The Raising Quality! Childcare for Preschoolers Guide

Your child is growing up fast! One minute they will be begging you to read their favorite book with them and the next they will be playing pretend with their friends. Children ages three to five are learning many new skills. They run, climb, and start learning letters and numbers. While they may start having friends, they may have a hard time seeing things from someone else's point of view. Although your child may be more grown up now, they still need your help and guidance.

Read on for helpful information on your preschooler's development, tips to help them grow, and what to look for in a childcare provider.

FIRST 5 San Joaquin

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Learning On Their Own

During play, children explore new feelings, ideas, and skills. They create make-believe stories and games. They are learning how to play with each other, how to relate to adults, and how to handle their emotions. It's important for preschoolers to have some control of their world. When children have opportunities to make decisions and increase their independence, they will see that their own identity is important. They are able to build confidence when their thoughts and opinions are valued by those around them.

Children Develop Differently

Preschoolers are learning many new skills. Each child develops and learns at their own pace. Try not to compare your child with other children. If you think there may be a problem or if your child loses skills they once had, talk to your child's doctor. If you have any worries about how your child is growing, trust your feelings. Talk to your child's doctor as soon as you have concerns. If your preschooler is showing signs of difficulty or is having problems, there are programs to help. Getting help early can make a big difference in your child's future.

If your child has additional challenges, or a disability, they need love and nurturing like any other child. They need the chance to play and learn, and they need your support to develop self-esteem and take part in school and social activities. You may need to do additional research and ask questions to find the services your child needs. Parents of other children with special needs are often a good source of information and support. There are also agencies that can help you as well. Visit the Family Resource Network at www.frcn.org for more information.

Things You Can Do

Help Them Grow By Developing Their Social Skills

Children need many social skills to be ready for preschool. You can help your child get ready by:

- Talking, reading, singing, drawing, and playing with them. Encourage them to come up with activities first.
- Helping them learn to wait, take turns, listen, share, and follow simple directions.
- Answering their questions with simple explanations.
- Using blocks, big puzzles, and other toys to teach letters and numbers.
- Singing the alphabet and counting songs together.
- Reading and talking about stories with them.
- Joining in pretend play or other activities when your child asks you to, or if you just want to encourage creativity.
- Making sure your child has time to play with other children.
- Visiting the local library and asking a librarian or bookstore clerk to help you and your child choose books. Your child can pick their favorite too!
- Using books to talk about difficult topics, like anger, sharing, or differences in abilities and family types.
- Talking to them about what has happened during their day.

Help Them Explore Their Creativity

You can encourage your child's creativity by:

- Making a place for them to play with chalk, crayons, markers, paints, and paper. Choose a place where they can experiment, practice, and explore that isn't too difficult to clean up!
- Giving them washable markers, chalk, or big crayons that are easy for them to hold.
- Letting them play dress-up with some of your old clothes.

Let Your Child Learn by Doing

Encourage hands-on learning rather than watching TV. This helps them refine small muscle skills needed for writing or large muscle skills that help build strong and healthy bodies. Here are a few ideas:

- Include your child in everyday tasks like cooking and cleaning.
- Take them to interesting places like museums and zoos.
- Help them learn responsibility. For example, they can help pick up toys, set the table, or sort the laundry.

High-Quality Preschool Programs

Children who go to preschool are more likely to do better in school. Look for a preschool program that will help your child develop the skills they will need in school and in life. But when visiting preschools, how can you tell if it's safe and enriching for your child?

Every preschool might look a little different, but some things remain the same in high-quality environments. Look for things like:

