

Getting started on the search for a quality preschool or child care program for your family can seem overwhelming at first, but the time you spend making this important decision is well spent—choosing a quality early learning setting for your young child is an investment that will benefit them well beyond the preschool years. Here are some frequently asked questions that will help you get started in the right direction.

Q: Who can I contact with questions about quality child care?

A: Virginia has excellent resources for parents and families who want to learn more about quality preschool and early education. The **Virginia Early Childhood Foundation** is a wonderful place to start, and since the VECF co-administers the Virginia Star Quality Initiative, you can begin your search for a quality program by considering those that have volunteered for a quality rating through this initiative. Virginia's **Department of Social Services** monitors all licensed child care for health and safety, which is the critical foundation for every preschool and early education program. On their website, VDSS makes available results of all inspection reports on Virginia programs. If you're looking for checklists and other information on quality care, as well as information about financial assistance, check out **Child Care Aware of Virginia's** website.

Q: What is a Star rating? How is it different from accreditation?

A: The Virginia Star Quality Initiative provides ratings to programs who volunteer to be assessed using documentation and observation. These ratings are designed to be a useful tool to parents and families and also deliver important feedback to programs who are interested in engaging in continuous quality improvement and staying up-to-date on best practices in the field of early education. The Star Quality Initiative is a no-cost way to demonstrate a commitment to quality and receive important professional development and technical assistance.

Programs that are accredited have volunteered to meet a set of nationally established standards for preschool and early childhood education. There are many different accreditation programs, which vary in the cost for participation, so in order to evaluate what a particular accreditation means, you would want to talk with the program or research the standards themselves.

Q: Why is quality important?

A: The quality of a preschool or child care program is what determines how much positive impact it will have on a child's academic and social learning. Certain aspects of preschool and child care programs are most likely to positively impact children's academic and social skill development, and these elements are used to evaluate the quality of a program. Aside from the safety, the most critical features of a preschool or child care program are the nature of the interactions between adults and children and the use of an effective curriculum to teach language, literacy, math, and social-emotional skills. Some of the most important benefits of attending a high quality program include academic and social gains for children as they enter formal school settings, such as math and language skills, self-regulation, and positive peer relationships. Participation in high quality programs has also been linked to higher graduation rates, lower crime and pregnancy rates, and lower rates of identification for additional educational services.

Q: What kinds of care are available in Virginia?

A: There is a wide range of types of preschool and child care programs available in Virginia. This variety means that you have many options to ensure that you find a good fit for your child and family, even though it can seem overwhelming at first. **Center-based** preschool or child care programs are classroom based programs or "schools" that can be run by a company or non-profit organization, or affiliated with a religious institution. **Home-based** programs, often called family child care, are operated from the provider's home and are often multi-age settings. Public preschool programs are offered at no cost to families, but set eligibility for enrollment using certain factors such as household income or parental deployment.