

What Do High Quality Childcare Centres Look Like?

There are many reasons why parents leave their children in the care of others. Brainwave Trust's vision is that one day every child in New Zealand will get the best start in life because parents and the whole community understand and value the impact early experiences have on brain development, and ultimately on the healthy development of society.

Our role is to advocate on behalf of children so that all the adults that affect their lives know this science and are able to use this to inform the decisions they take on behalf of those children. What is easiest/best for the adults in the short term – be they parents, teachers, politicians, nannies etc – is not always what is best for the child.

For many children over about 3, when peer social skills are developing, the opportunity to interact with other children in, for example, good quality centre-based education and care can be beneficial. This is not always so for babies and toddlers, particularly if they are in centres for many long days a week.

There is a wide variety of care available for children all of which lies somewhere on a continuum from warm responsive care mostly at home with loving “good enough” parents through a whole spectrum of options to, for example, unsupervised, unsafe, unclean, chaotic, unresponsive and neglectful “care” in a home or centre.

Modern day science now supports olden day wisdom; what is best for a baby in the first years of life is the unreserved love and commitment of at least one adult (preferably more). We know that the brain connections are driven by attachment in the first year of life; a baby's brain is firing and wiring in response to their most important relationships. Without the unconditional love of at least one adult a baby may or may not survive but he/she certainly won't thrive. The bond between the mother (or father) and their baby in that first year is paramount.

The early attachment between parents and their baby creates a foundation for that child's future relationships with others. Smiling, singing, touching and cuddling as part of attuned, responsive care is necessary to develop this part of the brain. Close, loving physical touch is crucially important. These things allow the child to develop the brain connections needed to feel empathy and care for others– an important prerequisite for healthy functioning as an adult.

Choosing a Centre

Child care centres are one option for non-parental care. If you choose this option, whether it be full or part-time, it is important to find a centre offering the highest quality you can for your child. Make sure you visit your short list of potential centres, spend time there watching the staff interact with the children; this can help you decide if the centre will suit your child's requirements, and whether the schedule is responsive to your child's needs. Ask yourself if your child will thrive in this setting? You can learn a lot about a centre just by watching.

Children need appropriate stimulation and time to rest. Children need love and attention; to be talked to and played with. Most importantly, they need the opportunity to form the



kind of comfortable, secure relationship with an adult that will nurture their healthy emotional development.

The law requires that the basics are met –safety, cleanliness, minimum ratios etc but what else should you consider?

1. Are the number of adults to children and the maximum size of the group suitable for your child?
2. Are the staff loving and responsive?
 - Is there a primary caregiver or family/whanau based model of care for your child? I.e. will one person take responsibility for him/her and develop a relationship with him/her?
 - Do they answer children's questions patiently? Do they listen to the children, make eye contact and engage in conversation when the child wants to talk? Do they smile and respond to their smiles and activities? Do they interact with the children and help them learn new skills? Do they demonstrate empathy and support fair play and friendships?
 - Do the staff hug, cuddle in a responsive way and talk to the children, including the babies? Do they sing and read to the children?
 - Does the caregiver handle conflicts without losing patience, humiliating a child, or frequently displaying anger?
 - If your child is upset or crying are they responded to in a comforting manner?

3. Does the Centre provide a supportive, safe and child-friendly environment?

- Is it clean and safe so infants can explore their surroundings?
- Is free play an option at least some of the day where the children are free to explore in their own way?
- Does it meet the ever-changing needs of growing infants and toddlers?
- Are there separate eating and nappy changing areas?
- Do the staff seem happy, cheerful and focused on the children?
- Are you welcome to drop in at any time?
- Will you be informed about a child's experiences and be kept up to date with their development?



4. How flexible is the Centre's schedule to meet your child's needs?

- Is each baby allowed to eat and sleep according to their own routine, not that of the centre or the caregiver?
- For toddlers, will their day include some predictable routine as well as some new experiences?
- Is this planned for in a daily schedule?
- Are children supported to do what interests them?
- Do caregivers respect the language, culture and values of families in the programme?
- What is the centre's position on conflict?
- What is the centre's position on learning to use the toilet? Will it be at the child's pace – when they show an interest?
- Do the staff take delight in the children?

The centre which is most convenient for you or the closest or the cheapest or where places are available, for example, may not be the best for your child. The final decision often comes down to a parent's gut instincts when they observe the centre in full swing. "Would my child look forward to coming here? Would I feel happy leaving my child here?"

Further Reading

1. The Neuroscience Data on Daycare
2. Early Childhood Education: A Guide for Parents, June 2007, Education Review Office, available on <http://www.ero.govt.nz/Publications/pubs2007/ece-guide-jun07.pdf>