



# Quality Counts: Choosing Early Care & Education Programs

Contact Us >>>

Child Care Resource & Referral, Inc.  
1001 W. Kennedy Avenue, Suite A  
Kimberly, WI 54136  
920.886.1211 or 1.800.749.KIDS  
[www.ccrfoxvalley.org](http://www.ccrfoxvalley.org)



### ***What influences a child's development?***

*In short, everything . . . from moving shadows on a wall, to the funny noise a toy makes, to the simple acts of being held or read a story.*

***A child's development is in constant motion, influenced by everything and everyone. This is especially true during a child's formative years from birth to age five when development is on a fast track and the brain is naturally laying the groundwork for the future.***

*But while nature begins the process, proper development must be nurtured and guided in stimulating environments, both in and out of the home. Children cannot do it alone. In every stage of a child's life, parents, family, schools – and for many children, early care and education and school-age child care professionals – need to provide children with every opportunity to learn.*

*With this collective support, children have the best chance to succeed physically, socially and academically throughout life.*



**"Children need the freedom and time to play. Play is not a luxury. Play is a necessity."**



### Choosing Early Care & Education Programs

Choosing an early care and education program is an important decision for any family. Finding a quality program is even more important. Why?

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Research shows that a child's first five years are the most formative for the brain, providing a tremendous "window of opportunity" when the brain makes the connections necessary for learning. The first years of life have the potential to establish either a firm – or fragile – foundation for your child's future. As a parent searching for an early care program, it is your responsibility to identify the program that will help lay the best foundation for your child.



*Defining quality early care and education is not simple. At the foundation of a quality program is its commitment and ability to support and nurture a child's healthy physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive development, and approaches to learning. It is these domains that form the basis of a child's readiness for school.*

#### How can you recognize quality?

This pamphlet can help you. It presents the range of available early care and education program options, Wisconsin's child care licensing standards and information concerning your responsibilities as a parent or family member. Wisconsin's Child Care Quality Rating & Improvement System, YoungStar, has an informational website and brochures that will come in handy when interviewing and visiting programs.

The search for the right program for your child takes time and energy. Choosing a quality program that is appropriate for your child and family is a decision that will support your child's success in school and in life.

### Early Care & Education Options- *Group Child Care*

**Licensed Center-Based Programs** serve nine or more children and are independently operated in child care facilities, workplaces or churches. Children in centers are usually grouped by age. As they grow, children often move into the next age group with a different teacher. Each center must meet specific Wisconsin state licensing regulations including ratios of caregivers to children and group size. Staff must meet training requirements including annual continuing education. All centers must obtain a license to operate from the Department of Children and Families. For license exempt child care options, see <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/ccregulation>.

**Preschool Programs** typically run for four or fewer hours per day, serve children ages three to five, operate in child care centers, schools and other community buildings. Faith organizations sponsor many preschool programs and are license-exempt.

**Public or Private 4K Programs** include community early care and education center programs and elementary school programs for four year olds. Public 4K programs are fully funded and operate under the direction of your resident public school district. Private centers that run 4K will charge a fee. To be eligible for 4K, a child must be four by September 1st of the school year.

**Head Start** is a Federal program that provides free, comprehensive developmental services for preschool children from low-income eligible families. Families with children with disabilities are also encouraged to apply. These programs are child- focused and family-centered.

**Early Head Start** is also available in several Wisconsin communities and serves children birth to age three and their families, see

<https://dpi.wi.gov/early-childhood/head-start>.





### Early Care & Education Options- *Family Child Care*

#### What is the difference between a licensed and certified family child care provider?

- **Licensed providers** can care for a maximum of 8 unrelated children. Providers are required to be licensed if they are caring for 4 or more unrelated children under the age of 7 at the same time.
- **Certified providers** can care for a maximum of 6 children, with up to three unrelated children under the age of 7. Certification is a voluntary form of licensing.
- In both of these options, the provider's related children under the age of 7 are counted in the group size.

Both licensed and certified family child care offer a home-like setting that often provides the opportunity for siblings to stay in care together. In both licensed and certified care, providers must provide age-appropriate toys and activities, nutritious meals and snacks, and meet basic health and safety standards. Both licensed and certified providers are required to have pre-service training and obtain annual continuing education.



