

Understanding the risks of low quality child care

Some signs of low-quality child care are often obvious to the average person. The most easily identifiable threats concern the physical setting and include safety and health issues - things or situations that could harm, or even cause death.

Some of these include uncovered outlets, electrical wires, sharp objects, choking hazards, chemicals, lead paint, open windows, doors that can be easily opened, stairs, climbing structures and swings without mats or sand under them.

Not-so-obvious signs

Less obvious hazards include medicine cabinets, lack of cleaning and sanitation of toys and bedding, serving of foods that are choking hazards, lack of first aid and CPR knowledge and too many children for safe supervision to name a few.

With the current research on early brain development, we now know that low quality child care goes beyond the physical safety and general sanitation of a child's environment.

A good knowledge of infant and child development allows a provider to have reasonable expectations of a child's behavior and aid them in planning activities that will entertain and stimulate a child's curiosity and need for learning. Understanding a child's typical behavior at each stage of development makes life much less frustrating for the child, caregiver and you as parents. When a caregiver feels frustrated and overwhelmed, it is hard for them to respond to a crying child with care and patience.

Understanding how a child grows also allows a caregiver to offer activities that are age appropriate and developmentally appropriate.

A child can get bored or frustrated if they are expected to do things that are way above or way below their ability. Such activities offer little opportunity to learn, succeed or foster a child's curious nature.

Knowledge of child development also allows the caregiver to be supportive to you as parents when your child's behavior or personality seems to suddenly change for no apparent reason.

Consequences

What happens if a child is in an environment that is not responsive, appropriately stimulating and nurturing?

Responding to a child teaches them that they have control over their environment. Responding with love and enthusiasm teaches them that the world around them is a safe and loving place.

Responding with anger and impatience or not responding at all may teach a child that his or her feelings are not important. They may become withdrawn and timid or they may start to act out to get attention, because sometimes getting negative attention is better than getting no attention at all.

When there is little or no positive feedback from the adults in a child's life, it is difficult for a child to develop good self-esteem. Normal development of a child's brain will be hindered when the appropriate stimulation is not provided, furthermore emotional, social and cognitive development will also be negatively affected.

A positive influence

Positive interaction with children is an important part of normal brain development as well as essential emotional growth. Children who learn they are loved and important at an early age will feel better about themselves and more comfortable with their environment. They will learn that making mistakes is okay and will be willing to try new things without a

fear of failure.

Reading books, blocks, sand and water play, music and movement should be a part of every child's life every day. Painting, coloring playing with toys that stimulate imagination and the creative process should also be available every day.

This isn't to say that a child's day should be filled with adult directed activities, ideally the environment should be set up in such a way that it invites a child to experiment and learn on their own but also allows caregivers to interact with children or just observe them. Quiet time is also needed for a child to process what they have learned throughout the day.

Evaluating your child care environment

With all of that said, how do you know if your child is in a setting that will support growth? Ask questions and spend time checking out the environment. It should offer interesting things to do, lots of books and opportunities to explore, but not be too stimulating.

Ask your provider what type of early childhood education training they have completed.

For your part as parents, it is also important for you to find out what you can about the stages of child development. This type of information is available at most public libraries without any associated cost.

You should also ask your child's caregiver how they would handle certain situations (biting, hitting, not eating). Ask about the day's schedule and request reports (preferably written) at the end of the day.

If your schedule allows, arrange for an extended visit to see what the day is like. When projects are completed by the children in the child care setting, does the provider emphasize the process of creating and not the end product? How many books are read to the children in a typical day? Do the children get outside each day to engage in large motor play? Observe the interaction between your provider and your child. Are they comfortable with each other? Does your provider talk to your child, greet them in the morning and say good-bye at the end of the day? Do they greet you with a smile at the end of the day and share positive stories about your child?

You are your child's primary caregiver and you know your child better than anyone else. If they are old enough to talk, ask them about specific activities they completed that day and ask them to tell you about certain children in their child care setting. Take the time to listen to what they say about their day and you will have a good idea if they are having fun or feeling stressed about something. If there is a problem, talk to your provider to see if the issues can be resolved. Be an involved parent, but also try to be as supportive as you can of your provider as well.

Building a good relationship with your child's caregiver will go a long way towards creating a positive environment for your child. Taking care of children is probably the one of the most difficult, challenging stressful and underpaid professions on earth and a little understanding and show of appreciation will be greatly appreciated by your provider.

Information for this article was provided by Early Learning New Hampshire. The organization is committed to ensure that all New Hampshire children have the opportunity to reach their full potential by expanding access to affordable quality child care and early education, supporting the child care industry; building public-private partnerships; and helping families balance work and family. www.earlylearningnh.org