

Choosing the right nursery for you and your child

This factsheet is provided for parents in England by National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA), the national charity for children's nurseries.
www.ndna.org.uk

Introduction

To help both you and your child, it is critical that both of you are happy and confident with your choice of nursery. Knowing that your child is in a safe, high-quality environment as you go to work or training is hugely reassuring.

This factsheet will give you an insight into what questions to ask, what you should be looking for from a nursery and what legal requirements a nursery has to follow. The right research about your nursery will provide you with the reassurance that your child will be cared for in a safe, high-quality environment.

You should always visit more than one nursery before you make a decision about where you wish to place your child. This will give you a better view of the variety of nurseries available as some will suit you and your child's individual needs more than others.

First contact

First of all you need to look at what nurseries are available in your area. You should consider what is going to work best for you, – for example, do you want a nursery near home or work/college? As part of this, you should think about what will work for your child, for example, if you have a long commute it may be preferable to locate a nursery on your route. You can look for a nursery in a variety of ways:

- Search National Day Nurseries Association's website for nurseries in your area that are members of NDNA. Being part of a membership organisation ensures that nurseries are kept up-to-date with all the latest information, legislation and support, which will aid them in delivering high standards of care and education. Visit <http://www.ndna.org.uk/parents/find-a-nursery> for more details
- Use your local Family Information Service. This will provide you with details of the childcare in your local area from nurseries and pre-schools to childminders and playgroups. Find your local Family Information Service at:
<http://findyourfis.daycaretrust.org.uk/kb5/findyourfis/home.page>
- Take a look at your local phone book or yellow pages. You can also visit their websites to search for local listings
- Talk to other parents in your area, for example at parent and toddler groups, or to parents you know whose children have attended nursery as they may have particular recommendations.
- Look at online parenting sites such as the Good Care Guide: <http://www.goodcareguide.co.uk/>, Netmums: <http://www.netmums.com/>, and Mumsnet: <http://www.mumsnet.com/> for reviews and advice from other parents and look at social media.

Once you have shortlisted the nurseries you wish to visit, contact the nursery and ask for information about what they do and offer. High-quality nurseries will either have a brochure/prospectus or set of information they can send you in the post or a website which you can visit. This will help you to gain more information about their services, fees and environment before you visit and allow you to collate the questions you wish to ask based on this information.

You can also learn a lot about the nursery from that first contact.

- Was the phone answered in a quick, professional and friendly manner?
- Did the nursery accommodate the visit date you required without any hesitation or difficulty? Or if they couldn't, was there a valid reason such as a trip was taking place so there would not be anyone available?
- Do they offer an open door policy to parents/carers to enable you to drop in and see the nursery whenever? This may give you the confidence that they are happy for you to see the childcare practice at any time.
- Were you able to access all the information you needed from the website/brochure/prospectus/information?

Visits to chosen nurseries

Once you have made your appointments to visit the nurseries you will need to think about the questions you want to ask, what you want to look for and note the legal requirements the nursery has to follow. Nurseries come in all shapes and sizes, and you and your child may prefer a larger or smaller nursery or one that offers a particular service – you should take your child on these visits to help you understand what they may prefer.

It is better to use the same criteria and questions for all nurseries so you can compare them more easily when you come to make your final decision. Don't be afraid to ask questions or request clarification on any area you are unsure about. Remember, you need to be fully confident about this decision for both your child and your own peace of mind. High-quality nurseries will expect you to ask questions and respect your need to query their practice in these early stages. They will be used to parents asking them in-depth questions on all areas and understand that this is a vital decision for you and will answer any questions you have.

Key points:

Before you visit the nurseries you may benefit from accessing their Ofsted inspection and complaints page. Ofsted register, regulate and inspect all early years providers in England and each nursery will be inspected at least once in a 47-month cycle.

The inspection report will highlight where the nursery has excelled and any actions or recommendations that they need to work on. This will give you an overview of the nursery at that point in time so check the date of the report. Remember, this is only a snapshot of that one day, and the nursery may have changed since this report so this may not be accurate at your time of visiting. It will however, give you additional questions to ask, e.g. if they have been advised to improve their procedure for washing children's hands before eating. This is a question you could pose to find out what procedures they have put in place since this last inspection.

Arrival at the nursery

When you first arrive at the nursery for your appointment you should note your first impressions. Ask yourself:

- Are there dedicated parking spaces, or somewhere you can pull in easily to take out your child safely?
- How does the nursery operate their entry system?
- Upon answering the door was the member of staff welcoming, polite, friendly and professional? Was the door answered in a prompt manner?
- Does the nursery have a friendly, clean and safe feel to it from those first impressions?

Seal of approval

You need to know that the nursery you ultimately choose is safe and of a high-quality. All nurseries have to be registered with Ofsted so you should ask to see their registration certificate which should be displayed clearly, and if you have not read their inspection report prior to the visit, you can request to see this now.

