



National Children's
Nurseries Association

7 steps to choosing a nursery

A PARENT'S GUIDE





the NCNA: towards quality daycare

Since its foundation in 1988, the NCNA has worked to support and improve the quality of daycare in Ireland, and to increase awareness nationally of the importance of quality in the provision of childcare.

the aims of the NCNA

- 1 To emphasise the importance of early childhood experiences through education, information and support of all involved in this sector.
- 2 To work consistently to improve the quality of daycare in Ireland.
- 3 To highlight the need for, and value of, nurseries in providing support for families.
- 4 To increase the standards of provision of daycare by educating owners, staff, parents and legislators.

helping you make the right choice

There are many reasons why parents choose daycare in a nursery for their children. For some it facilitates a return to work, training or education while others may simply want to see their child enjoy the socialisation and developmental benefits associated with quality childcare. There are many issues you need to consider when choosing the right nursery for your child, but the most important consideration is that you are happy and comfortable that you have made the right decision.

Your right choice is the one that meets your child's emotional and developmental needs and also meets your lifestyle needs. Step-by-Step, this guide will help you choose the best available childcare for your child and you.



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**the importance
of finding
the right
nursery**



the right nursery for your child will...

- ✓ Help your child be happy and contented.
- ✓ Assist your child's positive personal and physical development.
- ✓ Allow your child to interact with others at the same stage of development, teaching your child valuable socialisation skills such as learning to be aware of others' needs, to share and to make friends.
- ✓ Provide stability for your child.

and for you as a parent will...

- ✓ Fit in with your work or lifestyle, and will not impose any unrealistic time pressures on your busy life, providing you with peace of mind, so you can concentrate on your return to work.
- ✓ Reinforce the parental relationship you have with your child and will actively support you in your role as a parent.
- ✓ Provide an opportunity to meet with other local parents who have children of the same age.

before you start looking

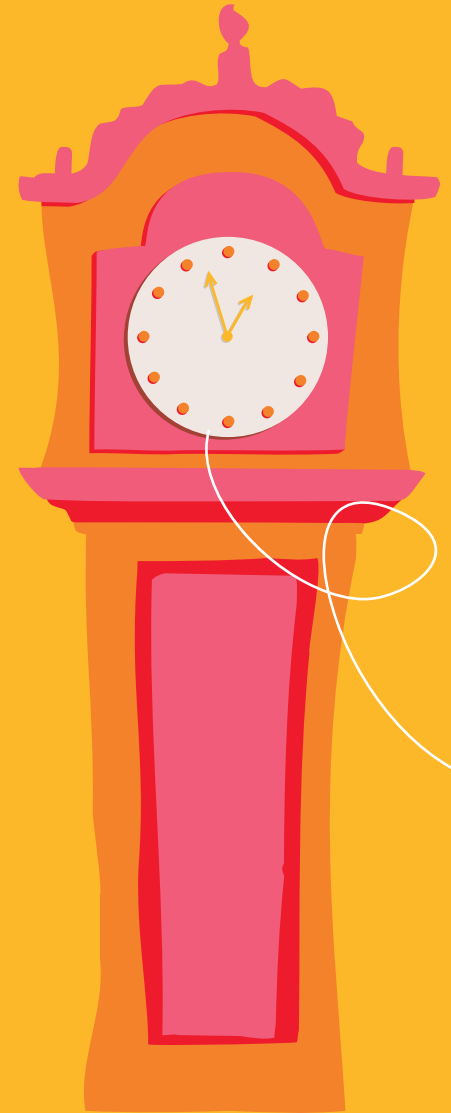
- ✓ Leave yourself plenty of time to find the right nursery.
- ✓ Be organised. Make sure you keep track of the nurseries you visit, any information or booklets you are given and your thoughts and impressions of each one.
- ✓ Make sure you examine all the childcare alternatives that are available to you.
- ✓ Be honest with yourself. Be aware of what will suit your lifestyle, what is practical and what you want for your child.
- ✓ Be confident that you will make the right choice and be prepared to follow your own instinct.



Choice Tip:
Choose an N.C.N.A. member nursery

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what are
your
childcare
options?



