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A whole world of childcare



Nurseries as a Childcare Option



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What is a nursery?

'Nursery' care can have different meanings in childcare services. The main types of nursery provision available include:

- Private day nurseries
- Nursery classes or nursery schools in the state sector
- Nursery provision attached to independent schools

This free resource outlines what each of these options can offer you and your child. You can start your search for the right nursery by looking at the different settings on offer in your local area. You can then consider which setting would most suit your child and the needs of the whole family.

All nurseries must be registered and inspected by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

Private day nurseries

Private day nurseries look after babies and children aged between three months and five years. They are normally open between 8am and 6pm though the hours vary from place to place. If you are looking for a full-time place or a full morning or afternoon of care as opposed to sessional care of two or three hours in a day, then this type of nursery may well suit you.

Nursery classes or nursery schools in the state sector

Nursery classes are attached to primary schools whereas nursery schools are run in separate premises. They usually offer sessional care for three to five year-olds; this means your child will be offered a number of sessions of two to three hours per week.

Nursery provision attached to independent schools

Some independent schools have nursery classes attached to them. They usually take three or four year-olds, but occasionally younger children, too. Many classes are open from 9am to 3pm but some schools are now extending their hours to help working parents.

How much does nursery care cost?

The cost of nursery care varies according to the setting. You can obtain up to date information on costs from your local Family Information Service, or by asking for a list of their charges from local nurseries.

As nursery classes in state or independent schools tend to cater for three-year-olds and above we have more detail about them in our leaflet on finding the right early education.

In this resource, however, we look in more detail at private day nurseries that provide full-time or part-time daycare for babies and children from three months to five years.

What happens in a day nursery?

A typical day in a nursery will involve children taking part in a variety of activities that will vary according to the age of the child. The children are usually separated according to age group and the babies have a higher adult-to-child ratio. During a day there may be scheduled times for reading, drawing, painting, outdoor play, messy play and quiet time.

When children are at a nursery they will spend their time playing and learning with other children. They also have their meals there and the younger ones usually have a sleep in the afternoon. This sort of day will help children to socialise and to learn about co-operation.

Do nursery staff need qualifications?

At least half of the staff in a nursery must hold a childcare qualification that is equivalent to the Level 3 NVQ in Early Years Care and Education or the CACHE Level 3 Diploma in Childcare and Education (previously known as the NNEB).

How many children can a nursery take?

The number of children a nursery can take depends on the size of the nursery and the number of staff employed there. There has to be a staff-to-child ratio of:

- 1:3 for under-twos
- 1:4 for two to three year-olds
- 1:8 for three to five year-olds

(These are the maximum numbers of children that can be in a group with one adult.)



What are the main advantages of using a nursery?

- A nursery is a great place for children to mix and socialise as well as learn through structured play. Children who go to nursery are often considered more confident and outgoing as they get older
- Nurseries never (well, almost never) close because of illness. There are enough staff there to cover one person's sickness, so you should never be in that difficult situation when your carer rings you at 9am to say that she is ill
- You will be able to find out what your child is doing during the day, and there are always other people around. Many parents like the openness and accountability that nurseries can offer

- Even if the carers change from time to time, the nursery and its routine will stay the same, so your child will feel familiar and safe there
- Day nurseries have to be inspected regularly and meet the National Standards in order to remain registered
- Nurseries are child-centred. There will be a curriculum and themes throughout the year, and children will benefit from a variety of activities to keep them busy and happy
- Most nurseries will be able to offer you a full or part-time place
- You may be able to ask some of the nursery nurses to be babysitters
- Development progress is constantly monitored
- Fees are often inclusive of food and nappies, wipes etc.

Are there any other considerations?

- Some parents think that the 'institutional' environment of a nursery is more suited to older children rather than babies
- The opening and closing times are not flexible and some nurseries have financial penalties if you arrive late to collect your child
- Your child is likely to pick up more bugs in a nursery, mixing with other children all the time. Also, if he is ill he will have to stay away from the nursery until he's better
- Nursery places are in short supply and are not cheap. If you have another child there too, your costs will almost double although many nurseries will offer a discount for a second child who attends the nursery
- Whilst a nursery is child-centred, one consequence of this may be that there are fewer opportunities to do 'ordinary' things like visiting the playground or the shops. Also, the change of staff (shifts etc) can be difficult for babies.