- **Specific play and learning areas.** Play spaces are organized by interest areas. For example, there are areas with materials to develop their skills and knowledge, but also for active play. Preschoolers should have separate areas where they can play alone or in small groups.
- **Secure open spaces (both indoors and outdoors).** Children have many opportunities for active play. The play equipment is safe, engaging, and challenging for preschoolers to explore.
- **Personal touches.** There are objects in the room that are familiar to each child, like family photographs and children's artwork. These are placed at a height for preschoolers to see or grab when they need.
- **Variety in their schedule.** Preschoolers will have active time and quiet time, indoor and outdoor time, short activities and longer ones to increase their attention span. Preschoolers should also be able to choose from a variety of activities to excite their curiosity.
- **Simple and complex materials.** Preschoolers are more interested in playing with each other than toddlers are. They can engage in activities with other children like solving big puzzles together, and using other toys to learn letters and numbers.
- **Child-size furniture.** Children can be more independent with chairs, tables, and shelves that are sturdy, safe, and the right size for them.
- **Diverse books.** Caregivers read simple stories to children and provide a wide variety of books for toddlers to look at. The books should reflect diversity in the children's languages, cultures, and families.
- **Accommodations for special needs[1].** Caregivers will have special training, skills, and experience, and should receive specific instructions from parents. The facility is accessible and safe for the child, and accommodates adaptive equipment – like wheelchairs or walkers.
- **Cultural diversity[2].** Caregivers will acknowledge different customs, languages, holidays, and important traditions to provide children with lots of cultural diversity.
- **Open communication[3].** Caregivers will check-in with parents to show how things are going, how the agreed-upon plan is working, and where adjustments might be needed. Lists like daily check-ins, sleeping and playtime logs, conferences, and other activities are helpful to keep track of the children's progress.

High-Quality Programs Build On What Your Child Already Knows and Can Do

Caregivers provide materials and experiences that are challenging, but that children can do with a little help. This is called Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). Developmentally Appropriate Practice means:

- Teaching based on each child's age and stage of development.
- Helping each child meet goals that are just right for that child.
- Valuing and including each child's family, language, and culture.

When caregivers choose materials, activities, and strategies to use with children, they think about many things, including:

- What most preschoolers need, like materials for creating and pretending.
- What individual children might need, such as a quiet space for some children, who could be sensitive to loud noises or lots of other stimulation.
- What ways they can support each child's family, language and culture, like learning several words in other languages for children who are bilingual.

Using what they know about your child, in partnership with you, caregivers will set goals for them and track their progress.

As a parent, you can be involved in your preschooler's childcare every step of the way. When visiting a potential preschool program, you should receive a copy of their policies and procedures. If the provider does not offer this information, just ask for it! Look for an "open-door policy," where you will be able to visit your caregiver any time care is offered. Make sure your caregiver allows you to visit unannounced any time your child is there.

Ask for the policies and procedures for parent engagement and involvement. Are parents encouraged to participate in activities? Are there opportunities to be involved in designing program policies, activities, and materials? Will you be receiving progress reports and how are they presented? Including parents helps ensure that all children's home cultures and languages are welcomed, honored, and celebrated. Your involvement can build a better relationship with your caregiver, promote quality improvement, and support your child's learning and development[4].

Checklist for Preschool

- ❑ Is the preschool a participant in Raising Quality!?
- ❑ Is there a regular schedule of activities for children?
- ❑ Is there (at least) one caregiver for every 12 children?
- ❑ Is the facility licensed by Community Care Licensing?
- ❑ Do caregivers have college education units in early childhood education?
- ❑ Do the caregivers have conversations with the children and ask them questions?
- ❑ Do children have regular access to books and are they read to daily?
- ❑ Do the caregivers give kind, clear, and consistent messages to the children about their behavior?
- ❑ Is there a large play space where children can build and move things, jump, and run?
- ❑ Is there sand, wood chips, or rubber under the play equipment, instead of grass or cement?
- ❑ Is there a place where children can do arts and crafts and play quiet games?
- ❑ Are there many kinds of toys, games, and art supplies? Are they suited to your child's age?
- ❑ Is there a quiet space for resting and reading?
- ❑ Are chairs, tables, and equipment child-sized?
- ❑ Is the food healthy and is it prepared safely?
- ❑ Are the teachers trained in first aid and CPR?
- ❑ Will caregivers avoid and/or limit media screen time?

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What Your Child Will Experience in Preschool

Preschool lets your child practice skills they will need in kindergarten and beyond. These include taking part in group activities and taking turns. Your child will play number games and practice using crayons, pencils, and other art supplies.

