

Find the Right Childcare Service for your Child



Free Pre-school Year

As part of the April 2009 Budget, a new scheme to provide for a free Pre-school Year in Early Childhood Care & Education (ECCE) was announced by the Government. The new scheme will be implemented by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) and will be open to all private and voluntary pre-school services which meet the requirements of the scheme.

Some main points of the scheme:

- Parents who avail of the scheme in a playschool will be entitled to a free pre-school provision of 5 weekly sessions of 3 hours per day for 38 weeks of the year. The weekly capitation payment of €64.50 will be made payable by Children and Youth Affairs to the childcare service.
- Parents who avail of the scheme within a full or part-time childcare service will be entitled to 50 weeks of free preschool provision of 5 weekly sessions of 2 hours 15 mins per day. The weekly capitation payment of €48.50 will be made payable by Children and Youth Affairs to the childcare service.
- Scheme will commence in January 2010 but will then run from September to August
- The scheme is open to all children aged between 3 years and 3 months and four years and six months on September 1st. To avail in January 2010 children must have been born between February 2nd and June 30th 2006. To avail in September 2010 children must have been born between March 1st 2006 and June 30th 2007.
- Childminders and preschool services who are notified to the HSE or those registered with The IMEB can apply to participate in the scheme.
- The preschool year will be guided by the principles of Síolta, The National Quality for Early Years.

County & City Childcare Committees

There are 33 County and City Childcare Committees (CCC's) established nationally. Childcare Committees can offer you advice on registered childcare facilities in your area. To locate your local CCC search Childcare Committees in your county. Most Childcare Committees have their own website.

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What to look for when visiting a Childcare service

If you are looking for childcare, you probably have a good idea of what you want — a place that is safe, happy, and loving, where children can learn and have fun. At the same time, childcare must also meet your needs. Childcare should be convenient, affordable, and offer care when you need it. Finding childcare that has the quality and convenience you want —at a reasonable cost—can be a real challenge. It is rare to find the perfect situation but it is possible to find a very good situation that will meet your needs.

Before registering your child with any childcare service, it is strongly recommended that you visit the service while children are present to evaluate the type and quality of service.

Five Steps to Choosing Good Childcare

Step 1 – Get Organised

Finding quality child care is going to take a little homework. If possible, begin gathering basic information several months before you think you will need child care.

- Ask your friends and co-workers for recommendations.
- Contact your County Childcare Committee or the HSE for names and contact details of childcare facilities in your area, a list of childminders is also available through your local Child Care Committee office, along with other helpful information.

Step 2 – Conduct a Telephone Interview

Save time and energy by using the phone to narrow your search. It is a good idea to contact at least three different childcare facilities and childminders. To get the best response, avoid calling at busy times such as arrival, departure, or lunch time. Suggested questions to ask:

Availability

- What ages are accepted?
- Is there availability?
- Is there a waiting list?

Hours & Location

- What are the hours for full- or part-time care?
- Is the service close to home?
- Is the service close to work?

Cost

- When are fees due? How much?



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- Are there different fees for part-time or full-time care?
- Are there different fees for children of different ages?
- Do fees include the provision of meals?
- Do fees include formula or nappies?
- Is there still a charge when a child is sick or on holidays? (there usually is)
- Are there discounts for siblings?
- Are there extra fees — supply fees, late collection fees?

Quality Issues

- How many children are cared for and what are their ages?
- How many adults are there per child?
- What type of education or experience do the childcare workers have?
- Is it OK to visit the service and when?
- Is the service notified to the HSE?

Step 3 – Make a Visit

It is important to visit the services while children are there. You will need to consider accessibility, affordability and quality. Good quality childcare has many long term benefits for children and their families and a quality, play-based curriculum will promote children's development in all areas.

Visit at least three services. Be prepared to spend some time — at least an hour or longer.

You should expect:

- a warm greeting
- short introductions to both adults and children
- a brief tour
- an explanation of fees and policies
- an invitation to stay a while to see the daily routine and children playing

Most services will have information to hand, possibly in the form of a Parent's Handbook. This should contain comprehensive and accurate information detailing opening hours, fees, facilities offered, policies and procedures etc. This should leave you with fewer questions to ask however, answers to the following questions are very important in order for you to make an informed decision.

Some things to bear in mind include:

- Was a member of staff available to welcome you and accompany you around the service?
- Is the environment caring, safe and friendly?