There are a variety of options available when it comes to arranging full-time daycare for your children. What suits you best depends on practical issues such as the hours that you work or study, where you live and the availability of places, as well as any personal preferences you may have for choosing a home or centre-based environment for your child. When choosing childcare it is important to take an honest look at what is best for your child's personality and your parenting style.

a nursery

A nursery, often called a crèche, provides care and education for pre-school children from infants to 5 years old. Some also offer care for older children. Typical opening hours are from 7.30am to 6.00pm all year round. Depending on your needs you can choose full-time or part-time care. You will find that some nurseries have adopted a specific philosophy regarding early childhood education, such as Montessori or High Scope, while others combine several approaches to pre-school development.

a nursery is right for you if :

- ✓ You want your child to enter a stimulating environment with qualified & professional care, that offers stability and continuity to school-going age and beyond.
- ✓ You feel that your child will enjoy taking part in a programme of activities that are appropriate to its own development.
- ✓ Because of work or other circumstances you need reliability every day.
- ✓ You want your childcare provider to complement rather than replace your role as a parent.



why do some nurseries offer different programmes?

When selecting a nursery, you may come across different programmes such as Playgroup or Montessori. The use of programmes such as Montessori are typically for children aged two and a half years and older. Many of these programmes share a similar approach, empowering children to enable their social, emotional and intellectual development. Some of the more common programmes that you may come across when choosing a nursery are:

montessori

A Montessori programme will emphasise your child's initiative and independence, allowing him or her to progress through an orderly series of structured learning activities at his or her own pace. Special materials are employed that emphasise the use of all the senses in learning.

playgroup

The playgroup programme offers play-based learning and involves the use of sand, water, paint and playdough. They help children to develop the skills they need to cope with more formal learning later in school.

steiner waldorf early childhood education

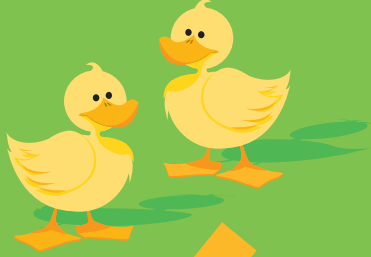
This programme involves developing the child's intellectual powers in harmony with the feeling and active aspects of his nature. Waldorf schools emphasise creative activity in their programmes and the use of natural materials in their classrooms. Teachers receive specialised training and often remain with the same group of children for several years.

high scope

The High Scope Foundation is a non-profit research and training organisation founded in 1970. Its detailed programme was originally used for teaching preschool-age children from low-income families, but today is found in other settings as well. It stresses learning through "active involvement with people, materials, events, and ideas".

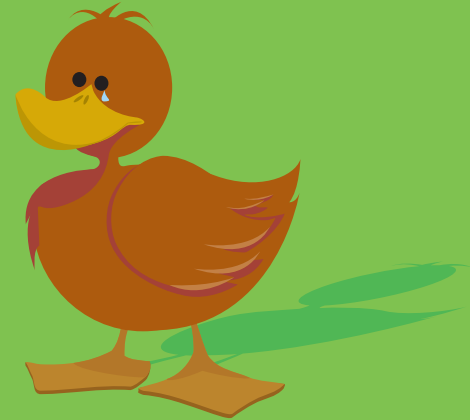


*Choice Tip:
Choose what is best for your child's
personality and your parenting style.*



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what I
should look
for in a
nursery?



a good nursery...

- ✓ Is an enjoyable place where your child will have fun while learning and discovering their own potential under the guidance of professional and experienced carers.
- ✓ Works with you as a parent, in every aspect of your child's happiness and development – involving you in your child's nursery life and building mutual trust through communication.
- ✓ Offers a safe and secure environment that is stimulating and challenging for children at every stage of their development.
- ✓ Fulfills its statutory obligations in terms of notification to the local health board, health and safety requirements, staff/child ratios and available space.
- ✓ Offers a defined development programme with the flexibility to respond to each individual child's needs at its own pace.
- ✓ Recognises diversity of culture.
- ✓ Can provide written policies and procedures for the daily running of the nursery.

as a parent you need...

- ✓ Support with your return to work, training or education.
- ✓ To be happy that your child is happy and is receiving the best of care.
- ✓ A nursery that works with you in partnership in every aspect of parenting.
- ✓ Open two-way communication.
- ✓ Respect for your parenting preferences and the flexibility to respond to your own individual requirements.
- ✓ Confidence that your child is happy.



the practical considerations :

location

It is important that your chosen nursery is conveniently located. A nursery in a location that puts you under unnecessary time pressure in the morning or the evening is not ideal. If you cannot locate a nursery near you consider a nursery en-route to work or near your work place. Remember to keep in mind how long it would take to drive to and from home and work, both at off peak and rush hour times. Also, how long it takes to reach the nursery in case of an emergency. Where possible share the responsibility of the “nursery run” with a partner or other family member.

opening hours

Most nurseries are open between 7.30am and 6.00pm and will require you to collect and drop off your child during these hours. Check to make sure that there is convenient parking and that the nursery is accessible at busy times.

costs of childcare

The cost of childcare varies from one nursery to the next. When agreeing a price make sure you fully understand what is covered by the cost and what your commitments are in terms of provision of food and items such as nappies etc.

full or part-time

Most nurseries offer a combination of full and part-time places on a permanent basis.

which is best? near home or work?

