



A Family's Guide to Choosing Quality Child Care

Pennsylvania believes in
quality care and early learning experiences.

Early Learning Resource Center:





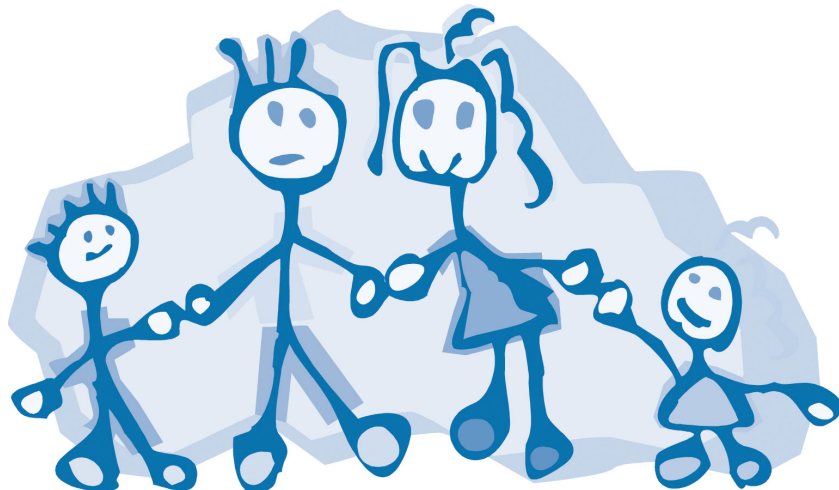


Dear Families,

The important decision of where to place your child can be difficult and confusing. The Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) provides this guide to inform and empower you to make smart decisions when choosing child care.

Pennsylvania's Early Learning Resource Centers (ELRC) can:

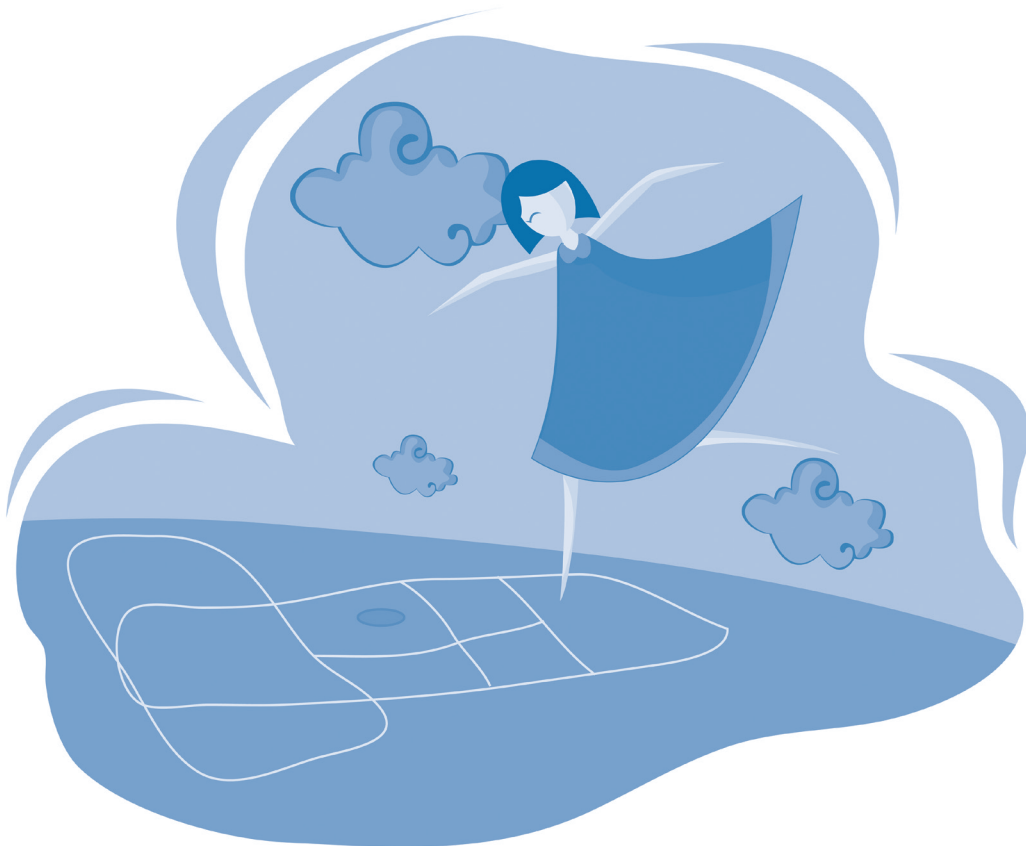
- 1. Inform families about the benefits of quality care.**
- 2. Match families with care and services that meet their needs.**
- 3. Cultivate a relationship with families to provide continuing services.**





