Two to Pre-Kindergarten: Guide For Finding Quality Center Based Early Child Care and Education Programs

NAME OF PROGRAM _____

Choosing center based child care for your child and your family is one of the most important decisions you will make as a parent. This guide provides a starting point with suggested questions to ask as well as things to look for as you visit centers. Centers can be referred to as preschool, nursery school, day care. The resource staff of the Columbia University School and Child Care Search Service is available to discuss any issues and questions that arise during the child care search process. Please be in touch with us at any point throughout your search.

All quality early care and education programs must be licensed by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Up to date licensure status can be found on: http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/dc/dc.shtml

We suggest that you use a separate checklist for each program setting visited

A meets all of our family's needs   **B** meets most of our family's needs   **C** meets half of our family's needs   **D** meets few of our family's needs   **E** meets none of our family's needs

EARLY CHILD CARE AND EDUCATION QUALITY FACTORS	NOTES ABOUT THIS PROGRAM	RATING
MISSION GUIDING PROGRAM POLICIES *A mission sets the tone and defines a program's practices and policies* **Things to Ask:** • Is the program voluntarily accredited by early care and education associations? • What is the program's educational philosophy and style? • How and where are the policies articulated? • Is there a religious affiliation to the program? • What are the hours? Extended Day? Early Drop-off? • What is the length the of program year and vacation schedule? • What are admissions guidelines? Is there a sibling policy? • Is financial aid available? • How are the children grouped (by age, mixed ages, based upon child development)? • What is the program's introduction/separation policy? What are expectations of parents during this time? • How is discipline handled? • How does the program deal with learning differences or special needs? • Is the program respectful of cultural differences? • Do materials such as books, dolls, pictures reflect diverse cultures? • Are languages other than English spoken or taught?		

EXPECTATIONS FOR CHILDREN
Expectations for children define the style of teaching and learning in a program

Things to ask:
- Is there a balance of child-directed and teacher-directed activity?
- Is there daily outdoor play time? What is the alternative location for inclement weather?
- Is there a written curriculum or description of what the children will do during the day?

Things to look for:
- Do the children look happy and involved?
- Do the children seem engaged in activity?
- Are there times for individual, small and large group activity?
- Are transitions between activities smooth?
- Is the room arranged in centers to encourage play and learning?
- Do the activities encourage children to develop language, social skills, math, science, and creativity?
- How is the learning documented (on bulletin boards, in newsletters)?

HEALTH AND SAFETY
All high quality early childhood programs should have certain basic elements

Things to ask:
- Does the program maintain medical records and emergency information for each child?
- Are teachers aware of health and safety plans for the children in their class?
- Is medicine administered by the staff?
- Is there a clearly defined, articulated plan for medical, fire, and evacuation emergencies?
- What is the system for daily arrivals and dismissals?
- Does the program have a clear policy about illnesses and attendance?
- Are one or more staff rained in pediatric emergency CPR and first aid?
- Are snacks and meals nutritious and varied?
- Will the program assist the child in toilet learning?
- Does the program require a change of clothes for each child?
- Is there a rest time for full day children? Do all children have their own individual cot/mat and bedding for resting?

Things to look for:
- Are emergency numbers clearly posted by telephones?

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AND MATERIALS		

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Indoor and outdoor physical environment fosters optimal growth and development through exploration and learning

Things to look for:
- Are classrooms clean and well lit with space for each child?
- Are sinks and toilets easily accessible to children?
- Are materials easily accessible to children and neatly organized?
- Do you see blocks, books, art materials, toys, dress up materials?
- Is a variety of children's artwork displayed?
- Is there space for children to keep their personal belongings?
- Are there areas with carpet or rugs?

INSTRUCTIONAL and LAY LEADERSHIP
Ongoing professional development and training for teachers, administrators and board leaders preserve programs as dynamic learning environments

Things to ask:
- Are the teachers certified in early childhood education?
- What are their qualifications?
- Does the staff meet regularly to learn about and evaluate the program?
- Do the teachers differentiate their program to meet the varying ages, levels and abilities of the children in their class?
- How is the program governed? Are the leadership policies transparent?
- Are there opportunities for parents to take lay leadership roles, if desired?

Things to look for:
- Do the teachers seem warm and friendly in their interactions with children and their families?
- Are the teachers speaking with children at their eye level?
- Is the director welcoming and easy to communicate with?
- Is the administrative staff helpful?

Additional resources such as a glossary of terms, guide to educational philosophies and general information spreadsheets are available by contacting www.worklife.columbia,edu