Every nursery has a different feel to it, even if it is in the same type of setting. Personalities, location, leadership style and the premises themselves will make each nursery individual.



Choosing a nursery

Where should I start?

It's a big decision to make and that's why a Tinies consultant can help you through the process. With their experience and knowledge they'll be able to talk through the options available to you.



Your Tinies consultant will be able to advise you of all the registered nurseries in your area and provide you with the information, support and advice to help you make the right decision.

Ask yourself these questions, and make a checklist of what you need from a nursery.

What time do I need to leave my child?

If you have to be at work very early, for example, you will need to think about a nursery that opens early. Most nurseries are open between 8am and 6pm.

How will I get there?

If you're planning on using public transport, you will need a nursery close to a bus or train route.

How much does the nursery cost?

It needs to be within your budget, but remember that you might be able to reclaim some of your costs through the Childcare Tax Credit or Childcare vouchers as part of a salary sacrifice scheme

How soon should I think about securing a place?

Nursery places are in short supply (especially for babies) and there are often waiting lists. You need to decide when you will return to work and select nurseries that will have places available. Can you manage fewer sessions than you really want for a short while?

What sort of approach do I think is appropriate?

Nurseries come in all shapes and sizes, and are likely to have individual approaches.

Try to keep an open mind, and visit nurseries even if you are not certain that they will meet your needs. You may be pleasantly surprised as you visit different nurseries with their contrasting styles.

Even if there is a waiting list remember that people do drop out, so a place for your child may come up sooner than you think. You could also try splitting your working week between two different facilities, but you need to consider whether or not your child will cope with such an arrangement.

What should I look for in a nursery?

Having looked at your particular needs, you can move on to look at what a nursery should be offering you. There are a number of features that are associated with high-quality care.

Look out for:

- **Low child-to-adult ratios and group sizes** - there are regulations governing the ratio of adults to children, but if possible, choose a nursery that has more than the minimum number of adults per group of children
- **Trained carers** - the more qualified staff in the nursery, the better. You should also try to find out how much in-house training is provided for the staff.
- **Good working conditions for the staff** - try to find out what the staff turnover is like. A well-supported staff team will be happier in their jobs and less likely to leave. If the staff are happy, then your child is more likely to be happy.
- **Continuity of care** - your child should be able to develop close relationships with one or two nursery workers. When she starts at nursery, she should be assigned a key worker who will monitor your child's development.
- **Check** that there is adequate space for outdoor play.

Apart from these basic indicators, there are plenty of other signs to look out for. Your introduction to the nursery should be a positive one, from the moment that you walk through the doors. Here are some ways of judging a nursery:

The staff

- Are staff friendly towards you at all times and do they encourage an 'open-door' policy?
- Is there a warm and welcoming atmosphere throughout the nursery?
- Do the staff have a flexible approach, but are able to put established procedures into action whenever they are needed, for example in the case of an emergency?
- Do they have a key worker system for under two's?
- Do they provide daily activity diaries?

The children

- Are the children happy and well-occupied?
- Are the children engaged with members of staff either alone or in small groups?



The building

- Is the décor bright and cheerful, with lots of the children's pictures and drawings on the walls?
- Is there an outside play area?
- Are there varied settings, such as an area for messy play, another place for quiet times and looking at books, a sleep area and a dining area?
- Are there clear security and safety measures to prevent children leaving the nursery, or unauthorised people getting in?
- Is there a shaded area for play?
- Is the building clean and safe at all times? Look at the toilet and hand-washing facilities.

The activities

- Are varied structured activities going on, such as group activities, individual activities, play, quiet times and stories?
- Does the nursery have clean, well cared for toys, which are age-appropriate for the children using them?
- Are children able to reach and choose some of these toys themselves?
- Do the activities on offer stimulate the children's learning as they get older?

A nursery does not have to be brand new and full of expensive equipment to be a good nursery. However, it should be clean, bright and, above all, have a happy atmosphere.

