



A Careful Choice

Weighing the decision of in-home versus center-based child care.

When it comes to new-parent decisions, few cause as much angst as the one about child care. In-home provider or center-based care? Do we rely on grandma or a private nanny who can care for our child one-on-one? Or will our child be better off in a group setting that offers an educational program and important social skills?

No doubt, the question ranks right up there with colic and 2 a.m. feedings as one of the most common concerns keeping new parents up at night. “It’s such a tough one,” says Massachusetts mom Lisa Chilinski, “because you feel like whatever you choose, you could be affecting your child’s whole future. But no pressure, right?”

Preparing for School

Much of the decision facing parents is emotional. After all, who to entrust with the care of your baby or toddler comes largely down to feelings about safety, assurance, and confidence. In-home care understandably gets points because it provides parents with a hand-picked nanny or relative who can care for a child in the comfort of his or her own home. But experts say parents should consider education and developmental growth as well.

Child care, say early education professionals, is more than just a place for a baby or toddler to spend hours while a parent is at work. To a developing youngster, the time between infancy and kindergarten is an important stretch, when learning and exploration set the stage for lifelong success in virtually all aspects of education including language, reasoning, and problem solving. The National Education Association points to several studies linking quality early learning to everything from future college achievement to higher salaries and more. That makes those early years spent with a provider not just a place for a child to be safe, but also a crucial opportunity to build an all-important educational foundation.

To many in the field, that gives a quality group-care setting a definitive edge. Dr. Linda Whitehead, PhD, vice president of education and development for Bright Horizons, says that while home providers are certainly well versed in caregiving, they don’t often offer a sequential curriculum and are not likely to be schooled in child development. By contrast, education-based centers include specialized curriculum delivered by trained teachers who know not only what children need in terms of nurturing but also what kind of developmental milestones they should be aiming for, and how to help achieve them. Such professionals are also highly skilled in communication, meaning parents are both actively involved in their child’s daily life and abreast of important developmental milestones and whether their child is on target. That multiple teachers staff each classroom means education never comes at the expense of personal attention for each child.

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- Dr. Linda Whitehead PhD

More Than Three “Rs”

But experts stress that early education is more than academics. In today’s world, interpersonal skills are counted as crucial ingredients in learning success. Dr. Whitehead points to a study done by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning showing that programs

focused on emotional and social skills, a standard feature of high-quality centers, produce students with better grades in school and higher standardized test scores. Such social competencies get an added boost at centers where children engage in daily contact with peers. The interactions not only bestow confidence, but also offer practical lessons about cooperation, sharing, and problem solving. “Those types of important skills are critical through your whole life,” says Dr. Whitehead.

Proponents of group programs also cite enrichment activities, access to technology, CPR-trained staff, and child-centered spaces built for safe exploration as additional benefits of center care. But if what happens inside the centers offers one set of arguments for choosing a group arrangement, events in the outside world provide another. Society has changed dramatically since stay-at-home moms were the norm. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in the 1960s, barely 17 percent of first-time mothers were still in the workforce a year after giving birth; by 2005, that number had jumped to 64 percent. When seeking child care, today’s working parents are looking to their children’s future and seeing high-quality early learning programs as an advantage. As a result, says Dr. Whitehead, few children arrive at kindergarten these days without some kind of group experience. Those without it can be at a distinct disadvantage.

“Children who’ve been in group settings typically have more confidence and the ability to interact and problem solve with peers,” she says, noting that these children also arrive with a comfort level in the classroom not always shared by peers without those experiences. “You just can’t underestimate the value of those kinds of skills.”

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Moving Toward the Center: One Family’s Story

When Lisa Chilinski had her first child, at-home child care seemed a perfect fit. “My sitter would come to the house in the morning,” she recalls, “and would be waiting for me when I got home from work at night.”

But over time, the arrangement started to show cracks. With a private sitter, playmates for Alexis were few if existent at all. And, as she grew older, the toddler seemed to get restless. As much as she loved her sitter, Ms. Chilinski began to realize that her daughter needed more than an at-home arrangement could give her.

Though it was a difficult decision, Lisa ultimately opted for child care at a center. It’s a choice she’s never second guessed.

A big part of the switch was socialization. “Going to a group setting gave Alexis something she really needed – interaction with other children,” says Ms. Chilinski. Equally important, ultra-attentive teachers provided that environment without sacrificing the nurturing feeling of one-on-one care. “They really took the time to get to know Alexis and what she needed,” she says.

Ms. Chilinski also liked that the progression of education in the center meant her daughter could move through her toddler, preschool, and pre-kindergarten years without having to transition to a new center. “The familiarity from year to year, and the confidence of staying in a familiar setting, really helped us all,” she says.

Alexis thrived for four years at her center, right up to the day she successfully started kindergarten. Her younger sister attended the same center two years later.

“I don’t regret at all that I started with a private sitter,” says Ms. Chilinski today. “But in the end, having Alexis surrounded by teachers and friends was so beneficial not only for my daughter, but for me as well.”