

How to Find, Choose, and Pay For High-Quality Child Care: A Guide for Families

Choosing child care for the young children in your life can be less stressful if you know what to look for when determining whether or not a program is “high-quality”.

Here’s what to look for:

Caregivers who:

- communicate through talk and touch, songs, and stories
- engage at the child’s level, sitting, squatting, or laying on the floor
- use a warm and supportive tone of voice while addressing behavior or redirecting attention

Classrooms and settings that include:

- organized, clean, and accessible materials for children to select without adult assistance
- a variety of materials available for all types of play:
 - physical—developing gross and fine motor skills
 - object—sensory tables with rice, sand, or water, loose parts play
 - dramatic—costumes, housekeeping, or kitchen objects
 - constructive—art materials, blocks
 - games with rules—fingerplays to music or books, board games

Curriculum:

- play-based and allows for exploration, creativity, and inquiry



Family Engagement that includes:

- an open-door policy for family members to drop-in
- regular updates about a child’s day
- special events, family nights, and programming in the evenings or on weekends

Designations like:

- Pennsylvania Keystone STARS*
 - licensed child care programs in Pennsylvania have a state rating from STAR 1 through 4; STAR 3 and STAR 4 are considered “high quality”
- National Accreditations*
 - additional markers of “high quality”
 - National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
 - National Association of Family Child Care (NAFCC)
- Pre-K Counts and Head Start (in schools or community-based settings)

* Note that only licensed child care programs may participate in these ratings systems.

Now that you know how to determine if a program is high-quality, it is time to **find programs that meet your location, time, and transportation needs**. Below are several resources to support your search.

Allegheny Child Care

www.alleghenychildcare.org

Search for available child care spots in early learning programs in real time.

Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC) Region 5

www.elrc5.alleghenycounty.us

412.350.3577

elrc5@alleghenycounty.us

United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania

Call 2-1-1

Text your zip code to 898-211

pa211sw.org

After searching for an affordable high-quality program, too many families find themselves making compromises in the process. Affordable programs fill up quickly and many have long waiting lists. Simply put, there are just not enough high-quality slots to meet the needs of all families.

A leading advocate in western Pennsylvania, Trying Together works every day with our local, regional, and state partners to advocate for child care access, affordability, and quality.

We invite you to join our effort to expand access to high-quality, affordable child care:

Read the Trying Together Public Policy Agenda and sign up for advocacy action alerts

tryingtogether.org/advocacy/public-policy-agenda



You found a high-quality child care program and are ready to enroll your child, but **how do you pay for it? Do you qualify for publicly-funded programs?**

Learn more about qualifying for subsidy and supplemental payment programs available for families below.

Pre-K Counts

300% of federal poverty guidelines

School-day, school-year program for children ages three and four; may give preference to four year olds

Child Care Works

200% of federal poverty guidelines

Children ages birth to 12 may receive a voucher to attend a child care program based on family or household's school or work schedule; a small co-pay is required from the family

Head Start

100% of federal poverty guidelines

School-day, school-year program for children ages three and four; may give preference to four year olds

Early Head Start

100% of federal poverty guidelines

Early Head Start serves children birth to age two in home-based or center-based programs; most programs are not full-time care

2026 Federal Poverty Guidelines

PERSONS IN HOUSEHOLD*	100%	200%	300%
1	\$15,960	\$31,920	\$47,880
2	\$21,640	\$43,280	\$64,920
3	\$27,320	\$54,640	\$81,960
4	\$33,000	\$66,000	\$99,000
5	\$38,680	\$77,360	\$116,040
6	\$44,360	\$88,720	\$133,080
7	\$50,040	\$100,080	\$150,120
8	\$55,720	\$111,440	\$167,160

For families/households with more than 8 persons:

- **100% FPL: add \$5,680 for each additional person**
- **200% FPL: add \$11,360 for each additional person**
- **300% FPL: add \$17,040 for each additional person**

Even if you do not qualify at the levels listed above, many programs offer their own independent scholarships or tuition assistance programs. Ask each program you are considering about financial assistance.

Source: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/b1bfa16b20ae9b89d525bc35de7c1643/detailed-guidelines-2026.pdf>