

Kids need preschool to be a happy place

by Jane Clifford

Janene Kallen is a working mother who very carefully chose the child care for her son and daughter. That's why she's not fazed by the flurry of recent stories with headlines like "Poor Behavior Is Linked to Time in Day Care" in The New York Times and "Study ties day care to some behavior problems" at MSNBC.com.

CHOOSE WITH CARE - Janene Kallen and her husband chose Los Arbolitos Preschool in San Diego for daughter Ali, 4, and son Ian, 6, because the school focuses as much on emotional development as it does on academics. CNS Photo by Peggy Peattie. The stories focused on the latest results of long-term research by the National Institutes of Health into the effects of child care, but the headlines targeted one small point: that there is some increased likelihood that children in day care will have some behavior problems later on. The researchers also underlined that the misbehavior is within "normal limits," or what would be expected. And that children in high-quality child care have better vocabulary scores.

"My son is not well-behaved, but that has nothing to do with preschool. That's his personality," Kallen says of Ian, 6, now in first grade. "He's hell on wheels, and that's a good thing and a bad thing, but it is who he is."

Not every working parent is reacting the same way.

A poll conducted by MamaSource.com, an online community resource for mothers, found that 60 percent of the more than 500 respondents said the study made them think twice about using day care.

"A study like this creates concern, but the reality is that for many families where both parents - or the single parent - need to work, child care is simply a necessity," according to Artie Wu, founder of MamaSource.com.

The most important thing working parents can take away from the study is that it still is vitally important how they choose the care their children will have, says Karen Shelby, head of resource and referral for the YMCA Childcare Resource Service. CRS helps working parents find the place for their children among 3,900 licensed family child-care homes, 850 licensed child-care centers and 300 school-age programs.

And given the study results, Shelby says parents should pay as much attention to choosing one that encourages social and emotional development as much as any academic focus.

That's what drew Kallen to Los Arbolitos Preschool in San Diego.

"I didn't know anything about (the preschool's) academics. What I knew and felt was that this is a happy place," she says. "I liked the setting. I liked the natural and calming environment. There are animals in every room. There's music. I want my kids to know about music and play and animals. ... That's as much a part of a person as reading and writing."

As is learning to get along with others, a skill that, left undeveloped, can easily lead to misbehavior - at any age.

"That's the most important. That's a lifelong skill," says Katy Kenshur, president of the San Diego County Family Child Care Association, whose members provide child care in their homes. "Children need to learn that they need to get along now with their peers."

Shelby recalls hearing from a mom whose 3-year-old had behavior issues. Shelby went to the child-care facility to take a look. She says she watched the teacher line up 20 3-year-olds to get ready to wash their hands and go to the restroom. They stood in that line for 20 minutes until all of them were ready. A child-care facility that works that way could be breeding misbehavior.

"Three-year-olds can't stand in line for 20 minutes without pushing and shoving," says Shelby, who has been at CRS for 15 years and worked at or directed preschools for another 15 years, as well as taught parenting classes.

Kallen and her husband, Bruce, were so pleased with Ian's experience at Los Arbolitos that his little sister, Ali, 4, is going there now. She sees the study as a nudge for some parents.

"If they weren't happy to begin with, this is the time to look at their child care," she says. "I don't think (the study) affects us at all. We know our kids and where they go. We're going to continue doing what we do."

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Choose with care

These are some of the things to keep in mind while deciding what care setting is best for your child - whether that is infant care, a family day-care program, a preschool or an after-school program:

Visit several child-care homes or centers. Think about your first impression, but don't stop there. Does the place look safe? Do the caregivers/teachers enjoy talking and playing with children? Are there plenty of toys and learning materials within a child's reach? Stay as long as possible so you can get a good feel for what the care will be like.

Do the children sound happy and involved? What about the teacher's tone of voice? A place that's too quiet could mean not enough activity. A place that's too noisy could mean there is a lack of control.

Obviously, the fewer children for each adult, the more attention your child will get. A small number of children per adult is most important for babies and younger children.

The knowledge and experience of the adults caring for your child are very important. Find out about the special training they each have. Ask about the background and experience of all the staff: caregivers, teachers and the program director.

Has your child's caregiver achieved accreditation or completed training that exceeds minimum requirements?

Assessment tips

What you should expect to see at a good day-care center:

- Active, comfortable and happy children in an environment where everyone appears warm, relaxed and responsive.

- Materials and toys that match a range of ages, abilities and interests.

- Many opportunities for infants to explore and interact with their environment, hands-on activities to challenge preschoolers, and a change of pace for school-age children, furnishing them with age-appropriate activities.

- Television is limited and monitored.

- The program recognizes and nurtures the individuality of each child while ensuring that the children's personal rights and individual needs (such as culture, religion, etc.) are respected.

- The provider seems to have good communication with children and families.

- Parents are encouraged to participate in the program in a variety of ways.

Online help

The National Association of Childcare Resource and Referral Agencies has a wide-ranging Web site for parents and professionals. Click on "Is This the Right Place for My Child?" for links to a comprehensive PDF booklet. The site also has a special section for military families. Web site: www.naccrra.net.

Sponsored by the American Academy of Family Physicians, familydoctor.org/030.xml has a page outlining what to ask a prospective day-care facility, covering such issues as playground safety and care of sick children.

The Arkansas-based Center for Effective Parenting offers several helpful handouts; click on "Day Care: How to Select" for a thorough, easy-to-read guide to the process. Web site: www.parenting-ed.org/parenting_handouts.htm.

Child Care Aware's Web site features a calculator for budgeting child-care options and a way to find the average rates for day care in your ZIP code. Web site: www.childcareaware.org/en/.

The National Network for Child Care offers a KIDCARE e-mail forum and articles covering issues of interest to parents. Web site: www.nncc.org.

The National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Education offers a section on selecting a good place for your child. Web site: www.healthykids.us/chapters/selecting_main.htm.

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