

Choosing the Right Child Care: A Comprehensive Guide with Checklist

Selecting a child care centre is one of the most important decisions you'll make for your child, and it's completely normal to feel a mix of emotions about it. Many parents experience anxiety or guilt when considering child care, wondering if their child will be safe, happy, and well cared for. These feelings are entirely valid—after all, entrusting someone else with your child's well-being is a significant step.

However, quality early learning environments can be a transformative and positive experience for both children and families. Research shows that a child's brain develops rapidly in the first five years, forming critical connections that shape their future ability to learn, communicate, and problem-solve. Early experiences play a fundamental role in this development, making it essential to provide children with stimulating, supportive environments during this period.

By engaging in high-quality early learning programs, children build cognitive, social, and emotional skills that lay a strong foundation for lifelong success. These programs not only introduce children to structured learning but also foster curiosity, resilience, and a love for exploration. A great centre will not only care for your child but will also become an integral part of your family's journey, supporting you every step of the way. Child care isn't just about supervision; it's about providing a nurturing space where children develop essential life skills, build relationships, and explore the world around them.

This guide aims to help ease concerns by providing clear, practical information on what to look for when visiting a child care centre. By understanding key factors such as curriculum, nutrition, educator relationships, and warning signs to watch for, you can turn this decision from a source of confusion into a confident step towards enriching your child's early years.

The suggested questions to ask are a combination of questions you can directly ask the centre you are visiting, others are questions to ask yourself before, during and after you visit.

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1. Do You Feel Welcome?

First impressions matter. When visiting a child care centre, pay attention to how you and your child feel in the space. A welcoming environment fosters a sense of safety and belonging, both for children and parents. Educators should engage warmly, demonstrate a genuine interest in your child, and be available to answer your questions. Feeling comfortable and confident in the centre is a strong indicator that it could be a good fit for your family.

Questions to Ask

- Are you greeted warmly upon arrival?
 - Do educators take time to introduce themselves and engage with your child at their level?
 - Does the centre feel safe, inviting, and child-friendly?
 - Are children happily engaged in activities?
 - Are other parents interacting positively with educators?
 - Do educators provide clear answers to your questions?
 - Are you encouraged to explore the space and observe?
 - Do you feel a sense of trust and ease about leaving your child there?
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2. What is the Learning Approach and Daily Experience Like?

Early learning should be engaging, stimulating, and developmentally appropriate, aligning with the principles of the **Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)**. The EYLF emphasises play-based learning, fostering children's sense of identity, well-being, communication, and connection with their world. Some centres go beyond the government-mandated curriculum to offer a more enriching experience by integrating additional programs that enhance learning outcomes. A well-structured daily routine not only supports children's cognitive and social-emotional development but also nurtures their sense of curiosity, creativity, and problem-solving skills.

Enhancing the curriculum with specialist-led activities such as music, language immersion, environmental education, and STEM-based exploration can further support EYLF learning outcomes. These additions encourage inquiry-based learning and promote essential early skills, such as resilience, teamwork, and adaptability. By incorporating elements beyond the standard curriculum, centres can create an enriched educational environment that prepares children for lifelong learning and success.

Questions to Ask

- Is play-based learning incorporated into the curriculum?
 - Are there structured activities as well as free play opportunities?
 - Are there specialist-led programs such as music, movement, or yoga?
 - Are children exposed to cultural learning (e.g., indigenous culture, languages, diverse traditions)?
 - Does the centre provide emotional and social development support? How?
 - Are nature-based learning opportunities available? What are they?
 - Can the person showing you the centre easily and clearly explain and answer questions about learning frameworks?
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3. What Do the Fees Include?

Child care fees can vary significantly. Understanding how fees are structured and what they include will help you assess overall value and affordability. There are two common fee structures:

1. **All-Inclusive Model** – This structure covers all expenses within the daily fee, including meals, nappies, extracurricular activities, excursions, and incursions. While this model may appear more expensive upfront, it ensures that every child participates in all aspects of the program without additional charges. Parents can budget with confidence, knowing there won't be unexpected costs throughout the year.
2. **Additional Fees Model** – In this structure, the base fee covers attendance, but additional charges apply for extras such as meals, nappies, excursions, incursions, or special programs. While this may offer a lower initial cost, it can lead to children missing out on experiences if parents choose not to (or cannot) pay for optional activities. It's important to check how often these additional costs arise and what impact they may have on your child's experience.

