

Factsheet for parents in England

Visiting childcare providers:

How to find high-quality childcare

When choosing childcare it is important that you visit different settings to help you make your decision. Recommendations from other parents can be helpful, but it's important to remember that everyone is different and what suits their child will not necessarily suit yours.

You can use this factsheet to help you decide if the childcare providers you visit are providing high-quality care.

This factsheet refers to finding childcare for young children. It offers guidance for parents who are making an initial visit to group settings such as day nurseries, but much of the information will be relevant to choosing childminders and other types of childcare for young children.

- What does registered childcare mean?
- What can Ofsted reports tell me?
- What kind of standards do childcare providers need to meet?
- Are there any childcare quality awards I can ask about?
- What should I look for when I visit and what questions should I ask?

To find out about local childcare contact your local Family Information Service (FIS). They will be able to provide contact details for all registered childcare providers in your area. You can find contact details for your FIS by searching in your local phone book, or by visiting www.daycaretrust.org.uk/findyourFIS.

What does registered childcare mean?

By choosing childcare which is registered with Ofsted you know that the childcare provider has been approved to care for children.

Most childcare providers working with children aged five and under must join Ofsted's Early Years Register. There are some childcare providers that are not required to register, but choose to join the voluntary part of the Ofsted Childcare Register. They do this so that parents know that they have met basic standards to protect children and also to allow eligible parents to claim help with their childcare costs.

For information about childcare registration and inspection for older children, download our factsheet, 'Childcare for older children' from www.daycaretrust.org.uk/parentinformation.

Registration requirements for different types of childcare are listed below.

Types of registered childcare include:

- childminders;
- children's centres;
- day nurseries;
- playgroups/preschools;
- crèches (open more than four hours per day and more than fourteen days per year); and
- nursery schools.

Types of childcare not required to register, but can choose to join the voluntary part of the register include:

- crèches (open less than 4 hours per day and less than 14 days per year);
- nannies or other care provided in your child's home; and
- activity based care (for example, sports, drama, language or arts clubs) for children aged three and over, for four hours or less per day.

Types of unregistered childcare include:

- childcare provided by a family member;
- babysitting in the child's home; and
- childcare provided by a friend (who is not receiving payment of any kind for caring for your child).

For more information about different types of childcare, visit our website, www.daycaretrust.org.uk/parentinformation. For information about the help you can get to pay for registered childcare, visit www.payingforchildcare.org.uk.

What can Ofsted reports tell me?

Ofsted inspection reports can give you an impartial view of a childcare provider and can help provide information on how well they are meeting health and safety requirements and also how they are meeting standards as set out in the Early Years Foundation Stage (explained below). You can view the latest inspection reports by visiting the Ofsted website, www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Remember, Ofsted inspections and other quality accreditations are no substitute for your own parental judgement. You know your child better than anyone else and it is important that you do your own research and trust your instincts.

It is important to keep in mind that Ofsted assesses childcare providers on how well they support children's development according to their individual needs. The assessment is not just about education, but includes how well they meet the social and emotional needs of children in their care.

What are inspection report grades and what do they mean?

Ofsted will inspect and grade childcare under various headings before making a judgement on the overall grade they award:

Outstanding:	provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	provision is strong
Satisfactory:	provision is sound
Inadequate:	provision is not good enough

How are childcare providers on the Early Years Register inspected?

Childcare providers on the Early Years Register will be inspected at least once every three to four years. Inspections are undertaken with little or no notice, with the exception of childcare which takes place in the child's home.

Ofsted now publishes complaints made about registered childcare providers, so that you have up-to-date relevant information to help you make your decision. Details about complaints can be found alongside inspection reports on Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

What kind of standards do childcare providers need to meet?

Every registered childcare provider in England who cares for children age five and under is required to follow the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The EYFS is a framework which describes what the childcare provider should be doing as they care for young children. It describes what level of development children can be expected to reach at certain stages, and how to support them in their development.

The EYFS ensures that all children have access to high-quality care, which is consistent across different types of childcare, including childminders and nurseries. The importance of play and having fun is central to the EYFS. Your child's progress and development will be based purely on encouraging them to learn through play activities. According to the EYFS, childcare providers should ensure that children are never pushed or measured against others in any way.

Every child has a 'learning journey' which is the common name for their record of achievement. There should be two-way exchanges of information between you and your child's key person contributing to your child's 'learning journey.'

When you visit a new childcare provider, ask how they plan to use the EYFS to support your child's development. There is a list of suggested questions at the end of this factsheet that you may want to bring along with you.

The EYFS is based on four themes which are explained below. Each of these themes are standards that childcare providers must meet.

Theme 1 – A Unique Child

- Child development

Babies and children develop in individual ways at different rates. All areas of development (physical, cognitive, language, spiritual, social, emotional) are equally important.

- Health and safety

Children should be kept safe, physically and psychologically.

- Inclusive practice

No child or family is discriminated against. The diversity of individuals and communities is valued and respected.

Theme 2 – Positive relationships

- Relationship between staff and children

Warm, trusting, respectful relationships with adults support children's learning more effectively than any amount of resources.

A key person will be assigned a small group of children so each child has one key person who helps them to feel safe and cared for. This person will also have a lot of interactions with you, so they can inform you about your child's development.

