



GUIDE
TO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM
IN THE UNITED STATES

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Early Childhood Education

Attendance at school for children under five isn't compulsory, and the provision of schools for children under five varies according to the finances and circumstances of local communities.

Child Care/Day Care options are used primarily for child care while parents are at work (or in school). Many day care programs offer extended day care and open from 6.30am to 6pm. There is no one "best" type of care. It depends on the needs of your child and your family.

Pre-school programs usually offer two or three-hour sessions per day, a few days per week. These programs are not used primarily for child care but instead offer children an opportunity on a part-time basis to interact with other children and prepare for kindergarten. The programs are licensed and are often located in their own buildings, community centers or places of worship. Enrollment is usually limited to children 3 to 5 years old.

Early Childhood Education Options

Licensed Family Child Care is one in which the caregiver has met the requirements for a license to care for children in her/his home. The caregiver may provide care for infants through school-age. The license has standards for the number of children that may be cared for and the ages served. Specific school-age activities and preschool curriculum may also be offered. Providers may care for up to 10 children, depending on their ages.

Licensed Group Family Child Care offers the home setting of family child care for up to 14 children. With more than 12 children, two adults must be present.

Some things to consider

- A home-like environment and smaller group size.
- Interaction between different age groups. Siblings can be together.
- Flexible hours
- Fewer adults to provide and oversee care. Caregivers usually work alone and don't always have readily available support.
- If the caregiver is sick or on vacation, back-up care may need to be arranged.
- Children may not be with other children their age.

Employer-Sponsored Family Child Care allows employers to offer child care under the licensing requirements of family child care. This type of program offers child care to 14 or fewer children at a location other than the provider's home.

Child Care/Day Care Centers are licensed by the state to care for larger groups of children in their own building or community centers, places of worship or other facilities. Centers are organized to meet the needs of children and working families. They offer part or full day

programs. They are usually open year round. Child Care Centers offer programs to a variety of age groups (infants through school-age children) and vary in terms of educational philosophy, curriculum, costs and services. Children are usually separated into groups according to age. Specific school-age and preschool programs may also be offered.

Some things to consider

- More adults to provide and oversee care.
- Children are usually grouped with others their age.
- Accommodates a variety of schedules; usually open 10-12 hours a day.
- Back-up care may not be necessary.
- Open Year Round
- More children and a larger setting may feel impersonal and intimidating.
- Some centers experience high staff turnover which can affect children's sense of security.
- The daily routine may be more structured; for example: eating and nap times may be at fixed times each day.

Unlicensed Family/Friends/Neighbors (legally unlicensed home care) caregivers provide care for their own children, related children, and children from one unrelated family in the home of the caregiver. The caregivers are often friends, neighbors or relatives. There are no limits on group size or the number of young children in care.

Some things to consider

- A home-like setting
- The caregiver may know you and your child
- Schedules may be more flexible
- Often more affordable than other types of care
- No outside agency monitors care
- Group size may be large
- Training in child development, early education and CPR/first aid is not required
- The caregiver may view care as temporary and may not always be available as needed

Drop-in Care Programs provide immediate, short-term care for a few hours at a time and are usually located in shopping malls, community centers, etc. Most drop-in programs are licensed, with rules that vary slightly from regular child care centers. Drop-in care may also be found in some child care homes and centers.

Sick Child Care Services vary from a provider coming into the family's home to care for a sick child, to a program within a hospital staffed by health care professionals. A few child care centers have "get well" rooms. Here children can rest and recover from a minor illness. Some child care homes will also care for sick children.

Playgroups and Exchanges are no-cost, informal arrangements organized by parents. Playgroups provide time for children to play while parents spend time together. In exchanges, parents take turns caring for each others' children. Because these are unregulated arrangements, there are no limits on group size or the number of young children in the playgroup.

Special Needs arrangements can be found in all types of child care. Contact the [Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network](#) agency for information about Early Childhood Special Education programs and services for your child.

"In-Home Care" means a caregiver comes to your home. Most in-home caregivers (commonly referred to as **Baby Sitters**) are friends, family members or "nannies." Nannies often have professional training and experience. In-home caregivers are not licensed. As their employer, you may be responsible for contributing to Social Security, taxes, workers' compensation costs, insurance and vacation time. In-home caregivers may live with you or they may commute to your home.

For children that are over 3 years of age there are various types of **Pre-schools Programs**, which offer children an opportunity on a part-time basis to interact with other children and prepare them for school. Pre-school options include non-profit co-operative schools, church-affiliated schools, local community schools, private schools and Montessori schools. A co-operative school is usually the least expensive, as parents work voluntarily as teachers' aides alongside professional teachers. Church-affiliated schools are usually attached to religious centers and may include religious education (it isn't always necessary for children to follow the same religion as the school). Private schools are the most expensive and vary considerably from small home-run set-ups to large custom-built schools.

