

THE FAMILY GUIDE

to Selecting Quality Early Learning Programs

A Parent's Guide to Child Care



DIVISION OF
Early Learning

LEARN EARLY. LEARN FOR LIFE.

Welcome to the World of Early Learning!

Choosing an early learning program for your child that meets the needs of your family is an important decision that requires time and willingness to learn about the many types of child care options. This guide is provided by the Florida Department of Education (FDOE) Division of Early Learning (DEL) to help you make choices about programs available in your community.

You should plan to visit several child care providers before making a decision. On your visits, observe and talk with the teachers and parents of children in the program. The teachers should be qualified, organized and openly share program expectations, policies and procedures. Policies may address topics such as fees, meals, discipline, illness, attendance and emergencies. Ask the staff to talk about the daily activities they organize for the children and how they encourage children to meet developmental milestones, which are activities most children can do by a certain age. Walk around the inside and the outside of the child care facility to be certain that you feel confident that your child would be in a safe, happy and healthy environment.

Choose Wisely

The right early learning program helps your child explore their surroundings and develop their social and communication skills. Look for a positive and caring relationship between the teacher and children. Make sure the teacher is willing to talk about your child's learning and will share concerns that may require follow-up with your child's health-care provider. When you walk into the child care center or home, the atmosphere should be cheerful and one that you can trust. The children should be having fun and the program should include experiences and activities you think are important for your child.

Make an Informed Decision

DEL has a Quality Checklist for guidance on what to look for and questions to ask during your visit of an early learning program. It is a good idea to visit three or more programs for at least 30 minutes each. If possible, bring your child with you on scheduled and unannounced visits, ask questions that will help you make the best choice for your child and visit your selected provider for a second time. Request references and talk to other parents about their child's learning experiences and how the program communicates with families.

Before making a final decision, check the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) child care licensing website for inspection information about any licensed program you are considering.

Child Care Resource and Referral Services

You can get help in researching and learning about early learning programs. Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) is a free service provided by your local early learning coalition. Trained staff can answer your questions to help you choose the best early learning option for your family, provide a child care list customized to your preferences and offer referrals and information about other services available in your community. Child care options may be available in the evenings, overnight or on the weekends to accommodate work schedules. Help is available by phone, in person and via email. To locate your early learning coalition, contact the CCR&R State Network at 1-866-357-3239 (TTY: 711).

Inclusive Programs

Inclusive early learning programs for children with special needs are designed to provide an educational setting in which all children, regardless of ability, can participate in a broad range of activities

that support their growth and development. If you have a child with a disability, developmental delay or special health care need, contact the local early learning coalition for assistance with finding a program that meets the individual needs of your child and family. To locate your early learning coalition, contact the CCR&R State Network at 1-866-357-3239 (TTY: 711).





QUALITY CHILD CARE

Research identifies essential indicators in quality child care programs. When implemented in a child care program, these quality indicators support children’s healthy development and learning.

Quality Indicator	Observations	What to look for
Health & Safety	Caregivers ensure the health and safety of children in their care.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Detailed procedures to maintain hygiene and prevent illness, including proper diapering, toileting and hand washing.– Infants are always placed on their backs for safe sleep.
Well-Trained Staff	Staff receive training and support to meet the needs of all children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Teachers have education in early childhood, maintain current cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) certification and complete ongoing training.– Staff are offered opportunities for professional learning and share ideas with families to support learning.
Environments for Learning	Environments are nurturing with daily routines that make children feel safe.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Toys, books, furniture and outdoor equipment are clean and in good condition.– Materials are accessible to children.
Small Groups with Optimal Ratios	Secure relationships between teachers and children are promoted by having small groups and low child-to-teacher ratios.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Small group sizes and ratios are maintained so children receive more individualized time and attention.– Teachers stay attentive and engaged with their small group.
Primary Caregiving & Continuity of Care	Teachers are given roles as primary caregivers for their children in their class, helping build meaningful relationships with the child and family.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– The same teacher continues to be the child’s primary teacher as that child grows.– Each child is assigned a primary teacher.