TAKING THE FIRST STEPS

- Talk with your child and think about what both of you want from a child care program. Write down what is most important to you.
- Think about what you can afford. Check into any child care financial assistance through your employer, the early learning program, or the state.
- Talk to the staff at your local ELRC.
- Visit www.findchildcare.pa.gov to find early learning programs in your area.





TYPES OF CHILD CARE

You should choose the most appropriate child care program that meets your child and family needs.

Relative Care

- One caregiver who cares for one, two, or three children who is the grandparent, great-grandparent, aunt, uncle, or sibling over the age of 18 who does not live with the child.
- No state oversight. No health and safety requirements.
- Unable to participate in accrediting programs.

Family Home

- One caregiver who serves between four and six children unrelated to the caregiver.
- State certification required, based on health and safety requirements.
- Mandatory participation in Keystone STARS.
- Other types of accreditation at discretion of the program.

Child Care Center

- Serves seven or more children unrelated to the child care operator.
- State certification required, based on health and safety requirements.
- Mandatory participation in Keystone STARS.
- Other types of accreditation at discretion of the program.

Group Home

- Serves between seven and 12 children unrelated to the child care operator.
- State certification required, based on health and safety requirements.
- Mandatory participation in Keystone STARS.
- Other types of accreditation at discretion of program.

ABOUT CERTIFICATION

Child care is an important partnership between families and child care providers. Both partners play a key role in achieving the well-being and healthy development of children.

Pennsylvania's Department of Human Services (DHS) certifies child care providers. At least once a year, DHS inspects child care centers, group homes, and family child care homes that serve four to six children. DHS is also responsible for investigating complaints about child care facilities.

For more information about requirements and who is considered related to the child care operator, or if you have questions or concerns regarding child care, contact your local ELRC for more information.



DEFINING QUALITY CHILD CARE

Quality child care will offer your child a stimulating, nurturing environment which should help prepare him for school and to reach his full potential. Quality care environments exceed minimum standards set by the state. They provide a stimulating and loving atmosphere in which your child will thrive mentally, socially, emotionally, and physically.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH QUALITY

- Program will have earned a Keystone STAR 3 or 4.
- Small group sizes and adult-to-child ratios encourage the best opportunities for a child's development.
- Caregivers or teachers have experience and education in early childhood development.
- Opportunities for meaningful family involvement.
- Learning materials and teaching styles that are age-appropriate and respectful of children's cultural and ethnic heritage.
- Learning opportunities that promote a child's success in school.





10 REASONS FOR FAMILIES TO CHOOSE QUALITY CHILD CARE

- 1. SAFETY!**
The basic need of a quality child care setting is to ensure that the children in care are in the safest environment possible.
- 2. SCHOOL READINESS!**
Children in a quality setting will gain intellectual skills and social skills to prepare them for the school environment.
- 3. PROFESSIONAL STAFF!**
A quality care setting includes a staff trained to care for children and their needs.
- 4. GOOD RELATIONSHIPS!**
Quality care promotes a positive relationship between families and the caregiver. Family involvement is a priority.
- 5. RESPECT!**
A quality program will be respectful of children's and family's cultural, ethnic and special accommodations.
- 6. PROFESSIONALISM!**
A quality program will have business practices and policies in place so families know what to expect in various situations.
- 7. ATTENTION!**
Lower staff-to-child ratios increase your child's individual attention while in care.
- 8. OPPORTUNITY!**
Age-appropriate learning materials and activities give children the opportunity to learn and grow.
- 9. STABILITY!**
Families have assurance that their child is in a safe, positive environment without moving from provider to provider.
- 10. CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT!**
Quality child care programs engage in activities and efforts that continually seek to improve practices.



WHAT DOES KEYSTONE STARS MEAN?

Keystone STARS is a continuous quality improvement program. It has four STAR levels. Each STAR designation has its own research-based performance standards. These standards measure four areas that make a difference in the quality of care your child receives:

1. **The educated and well-trained staff;**
2. **The environment your child is in everyday;**
3. **Leadership and management; and**
4. **Family and community partnerships.**

As a program moves from STAR 1 to STAR 4, the requirements in these areas increase.