If you have the choice between a nursery close to your home or near work, there is a number of factors to consider such as the amount of time your child will spend in the car, what would happen if you were sick, and if it is convenient for a partner or family member to share the nursery run. Whichever you choose, it is important that you are on time each day to pick up your child. It is unfair on your child and the staff to keep them waiting.



Choice Tip:

Childcare near where you work facilitates you if you wish to continue breast feeding or wish to see your child during your work break time. Childcare near home helps your child get to know the children in your local community.

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making the choice

- ✓ Draw up a list of nurseries convenient to you
- ✓ Telephone with specific questions to short list
- ✓ Make appointments to visit the nurseries for you to ask questions and see for yourself the nurseries' policies and procedures.
- ✓ Confirm your decision & sign contract



step 1: where to look

- 1 The National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA) provides a free listing of member nurseries. Each of these member nurseries has passed very strict membership criteria, whilst some nurseries have attained the NCNA Centre of Excellence award.
- 2 Your local health centre or health board offices will have lists of nurseries that have notified them under the childcare regulations.
- 3 Other sources for locating nurseries include:
 - ✓ Golden Pages
 - ✓ County Childcare Committees
 - ✓ Local newspaper advertising
 - ✓ Work place notice-boards
 - ✓ Recommendations by friends or family
 - ✓ The internet

step 2: draw up a list

This list should include all the nursery options that are convenient to you. Should you find that there are no nurseries close to your home, some alternatives could be those located en-route to or nearby your place of work or training.

step 3: save time – the telephone checklist

Save time - by telephoning and asking a few key questions, such as:

- ✓ Are they a member of the NCNA?
- ✓ Is there a place available for your child?
- ✓ Have they fulfilled their legal obligation to notify the Health Board?
- ✓ What are the nursery's opening hours?
- ✓ Do they offer an early education programme, what is the programme and for what ages does it apply?
- ✓ What is their cost structure?
- ✓ Can they send you out a brochure to review before your visit?



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Choice Tip:

Not every nursery has its own outdoor play area. If the nursery you visit doesn't have one – find out if regular outdoor field trips are organised.

step 4: the visit

Visiting a nursery for the first time is an exciting experience. During your visit it is important to gather the information you require, through observation and by asking questions. If you forget to ask a question – ring back later for clarification. To help you remember what to look for, bring the checklist at the back of this publication.

preparing for your visit

- ✓ Make a fixed appointment, this way the manager will have time to spend with you and answer all your questions.
- ✓ Bring your checklist along.
- ✓ Bring a pen and paper to take notes on any questions that may occur to you during your visit.
- ✓ If possible bring your child and a friend or family member with you, to see how the staff interact with your child.

what should you expect when visiting a nursery

Make sure that you allow yourself time to look around to see the facilities, to observe staff interacting with children and to sit down and discuss your requirements with the manager or owner. Remember it is unlikely that every nursery will offer everything that you require, so choose the one that best meets your needs.



the premises

The nursery should be large enough to offer freedom and space to each child, yet the area should not be so large as to hinder supervision.

what should you see

- ✓ A clean, spacious, organised, self-contained, and child-friendly environment.
- ✓ Bright and stimulating rooms.
- ✓ For infants and young children, a quiet and comfortable sleeping area.

what you need to know

- ✓ The nursery meets its statutory space requirements?
- ✓ Are age groups mixed or cared for in separate areas?
- ✓ Will your child will have enough space to play?
- ✓ Do siblings get to meet and play together at times during the day?

facilities

The premises should have a sense of order and cleanliness that is balanced with a sense of creativity and fun. The specific facilities that you require will depend on the age of your infant, toddler or pre-schooler.

what you should see

- ✓ Materials for interactive play and learning activities.
- ✓ Evidence of childrens' art and creative work.
- ✓ Puzzles, books, toys, blocks.
- ✓ A quiet area for rest and relaxation.
- ✓ All child equipment is at child level.

what you need to know

- ✓ All the equipment in the nursery is safe and well maintained.
- ✓ Each age group has access to age appropriate equipment and toys.
- ✓ The provisions in place for sleep or rest are suitable for your child's routine and requirements.
- ✓ If there is a radio, TV or video in the nursery, what is the policy on its usage?