Some things to consider

- Opportunities to socialize with other children their age
- Children engage in a variety of learning activities
- May require children to be toilet-trained and usually have strict enrollment policies regarding ages served
- Limited number of hours available per week; usually not available in summer

A number of private pre-schools use the Montessori method of teaching, developed by Dr Maria Montessori in the early 1900s. Montessori is more a philosophy of life than a teaching method and is based on the belief that each child is an individual with unique needs, interests and patterns of growth. Some Montessori schools have pre-school (for children aged two-and-a-half to six) and elementary levels (ages 6 to 11).

Fees for pre-school programs range from \$5,000 to \$15,000 per year for full-time schooling, depending on the school and area. School hours vary, but children usually attend for a few hours in the morning, e.g. from 9am to 11.30am, or 1 afternoon, e.g. 12.45pm to 3.15pm, or

both. Some schools allow you to choose a number of morning or afternoon sessions only, thereby reducing the fees.

Other Methods of Early Childhood Education

In many areas, private classes are offered for children aged from six months to three years. These combine the theory and practice of play groups and day care centers. Many areas also have what are termed 'toddler' or 'tot' programs, which usually accept children from two to four years of age. Activities generally include arts and crafts, music, educational games, perceptual motor activities and listening skills. Most communities also have informal community schools or learning centers, playgroups, morning programs at local YWCAs, and other inexpensive alternatives to private schools. Community colleges also offer a variety of courses for small children, e.g. painting, dancing and cooking, once or twice a week, e.g. on Saturday mornings.

Pre-school Education Levels

Pre-school education programs maintain a close relationship with the home and parents and are intended to introduce children to the social environment of school and concentrate on the basic skills of co-ordination. Activities are often expanded to include alphabetic and numerical orientation, so children entering kindergarten or grade one at the age of five or six who haven't attended pre-school are usually at a disadvantage.

A much lower proportion of children (around 60 per cent) attend pre-school in the US than in Japan and many European countries (e.g. Belgium and France, where it's 95 per cent). In some areas pre-schools are in short supply and it's necessary to put your child's name on a waiting list as soon as possible. Preference is often given to children that are already in the program and their siblings. Generally, it is a good idea to apply early (at least 3 or 4 months in advance) to ensure your child will be able to participate in the program. For example, many parents apply in April for the following fall (September). However, you can also apply throughout the year. Those programs that have space will accept your child right away.

Some of the more 'prestigious' (and expensive) pre-schools require pre-admission testing and interviews (of the potential students and their families), as some people believe the choice of the 'right' pre-school is essential for eventual university admittance. Ensure that a pre-school or day care center is licensed and meets local and state standards.

Many Preschool programs offer financial assistance to lower income families. Many also offer Sliding Fees proportionate to a family's gross annual household income. The range of gross income for each tier is determined by a formula using a percentage of the State Median Income (**SMI**) and the number of people in the household. Different Preschools might use different formulas. Some Preschools might also have a limited number of Scholarship rates available to those with gross annual household income below a certain percentage of SMI. Qualification for and availability of these limited rates is determined upon enrollment.

Pre-school is highly recommended for all children, particularly those whose parents' mother tongue isn't English. After even a few months in pre-school, a child is integrated into the local community and is well prepared for elementary school (particularly when English isn't spoken at home). Parents can also make friends in the community through pre-school contacts.

How do I choose the right Day Care or Pre-School Program?

You can visit the Choosing the Right Day Care and Pre-school Program section to find information and resources to help you in your search.

Early Childhood Family Education

Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) is a special program offered through Minnesota public schools for all Minnesota families with small children. ECFE has different programs within each school district which involve children and their parents in various activities. If you live in Minneapolis and want to learn about ECFE class listings, class description, registration, payment, special events and calendar, please visit the following website:

<http://ecfe.mpls.k12.mn.us/>

You can also access information about ECFE for your area by going to Google search "community education". From there you will be able to find the ECFE in your area.

Additional Information and Resources

MN Parents Know

This website is a convenient source of trusted information about children's learning, development, health and safety. The Newborn Web pages feature a free monthly email newsletter, **The Baby Express**, for parents and caregivers. The Website also features videos, podcasts, research-based topic search (across the net) and articles with a parent focus. The site is hosted by the Minnesota Department of Education

Raising a Fit Preschooler

Preschool - Academics or Play?

Kami M. Talley Reading and Resource Center

University of Minnesota Child Care Reading Sources

Child Care publications from the University of Minnesota Extension