In preschool, your child will build skills and knowledge[5]:

- **By interacting with caring adults.** Caregivers help your child feel secure and important every day. They listen to your child and get to know them well. When children feel safe and cared for, they grow in all areas of development.
- **By engaging in active, hands-on, "minds-on" play and learning.** As your preschooler plays, experiments, and interacts with children and caregivers, a lot of learning happens. They develop skills that will help them think, question, and explore the world.
- **By connecting new ideas and skills to what they already know and can do.** All of us learn best when we can link new information to what we already know. Caregivers help preschoolers do this to build knowledge and connect learning to what interests your child, like bugs or machines!
- **By exploring and making sense of their world.** As your child explores materials, they come up with ideas about why things happen and test them out. Caregivers help them make sense of their experiences by asking them to explain their thinking, encouraging them to try something different, and adding small challenges.

Through caregiver-guided learning, caregivers plan small and large group experiences that stretch children's learning. Some strategies they use during these times include:

- Giving children many opportunities to practice new skills, like finding and making patterns.
- Offering choices so children become more independent and take responsibility for their learning.
- Asking questions that lead to more than one right answer: "Why do you think that happened?"
- Giving hints to help children figure out something.
- Providing information and directions.
- Adding challenges when children are ready for them, like reading aloud slightly longer books with more complex words.
- Commenting on what children are doing to call attention to their efforts, not just what they accomplish: "You thought about that really hard before you answered."
- Giving them time to find their own solutions, and offering help if children seem stuck or frustrated.
- Encouraging your child to keep trying and to judge their own efforts: "How did your idea about making a maze with blocks turn out? What do you think you could do differently next time?"

Caregivers also think carefully about when, how, and where to help children learn. When they read a book to a small group, they might discuss the characters and point out specific parts of the book, like the title and cover. They might use puppets to help children talk about their feelings. Caregivers use every moment to help children learn including mealtimes, cleanup, and outdoor playtime.

If a Relative, Friend, or Neighbor Is Your Child's Caregiver

Childcare providers in California are required to be licensed except for caregivers who might be a relative, friend, or neighbor. This means that those caregivers are not subject to the same health and safety standards as licensed providers.[6] But having a relative, friend, or neighbor take care of your child can give your family many great benefits that fit your lifestyle, such as, more flexible hours, care with different-aged siblings, and a consistent caregiver. Although they are probably someone you are close to and feel comfortable with, you should still make sure that they are able to follow the "Checklist for Preschool" with the exception of having a license.

[1] CDE.CA.GOV
[2] UNL.EDU
[3] ZEROTOTHREE.ORG
[4] CHILDCARE.GOV
[5] NAEYC.ORG
[6] CDSS.CA.GOV
[7] CHILDCARE.GOV

Your caregiver will be a very important person in your child's life. It is important to discuss your desires and beliefs with them, and make sure that you agree with how your child will be cared for when you are not there.[7]

- Talk about ways to help your child learn, such as reading stories, playing games, and making things together.
- Express how much screen time you want your child to have and set limits you are comfortable with.
- Discuss your preferred toilet training methods if your child is learning to use the toilet. Make sure your child is not being shamed or forced to give up diapers before they are ready.
- Explain how you set limits and use consequences with your child. Talk about how you want guidance to be given.
- Ask if your caregiver is aware of *Raising Quality!* and encourage them to learn more at **RaisingQualitySJC.org**.

For More Resources

First 5 San Joaquin
Programs and services (preschool, home visitation, and more) for families with children ages 0 to 5.
209-953-5437
www.sjckids.org

San Joaquin 2-1-1
Information and referrals to services, including food assistance.
2-1-1
www.211sj.org

Raising Quality!
Information regarding quality childcare and early education programs in San Joaquin County.
www.raisingqualitysjc.org

Family Resource & Referral Center
Advocacy, information, training, and direct services to enhance child care and child development, and family well-being.
209-948-1553
www.frrcsj.org

First 5 California
Online resource center that provides developmental information, activity suggestions, and support resources.
www.first5california.com

Help Me Grow
Program for families of children ages 0 to 5 in San Joaquin County that offers comprehensive developmental screening and appropriate referral follow-up.
209-461-2728

Be Well San Joaquin County
Online resource center that provides emotional support facts and tips, and also connects parents with emotional support resources.
www.bewellsjc.org