Knowing which model a centre follows will help you determine what best suits your family's financial planning and ensures your child receives the full benefits of early learning.

Questions to Ask

- Are nappies, meals, and activities included in the base fee?
- Does the centre offer transparent pricing without hidden costs?
- Is there flexibility in session lengths to suit your needs?
- Does the centre accept the Child Care Subsidy (CCS)?
- Can you access a fee calculator to estimate out-of-pocket expenses?
- Does the centre charge extra fees for excursions, incursions, or additional programs? How are these extra costs communicated to families?

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4. The Role of Educators and Relationships

Strong educator-child relationships are fundamental to a child's emotional security, social skills, and long-term academic success. Research highlights that children who form strong, positive bonds with their educators exhibit higher confidence, better communication skills, and improved problem-solving abilities. These relationships foster a sense of safety, encouraging children to explore, take risks, and engage in meaningful learning experiences.

A great child care centre prioritises relationship-building by ensuring each child has consistent and trusted educators. This allows children to develop emotional security, which directly impacts their ability to focus, regulate emotions, and build resilience. A nurturing relationship with educators also creates an environment where children feel heard and valued, promoting a love for learning.

Additionally, educators should engage in continuous professional development, staying updated on best practices in early childhood education. This ensures they can implement effective teaching strategies, maintain a positive learning environment, and adapt to each child's unique developmental needs.

Questions to Ask

- Do educators engage warmly with children and parents?
 - Is there a consistent roster system in place? Tip: ask if you can expect to see the same educators at drop off time each day.
 - Are educators qualified and experienced?
 - Does the centre invest in professional development and training for educators and management?
 - Are educators retention rates high? Tip: ask how long educators typically work at the centre.
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5. Nutrition and the Daily Menu

A well-balanced diet is vital for young children's growth, development, and cognitive function. Nutrition plays a critical role in brain development, particularly in the first five years, when rapid neural connections are forming. A diet rich in essential nutrients like proteins, healthy fats, vitamins, and minerals directly supports memory, learning, and emotional regulation.

High-quality nutrition in early childhood also helps establish lifelong healthy eating habits. When children consume a variety of fresh, nutrient-dense foods, they develop a stronger immune system, maintain steady energy levels, and enhance their ability to concentrate and engage in learning activities.

Child care centres should prioritise providing meals that meet recognised dietary guidelines, ensuring that children receive the best possible start in life. This includes balanced meals that incorporate fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins. Additionally, mealtimes should be approached as opportunities for children to develop independence, social skills, and an appreciation for a wide range of healthy foods. Children should also have the opportunity to be involved with meal preparation as part of the curriculum.

By choosing a centre with a strong commitment to nutrition, parents can ensure their child receives the fuel they need for optimal growth, brain development, and long-term well-being.

Questions to Ask

- Are meals freshly prepared onsite?
- Does the menu follow healthy eating guidelines?
- Are dietary requirements accommodated?
- Are children encouraged to try new foods? How?

- Is food education incorporated into the learning experience?
 - Is the menu certified by Nutrition Australia or another recognised external body to ensure overall quality?
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6. Additional Curricular Activities (Incursions & Excursions)

Beyond classroom learning, external programs help broaden children's experiences by reinforcing and extending what they learn in structured settings. Centres that offer excursions and incursions expose children to new environments, ideas, and hands-on learning, enriching their understanding of the world around them. These experiences provide valuable opportunities for children to develop problem-solving skills, social confidence, and adaptability in real-world settings.

Additional curricular activities, such as visits from community professionals, nature explorations, and cultural programs, enhance a child's ability to connect concepts learned in the classroom to practical applications. For example, a visit to a farm can reinforce lessons on sustainability and nutrition, while an arts workshop can foster creativity and fine motor skills.

These activities also align with the **Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)** by promoting a sense of belonging, being, and becoming. They encourage curiosity and active engagement, supporting key learning outcomes like communication, identity, and community awareness. By integrating such activities into the curriculum, centres can provide a holistic learning experience that nurtures well-rounded development and lifelong learning skills.

Questions to Ask

- Are there regular incursions and excursions?
 - Are trips educational and engaging (e.g., zoo, science centre, library)?
 - Are safety protocols in place for excursions?
 - Are families informed about upcoming activities and are they invited to attend?
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7. Does the Centre Complement Your Home Life?

Every family has unique needs, values, and circumstances, and the right child care centre should complement, rather than compete with, your home environment. The transition between home and child care should feel seamless, supporting your child's development while reinforcing the routines, beliefs, and values important to your family.

