

What does a quality early learning service for toddlers look like?

Quality early childhood education and care for toddlers can be found in both centre-based long day care and in family day care services. Here's some information about what to look for and ask about when choosing a quality early learning service for your toddler.

As a parent, you want to find the best possible early learning service for your toddler. To decide whether a service will be suitable for your child, you should consider visiting the service at least once - to observe what happens on a day-to-day basis. This can help you build a clear picture of whether the service practices will meet your family and child's needs.

Why does quality matter?

Your child's brain rapidly develops in their first 5 years and research shows that children learn and develop at a faster rate during these years than any other time in their lives. Research also tells us that quality early learning services provide support and encouragement for the ongoing development of your child's language, cognitive, motor and social emotional skills.

You and your family are the most important influence on your toddler, and when they attend an early learning service, the experiences and relationships that happen there are also important.

Some of the most important characteristics of a quality early learning service revolve around:



Relationships and interactions

Quality early learning services place great importance on the development of meaningful relationships between children and educators. The many warm, friendly and respectful interactions between your child and the educators help to foster the development of your child's social and emotional skills and general wellbeing.

In addition, educators work in partnership with you and your family to get to know your child. They do this when they speak regularly with you about your child's needs, routines and experiences at home and at the service.

The following are particularly important:

- educators take advantage of opportunities in care routines, such as during nappy changing or meal times, to talk with toddlers and to strengthen their relationships with toddlers
- education and care is provided by educators who are familiar to your child and family
- many playful social interactions take place, including conversations, songs, rhymes, finger plays, and sharing books
- toddlers' rapidly changing behaviour is respected and educators take time to demonstrate to toddlers how to play harmoniously with others
- as toddlers are still developing the skills required for self-control, they're supported sensitively when they are frustrated or act impulsively.

Social and emotional development

Toddlers are beginning to develop an interest in others, and they often need adult support and reassurance to be able to interact and play appropriately with peers.

The following are particularly important:

- toddlers' communication skills are valued and educators recognise children and respond to their increasing ability to use language to communicate
- there is a lot of support for children to develop their self-esteem and confidence
- planned and spontaneous experiences are offered to take advantage of toddlers' curiosity and urge to find out, explore and investigate
- educators respond to children's emerging humour and laugh and play with them for extended periods of time
- toddlers are given opportunities to make decisions on things that affect them, for example, when they eat lunch or when they sleep and rest.

Programs for children

Quality practice happens when educators make flexible plans and prepare for toddlers' positive experiences using the knowledge they have about each child's own interests and abilities.

The following are particularly important:

- the service has a variety of both structured and informal ways of evaluating every aspect of children's programs with the aim of improving
- educators are continually thinking about how good the experience is for children and families and what improvements can be made.

The environment

The physical environment plays an important role in toddler's experiences.

The early learning environment should be rich with language and print, and educators should talk with children about what is happening to them and around them.

The following are particularly important:

- the environment is rich and stimulating, while at the same time being predictable and not overwhelming or overly busy. For example, nappy change and meal time routines occur the same way each day
- there is a pleasant and comfortable level of noise and activity and moments of rest and quiet
- natural materials as well as commercial materials are used to support toddlers' play and learning.



Health and safety

Maintaining children's health and keeping them safe is the most fundamental responsibility of an early learning service.

Children in service settings are more likely to come into contact with contagious illnesses than they are at home. It is particularly important that the service have clear procedures for minimising cross infection through hygiene practices and excluding ill children if required. The service should also ensure that families are provided with the service's current policies on health, nutrition and illness.

A quality service should:

- implement the recommended sun safety practices
- supervise children effectively
- have a policy to promote children's nutritional health
- there should be safe areas, indoors and outdoors, where toddlers can safely practice their developing physical skills such as climbing, balancing, running and jumping
- have effective processes for exchanging information with families about children's health and wellbeing throughout the day.

Choosing a quality service for toddlers

Some questions that you may find helpful when considering early learning for your toddler include:

- How will the educators comfort my child if they become upset, or have difficulty separating from me when they start?
- How will I be informed about my child's eating, sleeping and toileting during the day?
- How will my child be supported when they are toilet training?
- Which educator/s will be my child's main carer/s?
- Will my child be able to follow the same routine they have at home?
- How will the educators guide my child's behaviour?
- What will the program look like for my toddler?
- How can I share information about my toddler with his or her educator?