### YoungStar: Wisconsin's child care quality rating and improvement system



The Department of Children and Families is committed to improving the quality of regulated care for Wisconsin's youngest children. Wisconsin requires a childcare program to be regulated if it serves four or more unrelated children.

#### Can anyone earn a YoungStar rating?

Any regulated Wisconsin child care provider who serves children from birth through school age can join YoungStar, as long as they meet state regulations. (programs that have had their license or certification revoked, denied or suspended are rated 1 Star). Providers who receive Wisconsin Shares subsidies for children in their care are required to participate.

#### How to Read the Stars:

YoungStar rates child care providers from 1 Star (for programs that do not meet health and safety standards) to 5 Stars (for the highest quality of care). These stars help parents find the right place for their child to learn and grow. They also show caregivers their strengths and point out ways they can improve.

**Can a child care provider's rating change?** YoungStar rates participating childcare providers every two years. This ensures everyone has the most up-to-date information about their community's child care options. And YoungStar offers caregivers training opportunities, tools and financial support to help them improve.

At [www.dcf.wisconsin.gov/youngstar](http://www.dcf.wisconsin.gov/youngstar) parents can find Youngstar tools and information that can help them raise healthy, happy kids.

**Understanding Star Ratings**

- 5 Star Program**  
Meets highest levels of quality standards
- 4 Star Program**  
Meets elevated levels of quality standards
- 3 Star Program**  
Meets proficient levels of quality standards
- 2 Star Program**  
Meets health and safety standards
- 1 Star Program**  
Does not meet health and safety standards, and therefore cannot participate in YoungStar



# Four Easy Steps to Choosing a Quality Child Care Program

## Contact Child Care Resource & Referral

When you call CCR&R, a Referral Specialist will ask you questions regarding your child's and family's child care needs.



You will be provided with a list of child care options to programs that may meet those needs, including type of care, age of children, hours of operation, preferred location and special program features. CCR&R's comprehensive database of regulated early care and education and school-age childcare provides program information that is not available from the state.

## Call Child Care Programs to ask questions

Review the **Quality Child Care Checklist** attached for a list of questions to ask when calling or visiting programs.

Once you have your list of early care and education and/or school-age child care program options from CCR&R, call each program to confirm the information and check the availability of openings for your child. This is the fastest way to build on the referral information CCR&R has provided and narrow down your options.



## ***New in 2024- CCR&R is now offering Enhanced Child Care Referrals***

When families request an enhanced child care search, they will receive a customized list of regulated childcare programs according to their child(ren)'s age, location, and schedule. The **Enhanced Referral Specialist** will work to provide families with the most up to date vacancy information. Additional follow-up is provided to each family along with customized information and resources as requested. Parents must still call programs to set up enrollment and schedule site visits.

### Visit Programs

The most important step in the search for your child's care is to visit at least three of the programs on your list and look for signs that show each program's quality. While there, tour the program and observe the children and the staff. Ask questions about how the staff interacts with the children, safety and health issues, and about the setting and programming.



Use CCR&R's Quality Child Care Checklist to track important information about each program you visit. Consider visiting the program more than once and at different times of the day so you can get a good feeling for the program. When you are close to making a decision bring your child along on a visit to observe how your child and the provider/staff interact with one another.



### Compare and Decide

After your visits, review the checklist and compare what you've seen and heard at each program and determine which is best for your family's needs. Because your child may stay with a program for many years, it is important to know and trust that the quality of child care you choose will benefit your child as he/she grows and develops.



***Consider the program's YoungStar rating.***

***If it's low, why is it low and what are the plans to achieve a higher rating?***



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### Check References

Get references from the center for other parents using that program is an important step in your child care search. This ensures that the provider is highly recommended for their quality care and helps you make a more sound decision.

Ask other parents if their children enjoy the program. What do they like most and least about the program? Would they use this program again?

*Above all, think about what is best for your child, use your instincts, and know that choosing quality is an important responsibility that will have a lasting impact on your child's life.*

### The Next Steps

Once you have selected a quality program that best suits your family's needs, it's up to you to remain involved.