A good centre will offer flexibility to accommodate different parenting styles, work schedules, and cultural practices. For example, if your home environment prioritises outdoor play, a centre with a strong outdoor learning program may be a good fit. If you speak a second language at

home, a centre that embraces bilingual learning opportunities could support your child's linguistic development. Similarly, if healthy eating and nutrition are a key focus for your family, a centre with an in-house chef and a nutritious meal plan may be an essential factor in your decision.

By choosing a centre that complements your home life, your child will feel secure and confident, ensuring a positive early learning experience that aligns with their home routines and values.

Questions to Ask

- Does the centre align with your family's values, such as sustainability, inclusivity, or community engagement?
 - Do the centre's routines and expectations support your child's home schedule (e.g., sleep times, dietary preferences, cultural practices)?
 - Does the centre provide opportunities for parents to be involved in decision-making, events, and curriculum discussions?
 - Are educators open to learning about and incorporating your family's unique cultural or personal practices into the learning environment?
 - Does the centre provide a strong sense of community and belonging for both children and parents?
 - Does the centre offer flexibility to accommodate unique family structures and working schedules?
 - Are there clear channels of communication between the centre and parents to ensure alignment with home values and expectations?
 - Does the centre actively involve families in celebrations, cultural events, and learning experiences?
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8. Who Owns the Centre?

The ownership and management of a child care centre can have a significant impact on the quality of care and education your child receives. There are different types of child care ownership models, including family-owned centres, corporate-owned centres, and not-for-profit providers. Each has its advantages and potential drawbacks, so it is important to consider which model aligns best with your family's values and expectations.

Family-owned centres often provide a more personalised, community-oriented approach, with decision-making driven by educational philosophies rather than financial goals.

Corporate-owned centres may have better facilities, structured processes, and streamlined policies but can sometimes lack the flexibility of smaller providers due to corporate governance.

Not-for-profit centres typically reinvest their earnings into the community they serve, often focusing on those community benefits rather than profitability or the highest level of education and care.

To help highlight the differences, think about the experience you get calling a local tradesman or visiting a local shop (Family-owned) versus calling a telecommunications giant or bank (Corporate-owned) versus dealing with your local charity or sports club (Not-for-profit).

By understanding the centre's ownership structure, you can gain insight into how decisions are made, where priorities lie, and how this influences the overall care and learning environment.

Questions to Ask

- Is the centre family-owned, corporate-owned, or not-for-profit?
 - How does the ownership structure impact decision-making and daily operations?
 - Does the centre invest in improving facilities, staff development, or educational programs?
 - Are management and owners actively involved in the centre's daily activities?
 - Do the values of the centre align with your family's expectations for care and education?
 - Are families encouraged to provide input on policies and programs?
 - Is there transparency about how the centre is run and how decisions are made?
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9. Health & Safety Measures

Ensuring the health and safety of children is a top priority for any child care centre. A high-quality centre will have strict safety protocols in place to create a secure and hygienic environment. This includes maintaining clean facilities, adhering to health guidelines, implementing emergency procedures, and training staff in first aid and CPR.

Hygiene practices, such as regular handwashing, sanitisation of toys and surfaces, and clear illness policies, help prevent the spread of germs and illnesses. Outdoor play areas should be well-maintained and safe, with age-appropriate equipment and adequate supervision.

In addition to physical safety, emotional well-being is a crucial aspect of a child's development. A safe and nurturing environment ensures children feel comfortable, valued, and supported, promoting their overall happiness and readiness to learn.

Questions to Ask

- Are emergency and evacuation procedures clearly displayed and regularly practiced?
- Do educators hold valid first aid, CPR, and anaphylaxis training?
- Are hygiene practices, such as regular cleaning and handwashing, strictly followed?
- Is there a clear illness policy, including procedures for sick children?
- Are indoor and outdoor play areas clean, well-maintained, and safe?
- Is there a strong focus on both physical and emotional well-being?
- Does the centre have secure entry and exit points with visitor sign-in protocols?
- Are children encouraged to practice safety skills, such as road safety and emergency drills?

10. Parent Involvement and Communication

A centre that prioritises parent engagement fosters a stronger learning community. Look for open communication channels and opportunities for parent involvement. Strong parent-centre relationships create a sense of belonging and partnership, helping children feel more secure and confident in their learning environment.