food preparation & diet

what you should see

- ✓ A separate kitchen area that is inaccessible to children.
- ✓ Babies' bottles, if supplied by parents, are stored in fridges and correctly labelled.
- ✓ A designated area for preparation of baby food and sterilising equipment.
- ✓ A safe & hygienic system for the handling and storage of all food.
- ✓ Cleaning and sterilising chemicals are stores separately from food and drinks.
- ✓ A sample menu for you to see.

what you need to know

- ✓ What is the schedule for snacks and meals during the day?
- ✓ Who supplies the food? Is it you, the nursery or is it brought in by another company? If you are not providing the food, what steps are in place to ensure your child receives a nutritionally balanced diet?
- ✓ That children do not have access to the food preparation or storage areas.
- ✓ That the menus are balanced and varied.
- ✓ That menu does not include junk or processed food on a regular basis.
- ✓ Special dietary requirements are catered for and understood by all staff.
- ✓ The only drinks offered during the day are milk, water and natural fruit juices.
- ✓ If you are still breast-feeding, that adequate provisions are in place such as a quiet area for feeding.

the programme

The nurseries you are happiest with should offer a structured curriculum that includes physical activity, play, quiet time, group and individual activities, creative activities, meals, snack time and free time. Children of all ages learn through play, so look out for nurseries that place high value on children simply doing activities they enjoy. The programme offered by the nursery should be flexible enough to respond to your child's needs and there should be some activities through the year that include you as a parent.

what you should see

- ✓ Activities that children can participate in.
- ✓ The evidence of creative work, group work or outings displayed in the nursery.
- ✓ Both child-led activities and play supported by the carers.

what you should know

- ✓ If the nursery offers a prescribed programme such as Montessori or High Scope, are the carers qualified?
- ✓ What age does the programme start and finish? It is most common for nurseries to have programmes for children aged 2 and older.

the atmosphere

what you should see

- ✓ A warm and loving fun atmosphere where you feel your child will flourish and grow.
- ✓ Children looking comfortable and relaxed.
- ✓ Friendly and welcoming and attentive staff.
- ✓ Is there a warm and genuine welcome for your child?

what you should know

- ✓ The number of children in the group.
- ✓ That positive behaviour is rewarded, whilst inappropriate behaviour is discouraged.
- ✓ What steps are in place to encourage good communication between children?
- ✓ That the nursery has procedures in place for children who are upset coming into the nursery or during the day.



the staff

what you should see

- ✓ Staff being attentive to the children.
- ✓ Staff communicating with children at the child's level.
- ✓ Staff dealing with issues as they arise.
- ✓ Staff being friendly to you.
- ✓ A notice-board showing the staff/child ratio for each area in the nursery.

what you should know

- ✓ The staff are experienced and trained childcare professionals.
- ✓ The staff have undertaken first aid training.
- ✓ That student carers or those on placement are not left in sole charge of children.
- ✓ The nursery has an acceptable staff turnover rate. This is particularly important for younger infants where one to one bonding is vital.
- ✓ A staff member is allocated to each child, either formally or through natural bonding.

communication/parental involvement

what you should know

- ✓ Does the nursery have a policy on parental involvement?
- ✓ Does it have an open door policy?
- ✓ What form of daily feedback will you receive? Is it written or verbal?
- ✓ Are there parent's evenings / barbeques or other social activities organised?
- ✓ Is there a regular arrangement for discussing your child's progress?
- ✓ Is there regular written communication from the nursery to parents?

health & safety

what you should see

- ✓ A visible safety statement and evidence of a system in place.
- ✓ No accessible flexes, sockets or trailing cables.
- ✓ An accident and incident book.
- ✓ Evidence of fire safety equipment.
- ✓ Clearly marked and accessible emergency exits.
- ✓ No broken or dangerous equipment or toys.

what you should know

- ✓ Does the nursery have public liability insurance?
- ✓ They have a written policy for reporting accidents to parents.
- ✓ Is there regular fire drills or fire inspections.
- ✓ What is the procedure for emergency; under what circumstances will the nursery contact you?



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Choice Tip:

Have confidence in your decision and be prepared to follow your parental instinct.

agreeing details

Every Nursery should provide you with a written statement of policies and procedures. This is often in booklet form. It is important for you to read them carefully, and if you have doubts or queries to raise them with the nursery before you book your place.

the statement of policy includes:

- ✓ Quality of care provided
- ✓ Parental involvement
- ✓ Food
- ✓ Religious ethos
- ✓ Child illness
- ✓ Discipline
- ✓ Child protection

the statement of procedures includes:

- ✓ Opening hours
- ✓ Charges
- ✓ Holidays/Absent days
- ✓ What you as a parent are expected to provide
- ✓ What the nursery will provide
- ✓ Emergency procedures

signing contracts

Before signing contracts it is important to have thoroughly understood the policies and procedures for your chosen nursery and have agreed your terms of payment:

- ✓ The weekly cost and when it is to be paid?
- ✓ How you can pay the fees – cheque, cash & direct debit are the most common options available.
- ✓ How much is the deposit to secure your child's place, when is this deposit to be paid, and under what circumstances is the deposit refundable?
- ✓ What is the pay arrangement for holidays and illness?
- ✓ Does the nursery close for Christmas or other breaks during the year?
- ✓ How much notice does the nursery require?
- ✓ Are there reductions for second or third children from the same family?



