

## Choosing Preschool Care

Care for preschoolers comes in all kinds of settings and sizes – center-based, family child care homes, playgroups or shares. Traditionally, “preschool” referred to a part-time program for three- and four-year olds in a center-based setting. Although there are still preschool programs in this classic sense, preschool care now encompasses a wide variety of programs and environments for children. In BANANAS’ experience, quality learning can happen in many different settings.

### What Setting is Best for My Child?

The various child care options for preschool-age children can be confusing. Whether choosing a child care center, a family child care home, a playgroup or a shared in-home caregiver arrangement, keep in mind that the quality of your child’s educational experience will depend most of all on the people working with him or her. If the adults caring for the children are warm, caring, and nurturing; if they know about the ages and stages of child development; if they interact with the children; if they show “generosity of spirit”; if your child and you “connect” with them – then your child will thrive and learn.

Children are different; what is the best ‘fit’ for one child may not be the best choice for another. Let your child’s interests and needs be your guide in choosing a preschool setting. High energy children need lots of space to run around, climb, swing or ride trikes. They tend to thrive in mixed-age groups that allow them to play with older children who match their physical energy and skill. A large family child care program, or a child care center with lots of outdoor space, might be a good fit. On the other hand, a shy, sensitive child might thrive in a share, a playgroup or a small family child care home where it’s easier to bond with one or two caregivers – and easier to find a quiet spot to read, work on projects and relax. Visiting programs and getting to know caregivers is the best way to see how a particular situation might work for your child.

### Options for Preschool Care

**Child Care Centers** – These are state-licensed child care programs in non-residential settings. What many call “preschools” are licensed as child care centers – there is no separate licensing category called “preschool.” Child care centers can be licensed to serve a variety of age groups. Although some centers accept children under 2 years old, the number of center-based options increases as children

get older. They tend to serve more children than family child care homes, separating the children by age. Many full-day center-based programs offer part-time options, while others are exclusively part-time. See BANANAS’ Handout *Choosing a Child Care Center* for more information.



**Family Child Care** – These are programs licensed by the state which operate out of the provider’s home. Some family child care providers work with mixed-age groups. Other family child care providers offer programs for specific age groups. The small size and home setting of family child care often allows for more flexibility than centers. See BANANAS’ Handouts *Choosing Family Child Care*, *A Closer Look At Large Family Child Care* and *How Many Children Can Be Cared for in Licensed Family Child Care Homes?* for more information.

**Parent Co-ops** – Parent co-ops are child care centers which stipulate parent participation as a basic principle of the child care experience. The traditional co-op requires parents to participate in the program on a regular basis. Parents get to know the other families and be directly involved in their child’s day-to-day experiences. Many co-ops offer only part-day programs, but parents can work together to create options that meet longer child care needs. Parent co-ops tend to be less expensive than other child care centers due to this participation requirement.

**Playgroups** – Playgroups involve parents directly in their child’s experience. A playgroup is formed when several parents organize a group that meets their particular needs. Group size, children’s age, schedule and hours each parent spends with the children vary. Playgroups can evolve as needs change. For example, hours may expand and parents may decide to hire a caregiver to work with them, thus forming a paid playgroup. BANANAS’ publication *Parent-Created Child Care – Playgroups* provides helpful information for forming successful playgroups.

**Shares** – In a shared care arrangement, two or more families hire an in-home caregiver to care for their children. Care takes place in the parents’ homes. This provides children

with a small group experience and allows them to bond with a single caregiver. Parents work with the caregiver to provide activities that meet children's changing needs. A wide range of experiences – art, music, cooking, etc. – can be provided in the home with simple, inexpensive materials. Call BANANAS' Referral Line, 658-0381, if you are looking for other families to share care. See our publication *Parent-Created Child Care – Shares* for more details. BANANAS also has handouts with activity suggestions that are good resources for parents and caregivers in playgroups and shares. Call us for more ideas.

### Rules and Regulations

The regulations which govern care for preschoolers depend on the type of care. Shares and playgroups are exempt from licensing in California. Both family child care homes and center-based care are licensed and regulated by Community Care Licensing (CCL), an agency with the California Department of Social Services. Parents can contact CCL at 622-2614 to review a program's complaint history and records of licensing visits. Parents can also ask the provider directly for information on complaints and licensing visits.

The license mandates adult-to-child ratios. In centers, the adult-to-child ratio is 1 to 12 for children aged 2 years to 5 years. Some programs decide to separate children aged 18 months to 30 months. If so, the required adult-to-child ratio is 1 to 6. Many centers staff their programs to provide for lower ratios than required by state licensing. Teachers in licensed centers are required to have at least 12 units of early childhood education (ECE) and there must be at least one staff member on site at all times who has completed 15 hours of training in pediatric first aid and CPR. Ask child care programs about the educational level and turnover rate of their staff. Frequent staff turnover can hurt the quality of care.

**Note:** The State of California assists low-income families with the cost of child care by contracting with some centers and paying for the care of children in their programs. These centers are required to have lower adult-to-child ratios and higher educational requirements for their staff.

Family child care homes can serve 6 or 12 non-schoolage children and 8 or 14 children if schoolage children are included in the program. Licensing also limits the number of children under 2 years old. Family child care providers are also required to complete the 15 hours of health and safety training. Many providers take classes in child development even though not required by licensing.

### Choosing Care for a Child with Special Needs

Like all children, children with disabilities need the opportunity to learn at their own pace, bond with supportive adults and form relationships with other children. When children turn three years old, they may be eligible for additional services through their local school district. Contact the Family

Resource Network at 547-7322 or your local school district for more information about getting an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for your child. See BANANAS' Handout *Choosing Child Care for a Child with Special Needs* for additional information.

### Getting Ready for Kindergarten

When children reach preschool age, parents often think they need a more academic experience to prepare for kindergarten. But, preschool children still need developmentally appropriate experiences – opportunities to explore, make choices, solve problems, follow their interests, participate in real-life activities, negotiate play with others and form strong relationships. These experiences help children feel good about themselves; children who feel good about themselves will thrive and learn. As long as children continue in a high quality, nurturing environment, they will be ready to meet the demands of kindergarten. See BANANAS' Handouts *What Toddlers Need in Child Care – Age 1 through 2 Years* and *What Preschoolers Need in Child Care – Age 3 through 5 years*.

### Toys and Equipment

Children thrive when they feel safe, comfortable and encouraged, whether or not there are lots of fancy toys and equipment used in the program. A program does not need expensive or complicated toys and materials to provide quality care. How many times have you seen children playing happily for hours with pots and pans, or playing make-believe under a table with a blanket draped over it, or making imaginary roads and mountains in a pile of sand or dirt? All of these are valuable learning experiences.

### Choosing Preschool Care

Call our Referral Line or visit our office to find out about the available options within your price range and desired location. Consider different types of care (shares, playgroups, family child care homes and centers). Then interview thoroughly and **visit, visit, visit** until you find a suitable situation. With shares and playgroups it is important both to interview the caregiver and to meet the other families. Visit programs when they are operating and, if you like what you see, make a separate appointment for an in-depth discussion about the program's philosophy. Arrange for your child to spend time with a potential caregiver or in a program before finalizing your choice. Make sure you have the right match of interests, educational goals and people. Once you choose a child care option, remember that it is essential for communication be ongoing.

Lastly, no matter how you find out about care – from BANANAS, recommendations by other parents, advertisements or off the internet – it is important that you take the time to make an informed choice. There are no shortcuts to choosing care!

(BANANAS' Handouts are available at our office, by mail or from our website, [www.bananasinc.org](http://www.bananasinc.org).)