Early Care and Education: Choosing an Early Childhood Program

There are a variety of public and private early care and education programs for children ages 0-5. These include home based programs, child care centers, family child care homes, pre-school programs, nursery schools, head start programs, kinship care and co-ops. High quality early education services have been linked to positive outcomes for young children. It is the goal of early care and education programs to provide all children with the opportunities and foundation for learning they need to be successful in school and in life. This means that children with and without disabilities can and should participate in developmentally appropriate programs together. Inclusive education programs ensure all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential and allow children to develop a respect for peoples’ differences.

Relevance:

- Children who receive high quality early care and education are more likely to enter school ready to learn and have successful school experiences.
- Children with disabilities have a right to an inclusive education.
- Children with and without disabilities benefit from an inclusive education environment.
- The early years are the best time for children to develop an acceptance and appreciation for diversity.

Actions to Take:

- Contact your local Child Care Information Services (CCIS) office to identify licensed and accredited early care programs.
- Visit a number of different programs in your area to learn about the types of care that are available.
- Interview prospective caregivers.
- If you have a child with a disability or developmental delay, contact the CONNECT Helpline to learn about Early Intervention services.
- Look for programs that have received state and/or national accreditation. This is the best indicator of a high quality program.
- Learn about the Keystone STARS program and rating system.
- Ask questions. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning have lists of questions to ask child care providers as you look for the right program for your child.
- Look for qualified staff and a well managed program.
- Observe the ways in which staff interacts with children and their parents.
- Observe the early learning environment for a balance of both active and quiet learning activities.
- Decide which program will best support and meet the needs of your family.

Good Practices:

- Early childhood programs should be open and responsive to parents visiting their programs.
- Parents should look for child care settings that meet the needs of the individual child, the family and their lifestyle.
- Once a program is selected, all family members should feel welcome in the program.
Basic Facts:

Choosing an early care and education program can be one of the most difficult decisions a parent has to make. Parents need to find a safe environment that promotes positive developmental outcomes for their child and one that is also affordable and convenient enough to meet the family’s needs. Finding the right program can take time. It is important to start asking questions and gathering information as early as possible. There are a number of programs in Pennsylvania that can assist families in this decision making process.

The Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) is comprised of four Bureaus, working together focusing on providing a high quality early education system. The Bureau of Certification Services inspects and certifies child care centers, family child care homes and group child care homes across the state based on Pennsylvania’s child care regulations. The Bureau of Early Intervention Services works with Mental Health/Mental Retardation programs, intermediate units and school districts to ensure that all eligible children ages 0-5 with developmental delays receive the supports and services they need to maximize their development and have the same educational opportunities as their typical peers. The Bureau of Subsidized Child Care Services supports a statewide network of Child Care Information Services agencies that provide information and counseling to parents on local child care opportunities. In addition they enroll eligible families in the Child Care Works subsidy to assist them in paying for child care. The Bureau of Early Learning Services works to improve the quality of early care and education by developing and implementing early learning standards and providing financial support and technical assistance to programs and professionals. These include programs and services such as Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, Keystone STARS, Head Start, Parent-Child Home programs and the TEACH scholarship program.

The Keystone STARS Child Care Quality Initiative is a program of the Bureau of Early Learning Services that promotes continuous quality improvement in early care and education. Programs are rated on a 1 to 4 STARS scale based on an assessment in four areas: staff qualifications and professional development, the early learning program, partnerships with family and community, and leadership and management. Programs that participate in Keystone STARS are provided with performance standards, training/professional development, assistance, resources and support. Knowing if an early education program participates in the Keystone STARS and their current STARS rating provides parents with a way to determine program quality.

Resources:

The Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) has a number of resources to help families find and pay for quality early care programs.

www.dpw.state.pa.us/ServicesPrograms/ChildCareEarlyEd/

Keystone STARS is an initiative of the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) to improve, support, and recognize the continuous quality improvement efforts of early learning programs in Pennsylvania.

www.pakeys.org/stars/

Early Childhood Digest: Family Involvement in Early Childhood Programs: How to Choose the Right Program for Your Child, National Institute on Early Childhood Development & Education

www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/ECI/digests/98may.html