AT A KEYSTONE STARS PROGRAM YOU SHOULD FIND:

- Department of Human Services Certificate of Compliance for centers or group and family child care homes;
- A comfortable place where your child can explore and learn;
- Laughing, reading, and talking to build language skills;
- Teachers learning new ways to help your child succeed;
- A safe, healthy and exciting place;
- Music, art, science and play activities that increase school readiness;
- Children feeling good about themselves;
- Family involvement;
- Teachers that listen to children and families; and
- Children having fun together and being respectful of each other.



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KEYSTONE STARS

OFFICE OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND EARLY LEARNING



KEYSTONE STARS: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: Why should families care about Keystone STARS?

A: Your child's early education is critical to his or her development and future success in school and life. Keystone STARS sets requirements for early childhood educators to promote the best learning environment and safest setting possible for your child.

Q: What are the requirements set by Keystone STARS?

A: Quality ratings are based on four areas.

1. Staff education – early childhood educators have the training and knowledge to interact properly with children.
2. Learning environment – program has appropriate materials for a variety of ages and provides opportunities for children to learn on a daily basis.
3. Leadership and management – a well-run business has policies and plans in effect to optimize safety and also for families to know what will happen in certain situations.
4. Family and community partnerships – families and community stakeholders are encouraged to offer ideas and feedback regarding the learning program.

Q: How does Keystone STARS rate a program?

A: A program begins Keystone STARS with a STAR 1 rating and can work its way to a STAR 2 and STAR 3 until it becomes a top-rated STAR 4 program.

Q: What is the difference between a STAR 1 and higher STAR ratings?

A: Programs are rated using the four quality areas, but the requirements increase in each area for each STAR level. Please speak with your local ELRC for details of STAR level requirements.

Q: The Pennsylvania Department of Human Services certifies programs. Isn't that good enough?

A: A certified center does meet Pennsylvania's minimum requirements for safety. However, certification does not address early education. Keystone STARS programs combine these safety requirements with early education standards to give children a safe *and* an educational environment.

Q: Does it cost more to enroll my child in a Keystone STARS program?

A: There is no fee for providers to participate in Keystone STARS. Costs to families are set by the provider themselves.

Q: What will my child get out of being enrolled in a Keystone STARS program?

A: Many things! Individual attention, daily learning activities, a safe, friendly and respectful environment, feeling good about himself, a well educated staff, family involvement and more.

Q: What do families get out of enrolling their children in a Keystone STARS program?

A: Knowing that your child is safe and respected, that your child is learning something new every day, and the security of knowing what to expect from your provider in certain situations. Most of all, giving your child the best opportunity to succeed today and in the future.



INFORMATION ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Your child begins learning before birth. When your baby is born, her brain has grown to 25% of adult size. At age three, your child's brain has reached 80% of its adult size! Good nutrition and quality learning opportunities can help your child's brain development. This can help your child form relationships, be more successful in school and have a better life as an adult.

Where your young child spends her day and what activities she does, will help the brain to grow and develop. A quality early learning program can help your child grow and learn. Children who attend a quality early learning program do better in school and in life than children who do not attend a quality early learning program.

Visit www.findchildcare.pa.gov to find a quality early learning program that fits the needs of your child and your family. You can also contact your local ELRC. Find your ELRC at www.raiseyourstar.org.

Call Pennsylvania's CONNECT Helpline at 1-800-692-7288 for information about your child's development.

BASIC DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONES

AGE	DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONES
Birth to Six Months	Smiles spontaneously Can grasp a rattle Vocalizes Rolls over
Six Months to One Year	Sits without support Thumb-finger (pincer) grasp Waves "bye-bye" 2-3 word vocabulary
One Year to 18 Months	Removes clothes Walks without support Drinks from cup Knows 5-20 words
Two Years	Puts on clothes Knows six or more body parts Understands two-step commands Knows at least 50 words
Three Years	Knows name, age and gender 250+ word vocabulary Goes up and down stairs without support Pedals tricycle
Four Years	Can play board/card games Draws a person with three parts Can name at least four colors Almost all speech is understood
Five Years	Ties shoes Prints first name Understands the concept of time Abides by rules



FOUR STEPS TO SELECTING A CHILD CARE PROVIDER

1 *Interview Caregivers*

CALL FIRST

Ask:

- Is there an opening for my child?
- What hours and days are you open and where are you located?
- How much does care cost? Is financial assistance available?
- How many children are in your care? What age groups do you serve?
- Do you provide transportation?
- Do you provide meals (breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks)?
- Do you have a certificate of compliance?
- Other accreditations?
- What is your level in Keystone STARS?
- Visit www.findchildcare.pa.gov to check for inspection history, waivers, monitoring, and sanction information.
- When can I come to visit?

