

## Finding a High Quality Early Childhood Education Program

How do parents know if an early childhood education program is high quality? There are a number of factors that are indicators of a high quality program.

1. **Staff** – the most important indicator of a high quality program is the staff. The best programs employ well educated and experienced teachers and administrators. Teachers that are educated and trained in child development and early childhood education generally are the best teachers of young children. All of the full time teachers at the three professionally staffed IUB centers have a minimum of a bachelor's degree, many have graduate degrees. All of the center directors have a minimum of a master's degree. In addition, regular trainings and other professional development opportunities are very important. The IUB teachers not only take part in annual trainings such as conferences and university coursework, they also present trainings to other educators. Most programs staff their classroom with a lead teacher and assistant teacher, who many times have less education than the lead teacher. *The IUB programs use a co-teacher model where both teachers have a minimum of a bachelor's degree.*
2. **Ratios and group sizes** – the ratio of adults to the number of children in a group or classroom is an important quality factor but research indicates that even more important is the total number of children in the group. For example a classroom of 18 children with two adults is preferable to a group of 36 children with four adults. Licensing regulations mandate the minimum ratios and maximum group sizes allowed. National accreditation standards mandate even better ratios and smaller group sizes. *With their national accreditation, the IUB programs use the stricter accreditation guidelines.*
3. **Educational Philosophy and Curriculum** – research is quite clear in showing that children learn best through their play and the best programs use a child-centered, play based curriculum. Young children learn differently than adults and older children so an early childhood classroom should not look like an elementary school classroom. A child centered learning environment has the classroom arranged into learning centers where the children spend the majority of the day exploring materials and working with peers. Research also shows that children who experience a child centered curriculum in the preschool years are more successful in later school years. *Programs that provide paid planning time for their teachers, like the IUB centers, are best able to implement an appropriate, child centered curriculum.*

4. **Accreditation** – Many parents think that state licensing is a sign of quality – it is not. Licensing simply means that a program meets *minimum* standards for health, safety, and teacher qualifications. Some programs in Indiana (e.g. church sponsored programs, parent cooperatives and preschools) are exempt from state licensing. A licensed program receives regular inspections and is more than likely to be better than an unlicensed one but licensing alone is not necessarily an indication of high quality. A much better indicator is national accreditation. The standards set by accreditation go beyond what is required by licensing, particularly in the quality areas mentioned above. While there are a number of accrediting bodies, accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is considered the gold standard. *Less than 10% of early childhood programs nationwide are NAEYC accredited. All three of the eligible IUB early childhood programs are NAEYC accredited.*
  
5. **Quality Rating Systems** – many states are now implementing Quality Rating Systems (QRS) in order to assist parents in judging the quality of early childhood education programs. The Indiana QRS program is called Paths to Quality (PTQ). PTQ is a voluntary program that rates early childhood programs using four levels, with Level 4 being the highest rating. A program must be nationally accredited to be awarded a Level 4 rating. Programs enrolled in PTQ have made a commitment to maintain and improve quality. *All three IUB programs have been awarded Level 4 ratings.*

*In order to find the highest quality care and education for their child, parents should look for programs that:*

- *Employ teachers and administrators who are educated in child development and early childhood education.*
- *Employ teachers and administrators who are experienced in working with children under the age of six.*
- *Provide regular professional development opportunities for their staff members.*
- *Implement the practice of Continuity of Care where teachers and children stay together for a number of years rather than children moving to a new classroom at each birthday.*
- *Maintain ratios and group sizes mandated by state licensing. Meeting national accreditation standards is even better.*
- *Implement a play based, child centered curriculum in a learning environment that is arranged into learning centers.*
- *Provide paid planning time for their teachers.*
- *Have been awarded NAEYC accreditation.*
- *Have been awarded a Level 4 Paths to Quality rating.*