Choice Tip:

Because of the increased staff to child ratio required for babies – often baby places will cost more than places for an older child.



settling in ...

Settling into a new nursery can be a challenging time for both your child and you. Be positive and take your time, and everything will be fine.

- ✓ Arrange to visit the nursery at least twice with your child, staying with them, but in the background. Then leave them for a short time, making sure to return exactly when you said you would, before committing to longer periods.
- ✓ Seek advice from the nursery manager as to how to handle the settling in stage for your child.
- ✓ For older children such as toddlers or pre-schoolers, prepare them in basic skills to boost their confidence. Find out what they are expected to do at different ages and let the nursery know if they need help.
- ✓ Give your child a familiar item such as a cuddly toy, blanket or toy from home to bring with them.
- ✓ When you have to leave to go to work, don't just leave your child with the carer and hurry off, make sure they are settled, and the carer knows what stage they are at with sleeps, feeds etc.
- ✓ Be happy and positive, your child will pick up on your mood!

7

school age
childcare



choosing school age childcare

If you work fulltime, you may not have the opportunity to collect your child each day after school to bring them home. Many Nurseries offer school age childcare for children aged 5+. These Nurseries provide a safe place for older children to enjoy a range of sports and creative activities with children of a similar age. They are great for children who want a place to play and have fun with friends from school, for supervised homework and the assurance that your children are being cared for after school. Looking after school-age children requires different skills and facilities than infants and pre-schoolers – so it is important to make sure the Nursery is capable of offering the best of care.

what to check?

- ✓ Staffing Ratios.
- ✓ How is access to the building regulated?
- ✓ Secure drop off and pick up procedures.
- ✓ What activities are undertaken, do the children get a chance to undertake projects or supervised outings for example?
- ✓ Who is in charge of the school group and are they qualified and experienced?
- ✓ Is there a separate play area for after school children?
- ✓ Are there facilities for supervised homework?
- ✓ How many staff are qualified in first aid?
- ✓ Can siblings of different ages meet and spend time together?

collection & delivery from school

Whilst some parents collect and drop off their children from school to nurseries, either individually or by sharing responsibilities, some nurseries offer a collection service. If they do, you need to make sure of the following:

- ✓ Is the service limited to a number of specific schools?
- ✓ Do they use their own cars, do they have the appropriate insurance cover?
- ✓ Do they have sufficient bumper seats / seat belts for every occupant?
- ✓ If they use public transport, what is the ratio of supervising staff to children?
- ✓ Who is responsible for the children when in transit?



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Choice Tip:

Increasing numbers of Nurseries offer school age childcare, contact the NCNA to help you locate a nursery in your area that offers this service.

the nursery visit checklist

the premises

- ✓ The interior is attractive, clean, well decorated, warm and bright.
- ✓ The equipment is good quality, clean, safe and appropriate.

diet & nutrition

- ✓ If meals are provided, the food is fresh, the menus balanced and special diets can be catered for.
- ✓ The menus are changed regularly.

the children

- ✓ The children in the nursery appear happy and well occupied.
- ✓ The children are using a variety of equipment and the staff are involved.

staff

- ✓ The staff are happy, relaxed, well presented, calm and confident.

statutory requirements

- ✓ The nursery meets its guidelines on carers and space.

Carer/Child Ratio

0-1 years 1 carer for every 3 children
 1-3 years 1 carer for every 6 children
 3-5 years 1 carer for every 8 children

Space per Child Ratio

Under 1 year: 3.70 sq. meters
 13 Months – 2 years: 2.80 sq. meters
 Children over 2 years: 2.32 sq. meters

general considerations

- ✓ Is the nursery a member of the NCNA?
- ✓ Parents and staff work in partnership, recording your child's activities and achievements.
- ✓ Your child will be attached to a key-worker, who will be your main contact and will keep you informed.
- ✓ The costs and terms and conditions are clear.
- ✓ The nursery has written policies and procedures.
- ✓ You enjoyed your visit. It was friendly, relaxed and informative.





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