You should find that good nurseries stand out as soon as you walk through the door, and that the one(s) that suit you are clear to see.



What sort of questions should I ask?

First of all, check that the nursery is registered and inspected by the Ofsted. These questions will also help you decide whether the nursery will suit your child:

- How do you involve parents in the nursery?
- How many of the staff are qualified in first aid?
- What is the policy on sickness?
- Will my child have an allocated carer?
- How many accidents have there been in the past year? Do they have an accident book? (All accidents should be recorded)
- How do you ensure that the right person collects a child?
- How and where do the children sleep?
- Can you describe a typical day at the nursery?
- Is the food prepared on site?
- How do you cater for special dietary needs?
- Are you able to give my baby expressed breast milk?
- What security measures are used?
- How do you deal with children who are unhappy?
- What is your policy on behaviour management?
- How will I know what my child has been doing all day – is there a daily activities plan on display?
- What is the settling-in procedure?

You will probably have other questions that you want to ask, and you should not hesitate to keep asking them until you feel satisfied. All good nurseries will expect this and welcome your interest. You should also drop into the nursery as many times as you need to until you're completely certain about it.



What questions might the nursery ask me?

The nursery staff should want to know all about you and your child. Staff may ask questions such as:

- Does your child have a routine? If so, what is it? This is useful for them because, although they have a routine that eventually your child will have to fit into, they will want the changes to happen gradually and need to know what your child is doing now
- Is your child potty trained?
- Does your child have any food and drink preferences?
- What is your child's medical history?
- Does your child have any particular medical conditions?
- What are the contact details of your GP and emergency backup?
- How would you like to be more involved in the life of the nursery?
- Who will be collecting your child?
- How can you be contacted during the day?

Staff will also be able to tell you about the charges and what they include, the method of payment and holiday arrangements.

Do I need to follow up references?

You should be able to read the nursery's most recent inspection report, which will give you a detailed picture of the nursery, together with the recommendations that were made. Ask how they are implementing the recommendations.

Another way to get an accurate picture of the nursery is to talk to the parents who already use it. Try to talk to one or two of them as you pay your visit, or ask the staff if you can have a couple of telephone numbers.

When should I make my decision?

Whilst you should start looking and get onto some waiting lists when you are pregnant, it's also a good idea to return once you have had your baby, and visit the nurseries with your baby. You might find that the reality of your baby gives you a new insight into the care that's best for all of you.

Paying for a nursery space

Do I have to pay to go on a waiting list?

Many nurseries have waiting lists. This is why it is important to start looking early and choose your preferred nursery, rather than 'making do' with the places that are still available when you need childcare.

You may be asked to pay a registration fee (probably non-refundable) when you join a waiting list for a nursery. The amount will vary from place to place, but the figure might have an impact on the number of nurseries whose waiting list you want to join.



There is no reason why you shouldn't put your name down for more than one nursery, although you should let the others know as soon as you have a definite place. When a space becomes available, you will probably be asked to pay a deposit. This is usually one month's fees, and this payment is refundable when your child leaves. In the meantime, it is a protection for the nursery against non-payment of fees.

Do I have to sign a contract?

When you are offered a place at a nursery, you will be asked to sign a contract. This will legally commit you to paying for your child's place, so don't sign anything until you feel completely satisfied with what you have read in the contract, and with the nursery itself.

Your contract will be individual according to the nursery or nursery chain.

How do I pay for my nursery place?

When you are offered a place by a nursery, you will almost certainly be asked to make your payments in advance. You may be able to pay by:

- Direct debit, whereby the amount agreed will be taken automatically from your bank account
- Cheque or cash, which will be payable in advance, either monthly, or half-termly.

If your child attends a workplace nursery, or if your employer makes a contribution towards your childcare costs, you should be able to arrange for your part of the fees to be deducted from your salary before it reaches you. Talk to your human resources department about how they arrange this. You will probably have to pay the same fees every month, whether or not you are on holiday or your child is sick.

Using childcare vouchers

If you are employed by a company you may be able to sacrifice some of your salary in exchange for childcare vouchers. Childcare vouchers are exempt from National Insurance contributions and the first £55 a week is also exempt from Income Tax so they can save you money. These vouchers may be used to help pay for nursery costs.