Quality Indicator	Observations	What to look for
Active & Responsive Caregiving	Teachers are responsive to children’s needs, helping children regulate their emotions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Predictable routines and schedules are used daily. – All children are respected.
Curriculum & Individualization	Teachers use curriculum that encourages learning through relationships and play.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Infants and toddlers are taught skills through routines and play. – Teachers individualize instruction to meet the needs of all children. – Activities and goals meet the developmental needs of each child.
Language & Literacy	Children are offered opportunities to learn and develop language skills in many different ways.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Books and toys are used to promote conversations with children. – Songs, nursery rhymes and finger plays are used to encourage language. – Teachers read to children often during the day.
Family Engagement	Families are treated as partners in their child’s development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Teachers communicate with families frequently. – Families are welcome in their children’s classes. – Families give input on some program decisions.
Comprehensive Support Services	Families are strengthened through connections to community supports.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Teachers share developmental milestones with families and keep them informed of their children’s progress. – Families are connected with community resources and services as needed.



TYPES OF EARLY LEARNING PROVIDERS

Child Care Centers

Early learning centers may be licensed or license-exempt and can include stand-alone centers and facilities located in businesses, homes, apartment complexes, public schools, universities, hospitals and faith-based organizations. Prekindergarten programs (both school-based and non-school-based), Head Start programs, on-site employee early learning centers and faith-based centers are some of the types of child care centers available.

Licensed Child Care Centers

Licensed centers must submit a complete licensure application and pass an initial inspection by the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) or the local licensing agency. Once the license is issued, these programs are inspected throughout the year to ensure health and safety standards continue to be met. To meet the standards, these centers must:

- Meet physical facility requirements.
- Follow health, safety and nutrition standards.
- Maintain enrollment and attendance records.
- Allow parents/guardians access to their children at all times.
- Comply with annual inspection schedules.
- Meet staff and director training requirements.
- Maintain current CPR and First Aid certifications.
- Conduct background screenings of all child care personnel.
- Document current immunization records and physical examinations for all children in care.
- Comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act and make reasonable accommodations for children with special needs.

Religious-Exempt Centers

Some faith-based child care centers are eligible for exemption from child care licensing. These centers must be an integral part of a church or faith-based school and must:

- Be accredited by or a member of a state-recognized accrediting body.
- Comply with state and federal background screening requirements.
- Meet local governing requirements for city or county health and safety regulations.

- Maintain enrollment and attendance records.
- Maintain current CPR and First Aid certifications.
- Comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act and make reasonable accommodations for children with special needs.

Adult-to-Child Ratios for Licensed and Religious-Exempt Centers

Ratios represent the number of children that one adult may supervise for each age group. Ratios are regulated by DCF. Required staff-to-child ratios are listed below:

- Birth to 12 months (1:4)
- 12-24 months (1:6)
- 2-year-olds (1:11)
- 3-year-olds (1:15)
- 4-5-year-olds in Voluntary Prekindergarten Programs
School-year Programs (1:11)
Summer Programs (1:12)
- 4-5-year-olds (1:20) not in Voluntary Prekindergarten Programs
- 5 years of age and older (1:25)

Family Child Care Homes

Family child care takes place in a person's home for children from unrelated families. Group size may vary according to preferences of the family child care provider; however, the provider must maintain required ratios at all times.

Ages of children may often be mixed, although some providers serve only a specific age group (such as infants, toddlers or preschoolers). Different requirements apply to different programs, with some family child care homes being licensed and some registered.

Registered Family Child Care Homes

These providers are required to meet the following state requirements:

- Register annually with DCF.
- Complete and provide parents/guardians an annual health and safety home inspection checklist.
- Complete background screening for all adults and juveniles in the household.
- Complete introductory training, early literacy training and additional hours of annual professional learning.
- Maintain children's immunization records.



Licensed Family Child Care Homes

Licensed family child care home providers must meet all requirements listed above for registered family child care homes and the following additional licensing requirements regulated by DCF or the local licensing agency:

- Comply with health, safety and nutrition guidelines.
- Maintain enrollment and attendance records.
- Comply with licensing standards of local and state governments.
- Maintain current pediatric CPR and First Aid certifications.
- Pass an inspection prior to receiving a child care operating license.
- Comply with licensing inspections annually.
- Comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act and make reasonable accommodations for children with special needs.

Large Family Child Care Homes

A large family child care home is a home in which child care is regularly provided for children from at least two unrelated families, which receives a payment, fee or grant for any of the children receiving care, whether or not operated for profit, and has at least one full-time employee on the premises during the hours of operation in addition to the operator of the home.

Large family child care home providers must meet all requirements for licensed family child care homes and additional regulations by DCF. Prior to applying for this license, the operator must have operated as a licensed family child care home for two consecutive years.