VISIT NEXT

Look for:

- Responsive, nurturing, warm interactions between caregiver and children.
- Children who are happily involved in daily activities and comfortable with their caregiver.
- A clean, safe and healthy indoor and outdoor environment, especially napping, eating and toileting areas.
- A variety of toys and learning materials, such as books, puzzles, blocks and climbing equipment, that your child will find interesting and that will contribute to your child's growth and development.
- Children getting individual attention.





Ask:

- Can I visit anytime?
- How do you handle discipline?
- What do you do if a child is sick?
- What would you do in case of emergency?
- Do you have a substitute or back-up caregiver?
- Where do children nap? How do you ensure that babies sleep on their backs?
- What education do you (and other staff) have? What ongoing professional development is available?
- May I see a copy of your state certificate of compliance?
- May I see a copy of additional accreditations?
- May I have a list of families (current and former) who have used your program?
- What kind of family involvement do you have?

2 *Check References*

Ask Other Families:

- Did your child learn new things while enrolled in the program?
- How did the caregiver discipline your child?
- Did your child enjoy the child care experience?
- How did the caregiver respond to you as a parent?
- Do you feel that this program has helped prepare your child for school?
- Would you recommend the caregiver without reservation?
- If your child is no longer with the caregiver, why did you leave?

Ask the ELRC or Certification Office:

- What regulations should child care providers meet in my area?
- Is there a record of complaints about the child care provider I am considering and how do I find out about it?



3 *Make the Decision for Quality Care*

From what you heard and saw, ask yourself:

- Which child care should I choose so my child will be happy and grow?
- Which caregiver can meet any special accommodations for my child?
- Are the caregiver's values compatible with my family's values?
- Is the child care available and affordable according to my family's needs and resources?
- Do I feel good about my decision?

4 *Stay Involved*

Ask yourself:

- How can I arrange my schedule so I can...
 - Talk to my caregiver every day?
 - Talk to my child every day about how the day went?
 - Visit and observe my child in care at different times of the day?
 - Be involved in my child's activities?
- How can I work with my caregiver to resolve issues and concerns that may arise?
- How do I keep informed about my child's growth and development while in care?
- How can I promote good working conditions for my child care provider?
- How can I network with other families?



QUALITY CHILD CARE CHECKLIST:

What to look for in a quality child care program

When visiting a program, ask these questions.
Your answers to these questions should be *yes*.

Facility:

- Is the provider certified by DHS and is it posted?
- Does the provider have their current Keystone STARS designation posted?
- Are there appropriate toys and materials for children of all age groups?
- Does the provider encourage you to drop in and visit at any time?
- Did the provider tell you their Keystone STAR level?

Staff:

- Does staff communicate daily with families about their children's progress?
- Does staffing allow for each child to receive individual attention?
- Does staff sit and read to the children?
- Does staff seem patient and receptive to children's needs?
- Is staff respectful of children?
- Is staff respectful of families?
- Does staff encourage children's sharing, manners, and other good behaviors?
- Does staff appear lively, smiling and interacting in a positive manner with the children?
- Does staff involve children in daily learning activities?

Safety:

- Does the facility appear orderly and clean?
- Are hazardous materials locked away?
- Is an emergency plan posted?
- Are there security measures in place?
- Is there a policy for sick children and other circumstances?

Children:

- Do the children have a consistent routine that they can understand and follow?
- Do the children seem occupied and engaged?
- Are the children involved in activities that promote learning?
- Is there a policy on discipline?
- Do the children seem happy?

Feelings:

- Is my initial reaction upon entering the site a positive one?
- Is this a place my child would enjoy?
- Would my child be safe here?
- Would I/we feel comfortable using this program?
- Would my child learn new things every day at this program?



For more information about childcare, visit www.findchildcare.pa.gov or contact your ELRC.

Find your ELRC at www.raiseyourstar.org.



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DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

www.dhs.pa.gov