

Daycare or Crèche

Choosing a crèche or a daycare center for your child involves prioritizing your requirements, researching various crèches in your locality, asking plenty of questions, and being aware and observant.

Start your search as soon as you can. Many crèches are booked up months in advance, especially for young babies.

Although it is a good idea for you to add your own criteria about what is important for you and your child, you might want to use the following factors as a guide to begin with.

Look for a crèche with:

- A good location. The ideal place would be close to your home or workplace.
- A good reputation that is accompanied by a warm and stimulating environment.
- Transparent, well established policies and open communication.
- A structured, child-centric and age-specific curriculum.
- Qualified, dedicated, and professional staff.
- Clean and safe facilities with a valid operating license.

Good reputation

A sign of a good day crèche or nursery is a recommendation from other parents. When you visit a daycare, try to chat to one or two of the parents and get a feel for the place. Also talk to other local parents you know to see if they have heard anything, positive or negative, about the place you're interested in.

Your own first impressions are important too. Is there a friendly, welcoming atmosphere? What do you see? Is it clean, calm and, most importantly, do the children look happy and

occupied? Whatever the day nursery tells you, it's important to listen to your instincts.

Also, ideally all crèches should be registered. Unfortunately this is usually not the case. Do speak to the manager of the crèche to clarify this issue. Daycare centres, crèches and nurseries that are an integral part of private or independent schools may be registered as part of the school.

Policies

A crèche should have clearly established policies for everything from opening and closing times to dealing with emergencies. By checking that these procedures are in place, you can see that the crèche or daycare centre takes the responsibility of caring for your child seriously.

You'll want to see that the crèche can be flexible, too. For example, it should allow you to pick up and drop off your child at different times if your working hours change at short notice. There should also be a clear policy on holidays and any breaks.

The crèche should also have a strict illness policy. Find out if they have basic first aid facilities at all times. Staff should be trained in basic first aid and there should be someone responsible, who can assess an emergency situation and take necessary action. They should also have a list of emergency numbers handy.

The centre should also have a clear policy about handling sick staff and children. Find out which illnesses will keep your child at home, and for how long, so that you can plan leave from work if the need arises.

A crèche or daycare centre should have an open door policy which encourages parents to drop in, unannounced. Some crèches go beyond just letting you in and encourage you to help with activities or outings.

Activities

The best set-ups have a structured curriculum that includes plenty of time for:

- physical activity
- quiet time
- daily storybook sessions for groups and individuals
- group activities
- individual activities
- meals
- rest and naps

Activities should be customized for different age groups and especially for children with special needs. Some of the popular activities include:

- painting, drawing, gluing and sticking
- imaginative play with the sand pit, splash pool or playhouse
- story time and reading
- construction blocks and play dough
- jigsaws and puzzles
- moving and dancing to music
- singing and recitation
- simple cooking (fire-less)

Look out for the following:

- The crèche should have a wide range of age-appropriate toys and books. This will encourage your child's development and, as she gets older, stimulate creative, imaginative play.
- Look at what is on the walls, too. It is important that there are plenty of drawings and paintings that the children have done themselves. This shows that creativity is valued.
- Television, movies and videos should play little or no part in what your child does at the daycare or crèche. If videos are part of the curriculum, they should be age-appropriate and educational.
- A well thought out curriculum stimulates your child's development and introduces variety and interest. Your child of course will see all this as different ways of playing.
- Children learn through play. So look for centres that place high value on children simply doing activities that they have fun and enjoy.

- Many crèches will keep parents informed about forthcoming topics so you can talk about them with your child at home.
- Children should have the chance to play outside every day. Running, jumping and skipping are good for them physically, mentally and socially.
- If you live in a busy, crowded and built-up area, even the best crèches may not have enough space for an outdoor playground. Make sure there is a spacious indoor area and that the children are taken out regularly for visits to the local park or playground under supervision.
- Most crèches encourage parents to send a tiffin or meal along with the child. However, if your child's crèche offers meals, ensure they serve clean and nutritious food. They should provide you with the daily menu or meal plan.
- If they have a kitchen, check if it is clean and well equipped to cater to children who are strict vegetarians or have food allergies or intolerances too.

Qualities in the staff

Staff members should share your views on sleep, discipline, feeding and other care issues. Good caregivers will ask detailed questions about your child's health. This may also help determine whether the crèche is right for you and your child.

Hygiene is an important factor to look out in staff members. Look carefully and assess the cleanliness of the *ayahs* as they will be the ones who will be taking care of your child's feeding and nappy changing.

Make sure the crèche has plenty of staff so that your child gets the attention and care that she needs. Ideally the smaller the group, the better the care. The child to staff ratio should preferably be:

- 3:1 for children under two years of age
- 4:1 for children between two and three years of age
- 8:1 for children between three and five years of age

Apart from the teacher and *ayah* also check out crèche's policy on the support staff. Are

the security guards, sweepers, cooks, drivers verified by the police?

Some daycare centres may have staff juggling more than one role. For example, the driver may help with some kitchen chores or the guard may be asked to watch over children when they are playing outdoors.

Speak to the daycare centre to understand how they distribute staff roles. Whatever the case, they should have a clear policy in place and ensure only verified staff interact with the children.

Health and safety regulations

All crèches and childcare centres are required to provide a safe and healthy environment for staff, children and visiting parents. Prevention of dangerous situations is a must and you should satisfy yourself that steps have been taken to minimise every risk.

Here are a few things to consider.

- Security is the highest priority. The crèche or daycare centre must have a secure boundary wall. This is all the more essential if it is in the heart of a city or on a busy road. Check that children can't leave the building without being noticed, and that nobody can enter without valid reason. Each child must have an identity card. The parents or guardian should have an authorisation card. Under no circumstances should a child be handed over to a stranger claiming to be a relative.
- There should be a medical room with a staff member trained to handle emergencies. There should also be a doctor on call if the need arises.
- Play equipment, toys, play areas and living areas should be clean and safe. Splash pools, if any, must be kept dry when children are not indulging in water play.
- Electrical points should have safety locks and should be out of a child's reach. Staircases, windows, balconies and verandas should have protective grills.

- A good crèche is clean and well kept. Floors, corridors, walls and the kitchen area must be neat and clean. Dustbins should not be left full. The toilets should be clean and hygienic, and customised for young children.
- Staff must be aware of the importance of personal hygiene. They should also follow appropriate procedures when helping your child in the toilet.

In Mind

Here are a few things you may want to keep in mind:

- The building should be suitably air-conditioned, lit and ventilated.
- Do check if the crèche has a supply of good clean running water. Make sure the drinking water is filtered?
- Are they equipped to handle the frequent power cuts? Do they have electricity back up services?
- Is the refrigerator clean and in working order? Remember your child's medicines and food will be stored in the common refrigerator.
- Don't forget to check the cots and bed linen. Make it a point to discuss what sleeping arrangements are being followed. Sometimes crèches make two or three children sleep in one cot. You must ensure you state your expectations firmly and clearly.
- Check where your baby's daycare bag and spare clothes are kept. Ideally, each child should have a separate locker or shelf with a name tag. Your baby's bottle, sipper, clothes, diapers and toiletries must not be shared with another child.

- Make it a point to check your child's bag every day. Good crèches will provide you with a checklist. They will also inform you when anything has been used or needs replacement.
- Lastly, find out about their policy on potty training. Often one hears about caregivers hitting or punishing young children if there are accidents or if the child is not ready to be potty trained. Ensure you speak to the manager, caregiver and a few parents to get a true picture. If their ideas don't match with yours it may be wise to look for another crèche that does not put your child under any undue pressure.