Adult-to-Child Ratios for Family Child Care Homes

Family child care homes (FCCH) are regulated by DCF. An FCCH may care for one of the following groups of children, including the provider's own children under 13 years of age:

- A maximum of four children from birth to 12 months of age.
- A maximum of three children from birth to 12 months of age, and other children, for a maximum total of six children.
- A maximum of six preschool children if all are older than 12 months of age.
- A maximum of 10 children if no more than five are preschool age and, of those five, no more than two are under 12 months of age.

Large Family Child Care Home Ratios

Large FCCHs may provide care for one of the following groups of children,

including household children under 13 years of age:

- A maximum of 8 children from birth to 24 months of age.
- A maximum of 12 children, with no more than four children under 24 months of age.

Gold Seal and Accreditation

The Gold Seal Quality Care Program recognizes child care centers and family child care homes (either licensed or license-exempt) that are accredited by nationally recognized agencies and whose standards reflect quality in the level of care and supervision provided to children. To access the list of current approved agencies participating in the Gold Seal Quality Care Program, visit DEL's website.

SCHOOL-AGE CARE

Licensed or License-Exempt

A school-age program is a licensed or license-exempt program that serves only school-age children. A school-age child is one who is at least 5 years old and is attending kindergarten or a higher grade level. The setting for a school-age program may be a public or private school, private center, family child care home, faith-based center or community/recreation program. School-age programs may be open before and/or after school as well as full days during teacher planning days, spring, winter and summer breaks.

Licensed Programs

Licensed programs must pass inspections to ensure that specific requirements are met such as:

- Physical facility requirements.
- Health, safety and nutrition standards.
- Maintenance of enrollment and attendance records.
- Parental access to children in care at all times.
- Compliance with annual inspections.
- Completion of 40 hours of required training, plus a minimum of 10 hours in-service annually thereafter.
- Submission of screening and background checks of all employees/caregivers.
- Ratio of one adult for 25 children.
- Supervisor/director holds a director's credential (multi-site supervision of school-age child care programs is permitted).



License-Exempt Programs

The following programs are exempt from school-age care licensure but must meet minimum background screening requirements as outlined in Florida law. These programs can be exempt from licensure if the program is a:

- Public/non-public school site.
- Instructional/tutorial program.
- Open Access program.
- National membership afterschool program.
- Program exclusively for children in grades 6 and above.

UNREGULATED CARE

Unregulated child care does not require licensure or compliance inspections by the state.

Informal Care

Informal care takes place in a person's home where one adult cares for children from only one family. The person is often a relative, neighbor or friend. This type of care has no state guidelines or inspections. Informal providers may qualify to participate in the School Readiness program after completing a six-hour health and safety course and by meeting local early learning coalition requirements.

Au Pair/Nanny Care

Au pairs provide families with individualized, live-in child care. Most au pairs are members of one of 14 federally designated U.S. Au Pair Sponsor Agencies, which are regulated by the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Exchange Visitor Program. Nannies may also be hired by families locally to care for the children of one family and may live in or out of the family's home.

Summer Camps and Recreational Programs

Summer camps and summer day camps are recreational, educational and enrichment programs operated exclusively during summer vacation. These programs care for school-age children. Adult/child ratios of summer camps vary. This type of care requires no state inspections. All summer camp and summer day camp personnel must pass a background screening.

Membership Programs

Not-for-profit programs are associated with or certified by national

organizations. Personnel are not subject to DCF screenings. An example of these organizations is the Boys & Girls Club, which frequently offers an after-school program.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

School Readiness Program

The School Readiness (SR) program provides subsidies for child care services and early childhood education for children of low-income families; children at risk of abuse and neglect; and children with disabilities. The SR program supports children in the development of skills for success in school, recognizing parents and caregivers as their child's first teacher. The program prepares children to be ready for school and provides parents and caregivers with information on child development and other topics of interest. Services vary based on individual needs and range from early education and care to after-school and school-age care.

Program Highlights

- Helps income-eligible families become financially independent and pay for quality child care.
- Promotes parental choice and allows working parents to make informed decisions about child care and early learning.
- Provides education to parents on child development and family well-being.
- Enhances the quality and increases the availability of child care.
- Requires all providers to meet quality standards established by DEL and state and federal health and safety requirements.

How to Apply

Parents can apply for the SR program by submitting an application online using DEL's Family Portal available on DEL's website. Parents can use a computer, cell phone or other smart device, or can contact the local early learning coalition to apply in person. Applications are processed by the local early learning coalition.