Is there any help for paying nursery costs?

All three and four-year-olds are now entitled to a free, part-time nursery place.

You may also be eligible to reclaim some of your childcare costs if your total net family income is below a certain level. These costs are paid through the Childcare Tax Credit element of the Working Tax Credit. See additional information in our leaflet on being a working parent, for details about the benefits available to working parents. You can also call the Working Tax Credit Helpline on 0845 300 3900; they will be able to give you information about whether you may be eligible, and send you the relevant forms.



What about holidays?

Most nurseries will be closed for some holidays during the year. Day nurseries are normally closed during bank holidays (unless they are part of an organisation that is generally open on a bank holiday, such as a hospital).

It is common for nurseries to close for the week between Christmas and the New Year. Your fees will be calculated taking this into account, but rather than paying a different price in December, it's more likely that the annual cost will be divided into equal parts so that you know what to pay every month.

Some nurseries close periodically for staff training. Although this can seem inconvenient in the short term, nurseries that offer in-house training and support will probably have more motivated and loyal staff. In the long term, these training courses should be viewed as a productive process with a useful outcome.

What notice do I need to give?

You will need to give notice of when you are taking holidays, and when you want your child to leave the nursery. If you do not give the required amount of notice, you may have to pay a penalty. You should check for details of this in the contract that you sign. The notice period might be four or six weeks when you are leaving, but a nursery may be more flexible about holidays, especially if you are paying for them anyway.

It is useful for your nursery to know about holiday plans, however, so that they know how many staff are needed to be on duty.

Nursery places are generally in strong demand, which is why it is extremely important to get your search under way in plenty of time to avoid disappointment.

Getting along with nursery staff

It is important to find a nursery that takes the nurturing of personal relationships seriously. Your nursery should ensure that there are one or two carers dedicated to you and your child. The special workers who will be assigned to you are called key persons.

You should get to know your key person once your child starts nursery and develop a strong and open relationship with them. Nursery staff are trained to value the input of parents and make them feel involved.

What can I do?

These steps will help to keep the relationship positive and open:

Keep communicating

Spend time whenever you can to find out about what your child has been doing during the day.

Your key person may keep a diary of the activities your child has been involved in. Some nurseries send the diary home with the child so it can be read at home and added to by the parents. In this way, a rounded picture of your child's progress and well-being will emerge, covering both nursery and home life.

Remember to let the nursery know if anything has happened at home which might affect your child's behaviour at the nursery. A parent's illness, the death of a grandparent, an older sibling starting school... these can all change a child's patterns of behaviour and it's useful to let carers know what might be causing the changes.

Don't send your child to nursery with an illness

It may seem obvious, but many nursery workers are amazed by the number of parents who are prepared to drop their child off in the morning with a temperature, in the hope that it will 'just pass'. Whilst balancing work and home commitments can be very stressful at times like this, try to set up good back-up care so that you do not end up in a no-win situation.

Get involved in the nursery

Many nurseries encourage parents to join in the life of the nursery as much as they can. Some like parents to get involved during the day, but if that isn't possible, there may be parents' evenings and newsletters that keep parents informed about the nursery. It is good for your child to see your interest in their care setting, and it can help to nurture good relationships if you spend time getting to know the nursery staff.

Don't be the last to pick up your child every night

Sometimes you can't avoid being late, but you will do everyone a disservice if you are a habitual latecomer at closing time. Not only will the staff find it irritating that they can't go home, but they will start to pity your child if she is always the one left on her own after everyone else's parents have collected their children. Some nurseries will even fine you for being consistently late.

Don't send your child to nursery wearing best clothes

Nurseries are for running, jumping and playing with sand, water and paint. Remember to send your child in older or sturdier clothes that can withstand the wear and tear of nursery life and that are comfortable.

Trust the judgment of nursery staff

The people who look after your child are childcare professionals, so don't forget to trust their judgment, and listen to what they say to you about your child. If there are problems, it might be hard at times to swallow some undesirable facts about your child's behaviour, but try to remember that staff are not trying to undermine you, but to help your child to develop in the best ways possible.

All information and advice contained in this resource are meant as guidance only