- Share vital information about your family and child and keep it up to date. Tell the staff about any special needs, fears, or individual circumstances your child may have.
- Be sure to read and understand all policies, paperwork, and communications you receive from the program. Read the parent bulletin board for important information.
- Respect the program's staff as knowledgeable professionals. Remember, you are entrusting them with the care of your child.
- If you become concerned about something that is happening in your child's classroom or family child care home, talk it over with the director or owner. If you think the program is not following state regulations, call **Bureau of Early Care Regulation Northeastern Regional Office at 920-785-7811.**



### **Affording the Cost of Child Care**

Children are in their early learning years when parents are in their early earning years. Not surprisingly, child care is the second largest budget item for most families, exceeded only by housing costs. There are a number of programs that can reduce your out-of-pocket costs.

#### **Wisconsin Shares Child Care Subsidy Program**

The Wisconsin Shares Child Care Subsidy Program supports families by funding a portion of the cost of child care while the parents are working or participating in an approved activity. Families must live in Wisconsin and their children must be US citizens. To apply for Wisconsin Shares call 1-888-256-4563 or for more information visit the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) website:

[www.dcf.wisconsin.gov/wishares/eligibility](http://www.dcf.wisconsin.gov/wishares/eligibility) or  
[go to www.access.wisconsin.gov/access/](http://www.access.wisconsin.gov/access/).

#### **Discounts, sliding fee scales and child care scholarships**

Child care programs may offer sibling discounts with reduced rates for more than one child enrolled at the same time. Some programs offer a sliding fee scale with reduced rates based on family income. Child care programs sometimes offer scholarships based on financial need. Check to see if these discounts or scholarships are available to your family.





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### Free public early care and education programs

UWO Oshkosh Head Start is a preschool program serving children and families in Outagamie, Winnebago, Calumet and Shawano counties at no cost to you. To be eligible children must be 3 or 4 years old by September 1st of enrolling year, and their family must meet established income requirements. Families with children with disabilities are also encouraged to apply. To apply or for more information, call 920-858-7822.

### Local district-based public 4 Year Old Kindergarten –

4K is open to any student who will turn 4 years old on or before September 1st. Some programs operate in school district buildings, while others are located in community sites (i.e. preschools, child cares). While Public 4K is available to all it may be necessary for you to pay for before and/or after school (wrap-around care) for your child, depending on your schedule. Check your local school district website for info about 4K.

To inquire about Appleton Community 4K go to

[https://4k.aasd.k12.wi.us/our\\_school/registration](https://4k.aasd.k12.wi.us/our_school/registration) or call the 4K office at 920-832-1742.



### Additional help from Leaven Fox Cities

Leaven Fox Cities can help families who are struggling with:

- Delinquency on their child care tuition payments and are on the verge of losing care
- Potential help with enrollment and registration fees

*Please note: Families must reside in Leaven service delivery area, and must be enrolled in either a group or family regulated child care program. Contact Leaven at 920.738.9635 or visit [leavenfoxcities.org](http://leavenfoxcities.org)*

### Federal and State Tax Credits

Many families are eligible for federal and state tax credits that can significantly reduce your out-of-pocket costs for child care. Tax credits are dollar-for-dollar reductions in taxes owed that can add up to substantial savings, but you must file a tax return to access these credits. Tax credits and income eligibility requirements can change from year to year, so check with the IRS ([www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov)). Typically, the following tax credits are available each year: Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC); Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit (CTC).



### Dependent Care Assistance Program

This is an employer-sponsored spending account (also known as a flexible spending account) that allows for a certain amount of your income to be set aside before taxes to pay for child care. Check with your employer to see if this option is available to you. You are strongly encouraged to take advantage of these benefits that can save your family thousands of dollars and help to defray the cost of quality care and education for your child.



***Quality child care requires a commitment from both parents and providers to form a close working relationship for the well-being of the child.***





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**You have spoken with the CCR&R Referral Specialist, called child care programs, and there is no openings that can meet your needs. What do you do next? Following are some suggestions:**

**Re-contact CCR&R for another list.** We could expand the radius of the area searched or add additional locations to the search. This could increase the number of options available to you. If you have any flexibility with hours or days that care is needed, we could also change that criteria and search again.