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- Is the facility wheelchair friendly?
- Were you and your child made comfortable? (It is important that both parent and child are comfortable in the service).
- Are an adequate number of adults available to supervise and care for your children?
- Did the children appear happy and stimulated?
- Are you happy with the arrangements in place for feeding your child?
- Is adequate space available for the number of children being cared for?
- Are there enough toilets and washing facilities for the children?
- Is there a security system?
- Does the setting have definite policy guidelines on settling children into the service that allow the parent to stay with their child until they are both happy?
- Does the service keep records on each child and discuss each child's development with their parents?

Partnership with Parents

- Are parents able to drop in at any time or is it appointments only?
- How is information relayed to parents about their children?
- Verbally, written, daily, weekly, monthly or at the end of each term?
- Are the staff welcoming, approachable and willing to answer your questions?
- Does the service work in collaboration with parents?
- Does the service keep confidential records on each child and discuss each child's development with their parents?
- Are written programmes of forthcoming activities prominently displayed and available to parents?
- Do they observe and assess children's attainments and interests and use this as a basis for planning future activities.
- Do the staff members have the relevant knowledge and understanding to support parents and children with disabilities or specific requirements?
- What does the staff know about Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus? Are they willing to learn?
- Are the toys and equipment safe, clean, suitable and accessible?
- Is there plenty of equipment and resources available for the children?

For babies under 1 year these should include:

- Mobiles, musical toys and rattles, washable soft toys of different textures, activity centres, baby gyms, bricks, stacking toys, pull-along toys and a range of books - board, soft plastic, foam and cloth.
- Are babies talked to, sang to and given individual attention and physical contact?
- Are their positions changed regularly for comfort and to vary the environment?

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- Is there space for safe movement – rolling, crawling, first steps?
- Is the environment colourful and stimulating?

For children 1-3 years these should include:

- Opportunities for messy play – sand, water, paint. modelling materials – clay, play dough
- Opportunities for role play – home corner, dolls, play food, dressing-up clothes, vehicles, farm sets etc. that reflect the diversity of our society
- Opportunities for construction – blocks and bricks of different sizes and materials, interlocking bricks such as Duplo, junk-modelling materials
- Opportunities for physical play – climbing, running, jumping, ring games, ball games, dance
- Opportunities to develop fine motor skills – threading, lacing, jigsaws, drawing, cutting and sticking
- Activities involving story, music and drama
- Activities designed to promote the use of the 5 senses and to develop an appreciation of the natural environment
- Games with simple rules to encourage social skills of co-operation and interaction

For children over 3 years:

- Activities and experiences should include all of the above as well as providing some more structured activities designed to nurture the following:
- Language skills – talking - about ideas and feelings;
- listening - to adults and other children; early reading and
- writing e.g. listening to and creating stories and rhymes
- Mathematical knowledge – space, shape, volume, capacity, measures, sequencing, counting, patterns
- Knowledge of science, technology and the environment – observing, questioning, investigating, classifying in relation to forces, materials, animals and plants

Suggested Questions to Ask:

- Are all the activities offered all day or part of the day?
- Are the children free to choose their activities?
- Are there lots of examples of children's work displayed?
- Are the children properly supervised but still allowed to experience activities that are challenging and exciting?
- Are the children happy and engaged in the activities?
- For all children, is there a balance between activities that are directed by staff and those which the child chooses for him/herself?

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- Finally, do the children seem happy, purposeful and safe?

What outdoor facilities are available?

- Is the play area suitable, safe and secure at the boundaries?
- Are there a variety of surfaces?
- Is the equipment safe and suitable for the age of the children?
- Are children given access to outdoor activities every day?

Further questions to ask

- Will you be consulted about how to deal with your child should he/she become ill, distressed or angry?
- What happens if staff are ill or on holidays - who replaces them?
- What is the settling in policy?

Step 4 - Check References

Don't be shy about checking references. Selecting a childcare provider to share the care of your child with is one of the most important things you will ever do.

Ask each childcare service for at least two parent references and their phone numbers. Most parents are happy to share information with other parents and can be a wonderful resource. Parents who check references say they often get information they couldn't have gathered any other way.

Step 5 - Make a decision

Remember that it is OK to be choosy. Review the information you have gathered and call back if you have questions that were not answered. Trust your gut instinct. If you are not comfortable with what you have found thus far, keep looking.

If a child care arrangement you like is full, put your name on a waiting list. Even if you must use another program temporarily, you will have this as an option if things don't work out. Prepare your children by talking positively about the new childcare situation and by letting them visit the place beforehand. Ask your new childcare facility if it would be OK for your child to bring a favourite toy, teddy bear, or blanket to help ease the transition.

For further information on Childcare Regulations visit

http://www.citizensinformation.ie/categories/education/pre-school-education-and-childcare/health_safety_and_welfare_of_preschool_childcare_services