Parents and carers should be encouraged to participate in excursions and centre events. Being actively involved allows families to see firsthand how their child interacts with educators and peers, fostering trust and collaboration. Centres that provide opportunities for parents to attend open days, cultural celebrations, parent-teacher meetings, and learning workshops help build a supportive and engaged community.

Additionally, regular updates through newsletters, apps, and meetings ensure that parents remain informed and can contribute meaningfully to their child's learning journey.

Questions to Ask

- ☐ Does the centre provide regular updates through an app, email, or newsletter?
 - ☐ Are there open-door policies for parents?
 - ☐ Are parents encouraged to attend events and participate in activities?
 - ☐ Can parents provide feedback and suggestions?
 - ☐ Is there a clear process for raising concerns, and does the centre respond to and address issues in a timely manner?
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11. Red Flags: Signs a Child Care Centre May Not Be the Right Choice

While many centres provide excellent care, there are warning signs to watch for. These could indicate issues with quality, safety, or overall management. Before making a decision, take the time to research online reviews, explore the centre's website, and check their social media accounts to get a sense of their communication style and community engagement. While even the best centres may have the occasional negative review, what you're looking for is consistent, transparent feedback from parents and a history of addressing concerns in a professional and timely manner.

A lack of available information online can also be a cause for concern. If a centre has very few reviews, minimal website details, or no social media presence, it may indicate a lack of transparency or engagement with families. In such cases, ask the centre directly about their approach to communication and family involvement.

If you do find negative feedback, don't hesitate to ask the centre to explain. Reputable centres should be open to discussing past concerns and detailing how they have addressed or improved upon issues. This openness can be a strong indicator of a centre's commitment to quality care and continuous improvement.

Questions to Ask

- Do educators seem disinterested or disengaged when interacting with children or visitors?
- Is there high Educator turnover, indicating instability and inconsistency in care?
- Does the centre appear unclean or poorly maintained, with visible safety hazards?
- Are there unclear safety policies or procedures, and are staff unable to explain emergency protocols?
- Is there poor communication with parents, including delayed responses or lack of updates online?
- Are outdoor play opportunities limited, with restricted access to fresh air and movement?
- Is there no transparency about fees and policies, making it difficult to understand additional costs?
- Are there few or no online reviews, social media presence, or available parent testimonials?
- Do negative reviews lack clear explanations or improvements from the centre when asked?
- Is centre management hesitant or defensive when asked about past complaints or concerns?

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Making the Right Choice

Choosing a child care centre is about finding the best fit for your child and family. Take the time to visit, ask questions, and explore your options. While practical considerations like fees, curriculum, and educator relationships are essential, it's just as important to trust your instincts. If you don't feel excited about the opportunities the centre provides for your child's learning and development, it may not be the right fit.

A great child care experience should feel like an extension of your home, offering an environment where your child can thrive, build confidence, and develop a lifelong love for learning. If you leave a visit feeling uncertain or uninspired, consider whether the centre aligns with your family's values and expectations. Ensuring you feel enthusiastic about your child's potential experiences will lead to a more positive and enriching journey for both you and your child.

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Quick Reference Guide: Key Questions to Ask

1. Do You Feel Welcome?

- ☐ Are you greeted warmly upon arrival?
- ☐ Do educators take time to introduce themselves and engage with your child?
- ☐ Does the centre feel safe, inviting, and child-friendly?
- ☐ Are children happily engaged in activities?
- ☐ Are other parents interacting positively with educators?
- ☐ Do educators provide clear answers to your questions?
- ☐ Are you encouraged to explore the service space and observe?
- ☐ Do you feel a sense of trust and ease about leaving your child there?

2. What is the Learning Approach and Daily Experience Like?

- ☐ Is play-based learning incorporated into the curriculum?
- ☐ Are there structured activities as well as free play opportunities?
- ☐ Are there specialist-led programs such as music, movement, or yoga?
- ☐ Are children exposed to cultural learning (e.g., indigenous culture, languages, diverse traditions)?
- ☐ Does the centre provide emotional and social development support?
- ☐ Are nature-based learning opportunities available?
- ☐ Can the person showing you the service easily and clearly explain and answer questions about learning frameworks?

3. What Do the Fees Include?

- ☐ Are nappies, meals, and activities included in the base fee?
- ☐ Does the centre offer transparent pricing without hidden costs?
- ☐ Is there flexibility in session lengths to suit your needs?
- ☐ Does the centre accept the Child Care Subsidy (CCS)?
- ☐ Can you access a fee calculator to estimate out-of-pocket expenses?
- ☐ Does the centre charge extra fees for excursions, incursions, or additional programs?