**Request to visit the program anyway.** even if they do not have a current opening for your child, to confirm that this is a program you would like to choose if an opening became available.



**Ask to be placed on a wait list.** Availability can change quickly and an opening may come up unexpectedly.

**Make a short-term plan for child care.** Contact CCR&R again in a few months to see if new providers may have been added in the areas you are interested in.



**Ask the provider** that does not currently have an opening if they know of someone in the area that does have current availability.

### Explore the option of using in-home care such such as a nanny or babysitter

Please note: CCR&R does not provide referrals to nannies or in-home care providers. A suggested resource guide for nanny care can be found on the [For Families](#) page of our CCR&R website.

### Talk to friends, neighbors, and people at your library, church or community center who may have faced the same problems

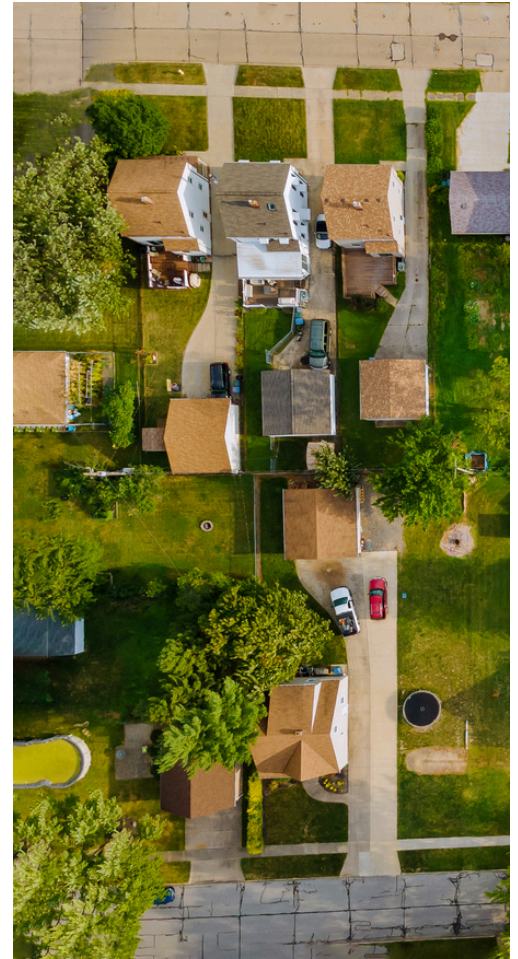
How did they solve them? Can you and your spouse work alternate shifts? Is anyone you know willing to become certified to care for your children?

### Discuss child care needs with your employer and with co-workers

If many of you are having the same difficulties, your employer needs to know. Can your employer be more flexible with your work hours? Is your employer open to the idea of an on-site child care center to fit the company's various work schedules?

Suggest that your employer contact CCR&R's **Business Child Care Advocate** to discuss family friendly child care options in the workplace.

***The key to future success is for employers, child care providers, community members and families to find innovative child care solutions that will support success in our communities.***






# Quality Checklist


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Use the following checklist to keep track of the answers you receive during your search for quality programs. You may need to make additional notes as you ask questions.


The checklist is broken down into several categories covering a wide range of topics, from general program information to the needs of the child. Use the checklist as you visit each program. As you ask questions about each program, check the box when the answer is “Yes.” Leave the box unchecked if the answer is “No.”


When you have visited all the programs you want to see, compare the answers and determine which program is best for you and your child.

	<b>Setting</b>	<b>Notes</b>
	Do children have a place to store personal belongings?	
	Is the environment cheerful, warm and inviting?	
	Are toys on low shelves within reach of infants, toddlers and preschoolers?	
	Are furnishings the right size for the ages of the children in care?	
	Is the children's work displayed at their eye level?	
	Are there science/sensory activities that encourage children to experiment and observe?	
	Is there enough space? Do infant rooms have space for both cribs and for infants to crawl?	
	Are there activity areas that allow for different types of play (housekeeping, cozy book corner, art, blocks, etc.)?	
	Is the program accessible and does it meet the needs of children with disabilities?	

 <b>Programming</b>		<b>Notes</b>
	Is there a curriculum that is followed?	
	Are infant activities (such as play, meals, or napping) individualized?	
	Is a daily record kept on feeding, naps, and diaper changes?	
	Is the children's work creative and individualized?	
	Is there a variety of clean, developmentally appropriate materials and equipment for children, both indoors and outdoors?	