Next Steps

Once a parent applies for the SR program, the parent can follow up on the status of their application by logging into the Family Portal or contacting their local early learning coalition.

If a child is placed on the waiting list, parents can receive information



about local community resources that may assist their family in the meantime. **Parents with a child on the waiting list will need to update their information in the Family Portal every six months to remain on the waiting list.**

If there is no waiting list and the family qualifies for services, the family will receive a notice through the Family Portal about documents required for the enrollment process. Families may contact their local early learning coalition for assistance.

Some families may receive services right away if they are in family crisis and have a referral from DCF for services.

Developmental Screenings

With parental consent, children aged 6 weeks to 5 years who participate in the SR program will receive a developmental screening to determine if supports are needed to help the child's learning experience. If any concerns are found, the family is informed and made aware of referrals to specific health and/or education specialists.

Program Assessment

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®) is an evidence-based observational tool used to measure the quality of teacher-child interactions in the classroom in different domains by age group.

CLASS® is recognized internationally for measuring the effectiveness of teacher-child interactions that drive learning outcomes. The CLASS® observation tool will be used by a trained, certified observer.



VOLUNTARY PREKINDERGARTEN EDUCATION PROGRAM

The Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) program is a state program designed to prepare every child in Florida for kindergarten and build the foundation for their educational success. VPK programs do this through age-appropriate curricula, substantial instruction periods, managed class sizes and high-quality instructors. Eligible children may participate in one of three VPK program options. Parents may select one program for their child:

- VPK School-Year Program - 540 instructional hours
- VPK Summer Program - 300 instructional hours
- VPK Specialized Instructional Services (SIS) - Hours vary based on services provided

VPK Highlights

- High-quality educational program with a focus on early literacy skills.
- Free for all children who live in Florida and are 4 years old on or before September 1 of the program year.
- Parents whose children are born from February 2 through September 1 may choose to enroll their child in VPK either the year they are 4 or the next year when the child is 5 and before they enroll in kindergarten.
- Parent choice is a priority. Both private and public providers are available.
- Information and materials about VPK standards can be found at DEL's website.

VPK Curriculum

- Developmentally appropriate
- Designed to prepare children for early literacy and math
- Supports age-appropriate development
- Prepares students for kindergarten

VPK Specialized Instructional Services (SIS)

A child who is eligible for VPK and has a disability and a current individual educational plan (IEP) issued by the local school district is also eligible for specialized instructional services instead of attending a traditional VPK



program. FDOE approves VPK-SIS providers whose services meet statutory standards, maintains a list of approved providers and notifies early learning coalitions of the approved providers. Parents with questions about accessing VPK-SIS for their child should contact their local early learning coalition. To locate your early learning coalition, contact the CCR&R State Network at 1-866-357-3239 (TTY: 711).

VPK Providers and Instructors

All VPK providers and instructors must meet high standards required by Florida law.

- Parents can choose the approved provider that meets their family's needs.
- Options for parents include public and private schools, private centers, charter schools, faith-based and licensed family child care homes.
- VPK instructors, at a minimum, must have a Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential for the school-year program or a bachelor's degree for the summer program.
- Class ratio is one teacher to 11 children, and class size cannot exceed 20 children with two instructors for a school-year program. The summer program has one instructor with a maximum of 12 students.

How to Apply

VPK applications must be submitted online through DEL's Family Portal website. Parents can use a computer, cell phone or other smart device, or can contact their early learning coalition to apply in person.

To complete the VPK application, parents must upload proof of Florida residency and documents that verify their child's age. Once submitted, the application will be reviewed by the local early learning coalition. Parents will receive a certificate of eligibility through the Family Portal when their application is approved. Parents may then take the certificate of eligibility to the VPK program of their choice.

Early Learning Coalitions

Your local early learning coalition can provide assistance with the application and a list of VPK programs in your area. To locate your early learning coalition, contact the CCR&R State Network at 1-866-357-3239 (TTY: 711).

HEAD START

Head Start (HS) is a federally funded program that promotes school readiness for children from low-income families. HS programs provide a learning environment that supports children's growth while providing comprehensive services to children and their families, which include health, dental, nutrition, social and other services based on the needs of the family. Families that receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits or other public assistance, families experiencing homelessness and children in the foster care system are categorically eligible for HS programs.