4. The Role of Educators and Relationships

- ☐ Do educators engage warmly with children and parents?
- ☐ Is there a consistent key educator system in place? Tip: ask if you can expect to see the same educators at drop off time each day.
- ☐ Are educators qualified and experienced?
- ☐ Does the centre invest in professional development and training?
- ☐ Are staff retention rates high? Tip: ask how long educators typically work at the centre.

5. Nutrition and the Daily Menu

- ☐ Are meals freshly prepared onsite?
- ☐ Does the menu follow healthy eating guidelines?
- ☐ Are dietary requirements accommodated?
- ☐ Are children encouraged to try new foods?
- ☐ Is food education incorporated into the learning experience?
- ☐ Is the menu certified by Nutrition Australia or another recognised external body?

6. Additional Curricular Activities (Incursions & Excursions)

- ☐ Are there regular incursions and excursions?
- ☐ Are trips educational and engaging (e.g., zoo, science centre, library)?
- ☐ Are safety protocols in place for excursions?
- ☐ Are families informed about upcoming activities?

7. Does the Centre Complement Your Home Life?

- ☐ Does the centre align with your family's values, such as sustainability, inclusivity, or community engagement?
- ☐ Do the centre's routines and expectations support your child's home schedule (e.g., sleep times, dietary preferences, cultural practices)?
- ☐ Does the centre provide opportunities for parents to be involved in decision-making, events, and curriculum discussions?
- ☐ Are educators open to learning about and incorporating your family's unique cultural or personal practices into the learning environment?
- ☐ Does the centre provide a strong sense of community and belonging for both children and parents?
- ☐ Does the centre offer flexibility to accommodate unique family structures and working schedules?
- ☐ Are there clear channels of communication between the centre and parents?
- ☐ Does the centre actively involve families in celebrations, cultural events, and learning experiences?

8. Who Owns the Centre?

- ☐ Is the centre family-owned, corporate-owned, or not-for-profit?
- ☐ How does the ownership structure impact decision-making and daily operations?
- ☐ Does the centre invest in improving facilities, staff development, or educational programs?
- ☐ Are management and owners actively involved in the centre's daily activities?
- ☐ Do the values of the centre align with your family's expectations for care and education?

- ☐ Are families encouraged to provide input on policies and programs?
- ☐ Is there transparency about how the centre is run and how decisions are made?

9. Health & Safety Measures

- ☐ Are emergency and evacuation procedures clearly displayed and regularly practiced?
- ☐ Do educators hold valid first aid, CPR, and anaphylaxis training?
- ☐ Are hygiene practices, such as regular cleaning and handwashing, strictly followed?
- ☐ Is there a clear illness policy, including procedures for sick children?
- ☐ Are indoor and outdoor play areas clean, well-maintained, and safe?
- ☐ Is there a strong focus on both physical and emotional well-being?
- ☐ Does the centre have secure entry and exit points with visitor sign-in protocols?
- ☐ Are children encouraged to practice safety skills, such as road safety and emergency drills?

10. Parent Involvement and Communication

- ☐ Does the centre provide regular updates through an app, email, or newsletter?
- ☐ Are there open-door policies for parents?
- ☐ Are parents encouraged to attend events and participate in activities?
- ☐ Can parents provide feedback and suggestions?
- ☐ Is there a clear process for raising concerns, and does the centre respond to and address issues in a timely manner?

11. Red Flags: Signs a Child Care Centre May Not Be the Right Choice

- ☐ Do educators seem disinterested or disengaged when interacting with children or visitors?
- ☐ Is there high Educator turnover, indicating instability and inconsistency in care?
- ☐ Are team profiles easily accessible either at the service or online?
- ☐ Does the centre appear unclean or poorly maintained, with visible safety hazards?
- ☐ Are there unclear safety policies or procedures, and are staff unable to explain emergency protocols?
- ☐ Is there poor communication with parents, including delayed responses or lack of updates online?
- ☐ Are outdoor play opportunities limited, with restricted access to fresh air and movement?
- ☐ Is there a lack of transparency about fees and policies, making it difficult to understand additional costs?
- ☐ Are there few or no online reviews, social media presence, or available parent testimonials?
- ☐ Do negative reviews lack clear explanations or improvements from the centre when asked?

- ☐ Is centre management hesitant or defensive when asked about past complaints or concerns?