



by Karen Stephens

Quality Child Care is Critical to Infants' Secure Attachments

Research tells us that a child's first year is the most critical period for establishing secure attachment to adults. It is also the most important year for laying a good foundation for life-long brain development.

In well-functioning homes, the parents are infants' primary source of emotional nurturing. But an infant's emotional attachment shouldn't stop with mom and dad.

It is in children's best interests to develop a deep sense of trust in anyone who interacts with them daily, whether it is extended family members or a child care provider. Becoming close to others bolsters children's confidence and sense of belonging.

Some parents do worry that child care will undermine their child's attachment to them. But when parents utilize *quality* child care, and parents are responsive at home, research does not support this concern.

Below are specific features that indicate quality in infant child care services. They'll help your child create secure relationships at child care as well as at home.

Staff Qualifications and Experience

Staff should have training in infants' typical as well as atypical development. They should understand temperament styles as well as attachment needs. Hands-on experience with infants prior to professional employment improves staff competence.

Staff-Child Interactions

Good child care providers are friendly and responsive. They greet each child and parent by name and with enthusiasm. They establish rituals for the end of day — whether it's a cozy story-time or quick hug good-bye.

Responsive infant care providers are gentle and *appropriately* affectionate. They smile, hug, pat backs, rub tummies, rock, cuddle, and maintain eye contact with babies. They are consistently attuned to infants' communication cues. They giggle and play when babies invite it. They physically and vocally reassure and comfort when needed.

Each baby's individual rhythm, pace, and interaction style is catered to during eating, playing, and sleeping. Care providers talk to infants about things they see and experience. They help children into comfortable positions for relaxing, playing, feeding, etc. They offer engaging, moderately challenging activities geared to children's specific development.

Children are fed when hungry, not according to a rigid schedule. Care providers hold children when giving a bottle. One person feeds no more than two babies at a time sitting in high chairs.

Babies are never left alone to cry without a care provider response. They are never spoken to harshly or physically hurt.

Diapering includes pleasant interaction, such as singing or naming baby's fingers, toes, etc. A calm and soothing atmosphere, free of startling loud and abrasive noise is the norm.

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Staff include soft elements in the child care space so it resembles a relaxing home more than a cold, sterile institution. Rockers, gliders, carpeted areas, couches, and love seats encourage friendly child-staff interactions.

Children are not left frequently, or for long periods, in play pens, bouncers, swings, walkers, or car seats on the floor.

There is adequate space for comfortable floor play. A variety of developmentally appropriate toys are offered, such as soft blocks and balls, rattles, stacking cubes, musical toys, touchy-feely boards, and texture quilts. Staff sit on the floor with children to encourage play. During play staff give supportive responses and guidance so infants experience success and pride.

Group and staff size

Good child care programs assign a primary care provider to each child to build attachment and trust. They strive to keep staff turnover low so babies' attachments aren't frequently broken, thus preventing alienation and a sense of abandonment.

Good infant care ensures adequate staff so each child can receive individual attention often. Rule of thumb is that smaller group size and smaller child to care provider ratio is better. Small also costs more, but it's a financial sacrifice that pays off for children's long-term development.

According to researchers, babies in center-based care are best served in a group size of no more than six to eight children. One care provider for every two to three babies is better than four or more babies to one person.

Child care-parent partnerships

Quality child care programs reach out to parents and work to support each parent's goals and dreams for their child. Prior to child enrollment, parents are asked to meet with their child's primary care provider. Staff ask parents to describe their infant's individual temperament and preferences.

To ease transition to child care, parents are encouraged to share tips with the providers that will make their infant feel comfortable and secure. For instance, parents may illustrate the ways a child likes to be held or fed. Or they may identify the nursery songs an infant is soothed by most easily.

Each morning when parent and child arrive, staff ask mom or dad about their child's disposition. Information on children's eating, sleeping, diapering, and activity patterns are shared daily.

Staff are respectful of each family's culture, family beliefs, and child-rearing viewpoints. When incompatible practices arise, staff work with parents for mutual problem solving.

Children's developmental milestones are joyfully shared with parents, such as children's success in crawling or using new words.

Staff welcome parents into the program at *any* time. They are respectful of parent comments, questions, and suggestions. Parents and staff cooperatively plan for children's care, such as determining when an infant should begin having solid foods at child care.

I know all those features are a lot to look for in one program. But remember, your infant deserves nothing less.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.