- The role of parents as partners

The childcare provider should recognise that parents are the most important person supporting their child's development and work in partnership with you.

There should be one staff member for every three babies under two-years-old, and one staff member for every four toddlers aged two-years-old.

Staff ratios for children aged three and over depend on a number of factors. Ask the childcare provider what ratios they have under Ofsted regulations.

Theme 3 – Enabling Environments

- The physical environment

A varied learning environment is important for a child's development. The environment should be safe but challenging and all children should be able to play both indoors and outdoors.

- Children at the centre

Childcare providers should plan activities which appeal to each child's interests and development needs. Activities should be challenging but achievable, based on observations of your child.

- Working with a range of professionals

When necessary, childcare providers should work with other professionals, for example Special Educational Needs Coordinators, who can help support children's development.

Theme 4 – Learning and Development

- Play and exploration

Children learn best through play; play with other children is important for their development.

Children need both mental and physical challenges. They need the chance to be creative and play with ideas in different situations. Childcare providers should support children's play, encouraging them to think critically and ask questions.

- Areas of learning and development

Six areas are identified by the EYFS: language/literacy; maths/reasoning/problem solving; physical development; social/emotional development; creative development; knowledge & understanding of the world. All are equally important.

To find out more about the Early Years Foundation Stage visit www.foundationyears.org.uk.

Are there any childcare quality awards I can ask about?

In addition to being registered with Ofsted, different types of childcare providers may also choose to follow a quality assurance scheme, such as the National Day Nursery Association's 'E-Quality Counts', Pre-School Learning Alliance's 'Reflecting on Quality' or one run by the local authority.

Your local Family Information Service (FIS) may be able to tell you which childcare providers in your area have completed a quality assurance scheme. Find contact details for your FIS by visiting www.daycaretrust.org.uk/findyourFIS.

Quality assurance schemes require childcare providers to work towards high standards of care, as described by the scheme they choose to follow. Some schemes may be judged by the childcare staff themselves (self-assessment) and others will be judged by an external professional.

Although quality schemes are not a legal requirement, they do demonstrate that the childcare provider strives to meet high standards. You may want to ask if they are working towards or have achieved any quality schemes.

What should I look for when I visit and what questions should I ask?

When you arrive first impressions count:

- ✓ Do you get a warm welcome when you arrive?
- ✓ Do the children there seem to be happy and content?
- ✓ Are they willing to show you around?
- ✓ Is there plenty of outdoor space?
- ✓ Do the staff interact with your child?
- ✓ Are you able to meet other staff members?

The following questions will help you to remember some of the key things you should be asking childcare providers when deciding on whether the care they provide will be suitable for your child.

Vacancies and costs

- ✓ Are there vacancies - is there a waiting list and, if so, how long is this?
- ✓ Do you have to pay a deposit? If so, what's it for? Is it returnable?
- ✓ How much does they charge per hour/day? Do you have to pay for holidays/meals/nappies/other activities?
- ✓ Can you take up the free 15 hours for 3- and 4-year-olds? If you want additional hours how much extra will it cost?
- ✓ Do they accept childcare vouchers (if this is an option from your employer)?
- ✓ Do they offer a settling in period? If so, how long for?

Staffing and premises

- ✓ What is the ratio of staff to children? How many children do they care for?
- ✓ Do they operate a key (named) person system?
- ✓ What is staff turnover like? How well qualified are the staff? Are all the criminal records checks up to date?
- ✓ Can you see a copy of the registration certificates and inspection reports?

Activities and support

- ✓ What are the daily routines and how can they incorporate your child's routines and special needs?
- ✓ Where can your child sleep or rest?
- ✓ What if your child is unhappy? How would they be looked after?
- ✓ What are their policies on discipline and how do they manage children's behaviour?
- ✓ How will your child's dietary requirements be accommodated? What systems do they have in place if a child has a severe food allergy?
- ✓ How will your child's cultural background be reflected and respected? Are there staff members from different backgrounds? Do they have books and activities representing all cultures? What about food/music/religious festivals?
- ✓ What opportunities are there for you to be involved?
- ✓ How will they update you about your child's progress? Do they provide a record book or learning journey?
- ✓ Can they describe examples of how they develop activities to meet individual children's interests and developmental needs?

Emergencies

- ✓ What happens if your child is sick?
- ✓ What happens if you are delayed picking your child up at the end of the day?
- ✓ How will they contact you in an emergency?

For information about choosing childcare for children with disabilities or special educational needs, download our factsheet, 'Childcare for children with disabilities of special educational needs' from www.daycaretrust.org.uk/parentinformation.

Use this space to make notes when you visit a childcare provider and to write down some questions of your own.



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Daycare Trust is the National Childcare Campaign. We have been working since 1986 to promote high quality affordable childcare for all.

If you have any questions about the information provided in this factsheet, or other questions about childcare, you can email info@daycaretrust.org.uk. You can also access information on our website, www.daycaretrust.org.uk or www.payingforchildcare.org.uk.

The information in this factsheet refers to childcare in England. However, much of the information will be relevant throughout the UK. For further information specific to Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland, contact your local information service. Find details of your local Information Service by visiting www.daycaretrust.org.uk/findyourFIS or by checking in your local phone book.

This factsheet provides general information only and was accurate at the time of publication. The information is not to be taken as legal advice. You are advised to seek independent advice if you need further assistance.