

Growing Together: Finding an Early Childhood Program that Supports Your Child's Social-Emotional Development

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Choosing an early childhood program for your young child is a big step. It is natural to feel both excited and nervous as you begin your search. There are many things to think about when looking at programs. One important thing to look for is how a program teaches social and emotional skills. These skills help children make friends, understand their feelings, solve problems, and work well with others.

Young children learn these skills best during their early years. Learning them early helps children feel confident, build healthy relationships, and succeed in school.

Think about what matters to you most. To make this process easier, think about what matters most to your family. When you find a program that matches your values and goals, your choices become clearer. Make a list of questions to help you get answers during a phone call, visit, or program tour. Here are some examples:

- ▶ **Learning Social Emotional Skills:** How do teachers teach children about friendship, feelings, and solving problems?
- ▶ **Play:** What kinds of games, toys, and activities do children use each day?
- ▶ **Handling Tough Moments:** How are children helped to calm down if they are upset or crying?
- ▶ **Behavior:** How does the program handle common challenges, like biting or hitting? Are there other supports in the program to support teachers, such as training, coaches, or mental health consultants?
- ▶ **Classroom Environment:** What pictures and visual tools do teachers use in the classroom?
- ▶ **Family and Culture:** How does the program value and support each family's language and culture? How does the program learn about children's routines at home?
- ▶ **Communication:** How does the program share information about what is happening in the program with families? How will teachers share information about my child's day?



- ▶ **Learning Differences:** How does the program support children who learn in different ways?
- ▶ **Inclusion:** How does the program support children with disabilities or children who receive special education services? Even if your child does not need individualized support, it is important that every child sees adults who are patient and caring with children who need additional support.
- ▶ **Collaboration:** How does the program work with therapists, specialists, or other service providers?

Some programs follow a framework called the Pyramid Model. This approach supports children's social and emotional development. Programs that use the Pyramid Model:

- ▶ Build nurturing and caring relationships with children, families, and staff
- ▶ Create clear and predictable daily routines that help children engage in learning
- ▶ Teach social and emotional skills throughout the day
- ▶ Look at behavior as a way children communicate
- ▶ Use information to make decisions about children's needs
- ▶ Provide extra support when a child needs additional help

If a program uses the Pyramid Model, you can ask how it helps teachers support your child.



What to Look and Listen for During Your Tour

When you visit a program for a tour, look around and listen closely. These are positive signs:

A Safe and Organized Classroom: Children learn best in spaces that feel safe, secure, and comfortable.

- ❑ Toys and materials are labeled and easy to find.
- ❑ You can easily see classroom rules, and the rules tell children what to do.
- ❑ Teachers tell children what to do (e.g., “Use walking feet”) instead of what not to do (e.g., “Stop running”).
- ❑ The room is divided into separate spaces for playing, eating, group time, and diaper changes or toileting.

Clear Routines and Schedules: Children do better when they know what will happen next.

- ❑ A daily schedule is posted with words and pictures.
- ❑ Teachers talk to children about what is coming next to help them move smoothly from one activity to the next.
- ❑ Children are engaged in activities and with materials.

Warm Connections: Strong relationships help children feel safe and cared for.

- ❑ A staff member greets children and families warmly when they arrive.
- ❑ Teachers use the children's names and speak to them with kindness.
- ❑ Teachers get down to the child's level when playing or talking.
- ❑ All staff offer real comfort when a child is hurt or upset.
- ❑ Teachers notice how children feel and talk with them about those feelings (e.g., “Jonah, you are excited to use the paints.”).
- ❑ Children seek adults for comfort.



Time to Play and Explore: Play is learning! Play helps children learn many skills.

- ❑ Books and toys show different families and cultures.
- ❑ The toys and materials that you see are ones that would appeal to your child.
- ❑ There are enough toys and materials to support children playing together.
- ❑ Children are encouraged to talk and play with one another.
- ❑ Teachers play with the children.

Teaching Social-Emotional Skills: Children learn these important skills with practice and support from adults.

- ❑ Children and adults talk about feelings.
- ❑ Teachers let children know it is okay to have different feelings.
- ❑ Teachers ask children how they are feeling and offer calming strategies if children are upset or frustrated.
- ❑ Teachers help children solve problems.
- ❑ Teachers express their own emotions using feeling words.
- ❑ Teachers appear to enjoy working with children in the classroom.
- ❑ Teachers try to understand the message behind children's behavior (e.g., "I see you are upset; would it help to have a hug or sit next to me?").

Including Families: Welcoming families in the classroom signals that they are the most important part of children's lives.

- ❑ Family photos and images of families are displayed.
- ❑ Teachers support goodbye routines during morning drop-off.
- ❑ Families can share traditions, music, or stories in the classroom.
- ❑ Families are welcome to visit and take part in activities.
- ❑ The program seeks and values input from families.



Additional Considerations

When you read enrollment materials, the family handbook, or visit a program's website, look for information about how the program supports families and teaches social-emotional skills. The program should explain how it will work with your family to help your child learn and grow. It is best to avoid programs that suspend children or ask families to leave because of challenging behavior (such as a "three strikes and you're out" policy). These policies might show that staff need more training or support to help children through tough moments.

Additional resources from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and Child Care Aware of America® on finding a high-quality program:

- ▶ [A High-Quality Program for Your Infant¹](https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/quality-program-for-infant)
- ▶ [A High-Quality Program for Toddler²](https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/high-quality-program-for-toddler)
- ▶ [A High-Quality Program for Your Preschooler³](https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/high-quality-program-for-preschooler)
- ▶ [Child Care Center Checklists⁴](https://www.childcareaware.org/families/choosing-quality-child-care/selecting-child-care-program/child-care-center-checklist/)



1 <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/quality-program-for-infant>

2 <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/high-quality-program-for-toddler>

3 <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/high-quality-program-for-preschooler>

4 [https://www.childcareaware.org/families/choosing-quality-child-care/selecting-child-care-program/child-care-center-checklist//](https://www.childcareaware.org/families/choosing-quality-child-care/selecting-child-care-program/child-care-center-checklist/)