 <b>Health and Safety</b>		<b>Notes</b>
	Are nutritious snacks and meals planned and served? Is a menu available for parents?	
	Are foods, bottles and medicines labeled with child's name and date and stored safely and appropriately?	
	Is there a staff member trained in first aid/CPR at the facility at all times? Is there a first aid kit?	
	Do staff follow health precautions such as using gloves and washing their hands and children's hands frequently?	
	Are toys cleaned daily or as needed?	
	Are there clean and easily accessible bathrooms?	
	Can the diaper changing surface be easily cleaned?	
	Is the space clean and odor free?	
	Are the programs indoor and outdoor areas safe, free of hazards and large enough for easy movement?	
	Are there separate outdoor areas for infants that include a variety of safe equipment?	
	Are electrical plugs and radiators covered or protected?	
	Are there smoke and carbonmonoxide detectors?	
	Are safety procedures for tornados, fire, etc. practiced regularly, and documented?	

 <b>The Children</b>		<b>Notes</b>
	Are the children allowed to select learning/play activities and toys by themselves?	
	Can children choose NOT to participate in activities?	
	Do children have the opportunity to develop self-help skills as they grow, e.g. zipping, buttoning and typing shoes?	
	Is problem solving among children encouraged?	
	Do children appear actively involved and interested?	

 <b>Staff</b>		<b>Notes</b>
	Does a staff member greet children warmly when they arrive?	
	Do staff welcome questions and share information with families?	
	Do staff respond to children's individual needs and do they provide one-on-one attention?	
	Are staff actively involved with the children (i.e. on the floor with the infants)?	
	Are staff members required to have special training in early education, and receive continuous staff training?	
	Have the majority of staff members worked at the program more than two years?	

	<b>Program Policies</b>	<b>Notes</b>
	Does the program have a written statement that describes its philosophy and are you comfortable with it?	
	Does the program have policies/procedures on discipline, illness, medicine, accidents/injuries and emergencies?	
	Does the program keep records on children and their development?	



	<b>Program Policies Continued</b>	<b>Notes</b>
	Does the child/staff ratio meet state standards?	
	Is the group size small enough so children are not overwhelmed?	
	Is there a safe sleep policy and a relaxed setting for nap/rest time?	
	Does the program have qualified substitutes in case of staff illness or vacation?	
	Does the program have a policy on toilet learning?	
	Does the program have a plan for when a child is bitten?	
	Does the program have a plan and resources for children with special needs?	
	Are children's families allowed to visit at any time? Is there an "open door" policy?	
	Are there opportunities for parent/family involvement?	
	Is there a written contract and do you completely agree and understand it?	

	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Notes</b>
	Are planned activities appropriate for the ages and developmental stages of the children, and give children opportunities to learn new physical skills?	
	Are activities planned that help children solve problems, express ideas, and learn about the real world?	
	Do books, materials, and artwork reflect cultural diversity?	
	Are daily activity plans posted and followed?	
	Does the program support early literacy by integrating appropriate activities into children's play?	
	Do activity plans provide for active AND quiet play?	
	Are children talked to, read to, and sung to by adults	

**What is the program's Youngstar Rating?**

**Additional Notes**

## About CCR&R

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Founded in 1986, Child Care Resource & Referral, Inc. is a non-profit resource and referral agency that works with families, child care providers and communities across northeast Wisconsin, serving 8 counties – Calumet, Fond du Lac, Green Lake, Manitowoc, Outagamie, Sheboygan, Waupaca and Winnebago. We are a member of Wisconsin’s Supporting Families Together Association (SFTA) and Child Care Aware® of America (CCAoA)



### Our Mission

Child Care Resource & Referral improves the quality and accessibility of early childhood education and care.

### CCR&R services include:

- FREE Child Care Referrals
- Business Start-up Services for New Family Child Care Providers
- Technical Assistance & Training for Providers
- Early Childhood Resource Library
- Child Care JobLine Dashboard
- Certified Child Passenger Safety Technician- will assist with proper car seat installation

### Contact Information:

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