

## **Voices for VI Children**

*Daily News* Column, Judith Richardson, columnist

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### **Title... The Early Years are Learning Years -- Helping Children Start Right**

Parents: here's information you may want to clip and save. It will give you tools to choose the daycare or preschool that's right for your child, or to ask for improvements if your child is in a current daycare program.

What's "right" you say? For a parent, "right" can be a facility that's closest, most affordable, or where you know an employee. But for your young child, "right" is a *good-quality* program where he or she is nurtured and stimulated with safe, age-appropriate play and learning, staffed by adults who are actually educated in (or have received training in) child development.

What's the difference between a good quality program, and one that's simply okay...or less than okay? In a *good quality* early care and education program a child develops the habit of curious, confident learning. She or he enters kindergarten ready to succeed, able build on those skills in the years beyond. A solid foundation in "becoming a learner" sets children on a path for life-long learning...with lasting benefits for life success. Conversely, the effects of poor quality early childhood programs weaken a child's chances for success in school before they even begin kindergarten.

**4 Signs of a Great Preschool.** If your child is age 3 to 6 years old, look for these childcare-center qualities, recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the nation's leading early childhood education organization, to be sure your child is attending a *good-quality* program.

#### **1. Preschool and child care programs should focus on children:**

- Watch to see that children interact with other children and adults, so they can build healthy relationships. They should not be wandering aimlessly, or expected to sit quietly for long periods of time.
- Ask about the curriculum, which should include a variety of activities matching the children's ages and needs. Do children have access to many age-appropriate activities (block-building, pretend play, art, puzzles) during the day, rather than all doing the same thing at the same time? Do teachers work with individual children? Do children have a chance to play and explore outside for at least an hour every day?

#### **2. Preschool and child care programs should have qualified staff:**

- The staff should have the educational background to promote your child's learning and development. Ask what degrees and training teachers have.
- Ask how long teachers have been with the program. Frequent staff-turnover reduces children's chances of forming a secure bond with a primary caregiver...and may signal something is not right at the program.

#### **3. Preschool and child care programs should build relationships with families:**

- Program staff should work with families to meet their children's needs. Ask how information and concerns are communicated between staff and families.
- Check that the program's policies allow families to visit their children during the program day.

#### **4. Preschool and childcare programs should be well-run:**

- Check that the program is licensed by the Department of Human Services. Licensing ensures that the facility meets minimum health and safety standards necessary for the protection of children.
- Check whether the program has policies and practices to help keep children safe from preventable illness and injury.
- Ask about the child-to-teacher ratio, which helps determine how much individual attention your child will get. For example, there should be at least one adult for every ten 4-year-olds

Additional sources for parents and early childhood educators and care-providers seeking information on how to find (or establish) quality childcare programs: *Department of Human Services' Office of Licensing and Regulatory Services*; *The Family Connection Center* (774-6031; ask for director Beth Marshall), or the *National Association for the Education of Young Children* (website: [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org)).