Head Start emphasizes the role of parents as their child's first and most important teacher. Programs build relationships with families that support:

- Family well-being and positive parent-child relationships.
- Families as learners and lifelong educators.
- Family engagement in transitions.
- Family connections to peers and community.
- Families as advocates and leaders.

Head Start serves preschool age children from age 3 to school-age and is offered throughout Florida. Early Head Start (EHS) serves infants, toddlers and pregnant women and provides services throughout Florida.

Florida is also host to two Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs: East Coast Migrant Head Start and Redlands Christian Migrant Association. These grantees serve the unique needs of Florida's migrant families who have children ages 6 weeks to school-age.

Head Start programs offer a variety of service models. Programs may be based in centers or schools that children attend for part-day or full-day services; family child care homes; and/or children's own homes, where a staff person visits once a week to provide services to the child and family. Children and families who receive home-based services gather periodically with other enrolled families for a group learning experience facilitated by HS staff.

Head Start programs provide services to children with disabilities or special health care needs and collaborate with local school districts, early learning coalitions, health professionals and other partners to assist the family in coordinating services. HS classrooms offer low teacher-to-child



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ratios, a research-based curriculum, teachers with bachelor's degrees or CDAs and, in most communities, year-round services. Most HS programs participate in the VPK program.

For more information, contact your early learning coalition. To locate your early learning coalition, contact the CCR&R State Network at 1-866-357-3239 (TTY: 711).

Early Intervention

If you are concerned about the development of your infant or toddler or suspect that your child has a disability or needs early intervention services, contact your local early learning coalition to speak with a specialist. To locate your early learning coalition, contact the CCR&R State Network at 1-866-357-3239 (TTY: 711).

FAMILY RESOURCES

Division of Early Learning (DEL)

DEL provides state-level support and direction for parents, teachers and early learning professionals. DEL administers three statewide programs including the School Readiness program, the Voluntary Prekindergarten program for 4- and 5-year-olds and the Child Care Resource and Referral program for all Florida families. 1-866-357-3239 (TTY:711)

2-1-1

A 24-hour hotline where parents connect with national, state and local information and referral services. 2-1-1 offers information to assist families with food, housing, employment, health care and counseling services. Dial 2-1-1.

MyACCESS

Temporary cash assistance and food stamp information is available through DCF's MyACCESS Hotline, 1-850-300-4323.

Florida Department of Children and Families Abuse Hotline

Accepts reports 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, of known or suspected abuse and neglect to protect Florida's most vulnerable citizens. 1-800-962-2873

Florida Department of Children and Families

Responsible for the administration of child care program licensing and training in Florida and administers programs addressing adult and child

protective services, homelessness, food stamps, refugee services and adoption and foster care.

Florida Department of Health/Children’s Medical Services/

Early Steps

Provides information and referrals on disabilities and special health care needs for families, service coordinators and other professionals who work with children with special needs. 1-800-218-0001

Child Support Enforcement

Child support services that include locating missing parents, establishing legal paternity and establishing, enforcing and modifying support orders. 1-800-488-KIDS (5437) or 1-800-955-8771 (TTY)

Florida KidCare

Health insurance program for uninsured children younger than age 19. The Florida Kidcare program assesses eligibility based on age and family income. 1-888-540-5437, (TTY: 1-800-955-8771)

Healthy Start

Ensures that all Florida families have access to a continuum of affordable and quality health and related services. 855-889-1090

Head Start

The Florida Head Start State Collaboration Office (HSSCO) is a federally funded office that supports collaboration between Head Start and educational, medical and social services providers in Florida. For more information on Head Start programs in your area, contact your local early learning coalition. For assistance locating your early learning coalition, contact the CCR&R State Network at 1-866-357-3239 (TTY: 711).

The Ounce of Prevention Fund

Works to improve outcomes for children, preserve and strengthen families and promote healthy behavior and functioning in society. 1-850-921-4494

Disability Rights Florida

Disability Rights Florida is a nonprofit organization that provides legal advocacy and rights protection for adults and children with a wide range of disabilities. 1-800-342-0823



Contact Us

For more information, please contact your local early learning coalition. The CCR&R State Network can help connect you with your coalition.



Child Care Resource and Referral

Florida Department of Education
Division of Early Learning
325 West Gaines Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Toll Free: 1-866-357-3239

Email: CCRRHelp@del.fldoe.org

Website: DEL (floridaearlylearning.com)

[Locate Your Early Learning Coalition](#)