Children and adults at the center must provide proof of immunizations and visits to the doctor. DOH representatives inspect school files to make sure that everyone is up to date. The DOH provides centers with guidance on how to handle sickness in general and specifically respond to infectious disease in a school setting. The regulations are helpful for directors, especially new directors, when explaining policies to parents, particularly why one child should stay at home to protect the health of the group.

All school personnel must receive training in CPR/First Aid, which schools maintain according to the CPR/First Aid certification date. School personnel are not allowed to administer

medication to a child unless they are MAT (Medication Administration Training) trained. Ask your director how many staff members are MAT trained. This becomes particularly important when your child needs an antibiotic for ten days and you have to be at work for long hours.

Safety Plans

The DOH approves a school's safety plans, including fire, environmental, and active shooter emergencies. Schools must have a published safe space and protocol for communicating where the children will go if the school itself becomes unsafe, including emergency bags that teachers take with them upon vacating the school. Administrators and teachers must have fire and other emergency drills that involve putting non-walkers into cribs for evacuation, and making sure everyone knows which exit of the school they must use. New staff must be brought up to speed on the safety plan as they are hired.

Child Abuse and Neglect

Administrators and teachers are mandated reporters of child abuse and neglect. All school personnel receive training in detection and reporting of child abuse and neglect, focusing on physical and emotional indicators, and the process of reporting suspected cases to the DOH. As the first adults who support children outside the home, school administrators are often the first to recognize abuse or neglect. The DOH provides information and support so administrators and teachers can effectively advocate for children's needs in this crucially important area.

Safe Sleep Practices

Article 47 mandates that all teachers place sleeping babies on their backs, and do sleep checks every fifteen minutes to make sure babies are safe. In addition, DOH provides guidance on how to set up safe sleeping spaces without blankets and pillows.

Visits from DOH Representatives

All licensed centers in NYC receive two surprise DOH visits per school year, one focusing on mandated paperwork and the other looking at sanitary conditions, such as climate control, handling of garbage, dishwashers, sleep conditions, etc. Both visits are important to maintaining a minimum standard of safety for children. If the center is in compliance, the DOH representative may simply provide advice on any questions and serve as a resource to improve practice. If there is a violation, centers may receive a grace period in which to ameliorate, be charged a fine, or even shut down pending rectification.

Reporting a Possible Violation

If you believe your center is in violation of the DOH regulations, for example, by housing too many children in a classroom, not providing enough teachers, or opening on a cold day without heat, you can report the violation by calling 311. A DOH representative will make a surprise visit to the school to determine if the school is in compliance. You can then check the New York City Child Care Connect site to see if indeed the school was in violation.

If you find a center that appears to be a good fit for your family, research its standing with the DOH. A clean record, however, is not an indication of a strong educational program or overall excellence. It simply indicates that the center has followed the letter of the law, a great starting point for a nurturing early learning environment. One indicator of an excellent program is if the center has been accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (<http://www.naeyc.org/>) or the Middle States Association (http://www.msaccess.org/RelId/606568/ISvars/default/MSA_Programs_of_Distinction.htm).

You can familiarize yourself with the codes at: <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/about/healthcode/health-code-article47.pdf>.

Choosing a day care center is a labor intensive, highly emotional process. It can be exhausting and stressful, but it can also be delightful and inspiring when you find the right place. Once you make the choice, you will find yourself daydreaming about what they'll be like in "school." Will they like blocks? Who will their friends be? Will they ever be able to go down the big slide?" Going back to work after a childcare leave is a rite of passage for parents who commonly spend the first transition week in day care with tissues in hand.

Keep in mind, the younger the baby the easier it is for them to attach to new adults. In time, this sharing of your baby will feel natural, just an extension of the circle of care that you provide at home. Enjoy these day care years, and all of the new parenting challenges they entail. When you choose the right center, your child and family will blossom before your eyes, all within the loving embrace of a day care community.

About Renee Bock



Renee Bock. Photo courtesy of Rivka Singer

Renee is a devoted advocate for infants, toddlers and their parents, who has spent more than 15 years as a teacher and educational director. She entered the field of education with a mission to bring music into the daily lives of young children, creating joyful singing communities. She is the founding Educational Director of *Explore + Discover* (www.explorediscover.net), an infant/toddler center in the Gramercy Park section of Manhattan, and an educational consultant for Brightside Academy's Early Head Start program in Brownsville, Brooklyn.

She has a master's in early childhood education from Bank Street College and a master's in American History from New York University. What makes her uniquely qualified to support parents of infants and toddlers, is the fact that her three sons, Ariel (18), Raffi (17) and Shaya (15) were all in diapers at the same time! She is grateful to the Bock boys for teaching her everything she knows about young children.

You can read more from her at:

<http://www.communityplaythings.com/resources/articles/2016/creating-a-soundscape-for-children>

https://www.childcareexchange.com/catalog/product_info.php?products_id=5023252

<http://wellroundedny.com/author/renee-bock/>

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