

Preparing for child care

There are a lot of families looking for a quality early education and care service for their child such as child care, preschool or home care. It's a good idea to start thinking about options to suit you and your child before you need to use them. Things to start thinking about include: when you want your child to start, what options are available for you, how you can access the services, and what you can expect when your child starts.

When should my child start?

There is no ideal time to start but the earlier you start preparing, the better. Recent research tells us that the quality of a child's early education and care is more important than the age they start or the amount of time they spend there.

Most services have a waiting list, and it's best to put your child's name down for more than one place to better your chances of finding a service you are happy with.

It's also important that you take your name off any waiting lists you're on once you find a place to ensure waiting lists are kept up to date for other families.



What options are available?

There is a variety of options available, including family day care, long day care and outside school hours care.

Many families find that their child's education and care needs change over time, and they may use two or more different service types at the same time, or one after another. For example, a family may choose to place their baby in a family day care service, but move them to a long day care service in the year before they start school so they can engage with a larger group of children.

- Family Day Care provides care for small groups of children from birth to 12 years of age in the family home of a registered educator.
- Long Day Care provides care for children from birth to 5 years of age in a centre based environment.
- Outside School Hours Care provides care for school age children before and/or after school and/or during school holidays (vacation care).

Other options include occasional child care, preschool services or care provided by family or friends, babysitters and nannies.

It is important to note that many services charge a non-refundable waiting list administration fee. If you have concerns about these fees, you should contact the Office of Fair Trading in your state or territory.





How can I find an appropriate service?

To find quality approved early education and care in Australia visit www.startingblocks.gov.au/findchildcare

Your friends and family members can also be a good source of information. It can be useful to find out what others think about the services they use, so don't be afraid to ask the people around you. Other ways you can find out about services are through:

- your local business or telephone directory
- local council listings
- classified advertisements
- public noticeboards in schools and shopping centres
- work/study colleagues
- your employer or educational institution
- the Child Care Access Hotline: 1800 670 305

How will I know if the early education and care service is good quality?

A quality service is one that:

- Works with you to ensure that your child is safe, happy and protected; and that makes you feel confident with the decision you made to use child care.
- Provides a learning environment where careful guidance and role modelling by staff can help children become competent, independent and develop valuable life skills.
- Responds to children's emotions and interests, as well as comforting children and helping them to make friends and engage in activities and experiences.
- Implements effective policies and procedures to reduce the risk of cross infection, promote immunisation and exclude unwell children from child care when necessary.

What happens when my child starts?

+ Enrolment

Once a place has been offered, the service should guide you through an enrolment process. Effective enrolment processes are very important as this time is used for families and staff to share important information about your child, family and the service.

An enrolment form may request information including:

- Family contact details and information.
- Authorised contact details and access information for your child. This helps services to know who is authorised to collect them from the service, as well as authorised contacts that may be used in an emergency, when you cannot be contacted.
- Specific information about your child, including their eating and sleeping routines, interests and likes/dislikes, illnesses, allergies, medical conditions, and health care professional contact details.
- Your child's immunisation history. This may be provided by taking a photocopy of your child's child health record, or by obtaining an immunisation history statement from the Australian Childhood Immunisation Register on the Department of Human Services website (www.humanservices.gov.au).
- Your child's birth certificate.



+ Orientation

This can sometimes be an emotional experience for both you and your child. An orientation visit usually takes place before your child starts, and is an important step as it provides time for you, your child and staff to get to know each other.

An orientation visit also provides valuable time for you to discuss the enrolment form, your child's needs, interests, strengths, culture and routines with the staff who will work with your child. It is also a good opportunity to ask questions, and to become more familiar with the service.

It enables children to explore their new environment, establish the beginnings of a relationship with staff, and meet other children at the service with the security of having you close by. Seeing how your child responds to the environment can also provide you with much needed reassurance.

Services often provide a handbook to families at orientation time which outlines information about the service, the staff, opening hours, and policies on issues such as holidays, health and safety, managing illness, fees and other issues which may affect the arrangements in place with the service.



What will help my child to settle in?

Children can often experience some difficulty settling into a new environment, particularly if they find it hard to separate from family or familiar caregivers. Each child's response and the length of time they take to settle depends on the individual child and their past experiences. However, there are strategies that families and services can use to support children to settle successfully.

Families may find the following suggestions helpful when they are supporting their child as they settle into the service:

- If possible, start before your work or study commitments commence and allow your child to experience shorter days initially, then gradually increase their time spent at the service.
- Seek out a preferred staff member or peer that your child can be left with when you drop them off for the day.
- Spend some time settling your child into a favourite activity before you leave.
- Inform the service about what comforts your child and discuss how you manage activities or times of the day they find unsettling. For example, does your child have a comfort item, such as a toy or blanket that helps them to settle when they become upset?
- Show your child that you feel secure about leaving them at the service and that you trust the staff. Say 'goodbye' confidently, and reassure them that you will be back later. While it may be tempting to leave while they are engaged happily in play, it can be very distressing for your child to realise you have left without saying goodbye.
- You should feel that you can contact the service at any time to check how your child is settling, and the staff should provide you with sensitive, honest feedback.