Next, ask whether the nursery has achieved any quality standards or awards, e.g. Investors in People (IIP), NDNA's e-Quality Counts, local authority quality improvement scheme or healthy eating award? This will show their dedication to quality improvement and continually reviewing their practice.

Also ask if the nursery belongs to any professional organisations, such as NDNA, in order to keep up-to-date with current issues and make sure they are receiving information that helps them improve what they do.

Happy, clean and safe environment

In most nurseries the manager, deputy or room leader will show you around the nursery. This is the time when you can ask lots of questions and gather most information. Always ensure you see the whole nursery and not just the area your child may enter when they first start. This will give you a much better picture of the entire nursery and when your child is ready to move to the next age group area it will help you to feel more comfortable with this new room. You can also ask to speak to the person who might potentially be your child's key person – this is the team member who will be your child's main carer and who will build a close relationship with you. Together you will share information about how your child has been at home, any new interests, outings etc., and they will update you about what your child has been doing each day at nursery.

Key questions:

While being shown around the different areas/rooms ask yourself these key questions to give an overview of the quality and safety of this nursery:

- Are the indoor areas all safe, clean, well-lit, welcoming and well decorated?
- Are the rooms an appropriate temperature?
- Is there a safe, secure and clean outside area for children to play in?
- Can children choose when they want to play outside or are there set times? (Children should be able to choose)
- Are children able to freely choose where and what they want to play with, e.g. do the rooms/areas have low storage units that children can see the contents of? (Children should be able to choose)
- Do the children in the different areas/rooms look happy, settled and well-occupied and engaged in the activities? Do you feel their needs are being met?
- Does the team of staff appear friendly, welcoming, calm, relaxed, well-presented and professional? Are they at the children's level? (e.g. sitting on the floor, sitting at the meal tables etc.).

Safety will be a key deciding factor. It is important to ask during the visit about the nursery's safety features and you could consider asking some of the following questions:

Key questions:

- How do you ensure the safety of the children in this area? (Answers here may include risk assessments, registration and regular head counts, safety checks, supervision of children at all times, safety equipment such as straps, safety gates, door finger guards)
- How do you ensure the safety of the toys the children are playing with? (Staff should be checking and cleaning the equipment on a regular basis, risk assessments should take into account the equipment and toys, all toys should be age appropriate – i.e. no risks of choking for younger children)
- If you take the children out of the nursery on trips, e.g. to the local park or further to farms, zoos etc., how do you ensure they are safe there? (The nursery should have a specific procedure for this which must include risk assessments. The nursery should have other safety features such as increasing staff to child ratios during these outings)
- How can I be assured that the staff are safely recruited? (All staff **must** have enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks (previously CRB checks) before they have unsupervised access to children, and all staff should have provided references from previous employers).

You should be able to view the nursery's policies and procedures which should give you all the information you need about the above points and more.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)

The EYFS is the learning framework used in all early years settings and school reception classes so if your child is to attend any nursery, pre-school or child minder, the EYFS will be followed to support your child's learning and development.

There are three prime areas of learning for your child: communication and language; physical development; and personal, social and emotional development; and there are four specific area of learning: literacy; mathematics; knowledge and understanding of the world; and expressive arts and design.

All nurseries you visit should be supporting children in their care with these areas of learning, mainly focusing on the prime areas for younger children and those who have just started in the nursery/room. Nurseries should be helping you to understand this framework and providing you with advice and ideas for continuing the learning from nursery at home, so you may choose to ask questions to help you understand how the nursery does this.

Activities/resources/experiences

While visiting the different areas and rooms, you may consider asking about the activities/resources available to the children and the experiences they are having. The manager and the staff team should be able to communicate confidently about these, including why the children are engaging in this and how they plan for each individual child's interests and links to the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum.

You may wish to ask how the nursery will communicate with you about these activities and any changes in your child's development. Nurseries will use a variety of different approaches but all nurseries must engage with parents and share information about the type of activities your child has been provided with. High-quality nurseries will use robust systems, e.g. daily diaries, sharing sheets, parental consultation evening and/or an open door policy where you can visit at any time to discuss concerns or simply take a look at what children are doing.

It is good practice to have a number of activities out so children can choose what they wish to play with both indoors and out. This is known as 'continuous provision' and may include sand and water play, a set up area where children

can play imaginatively (e.g. in a café/home/shop), a cosy area where children can enjoy books, an area for mask making and drawing, puzzles, games and construction resources (such as building blocks).

It is also recommended that throughout the day there are adult-led activities that work with the children to develop their interests and stages of development and to encourage the children to learn new skills or to practice their existing skills, such as using scissors or exploring new materials and developing their senses (e.g. using jelly play). These activities should be included in the room planning displays/sheets so you as parents know what your child will be/has been doing during the day.

High-quality nurseries will also actively encourage you and your family to be involved in your child's learning by sharing experiences and achievements from the home environment, and to contribute to your child's learning file or journey.

Menus

A high-quality nursery should be providing nutritious menus for children which meet their individual dietary requirements and provide a nutritionally-balanced diet for all ages. You should ask to see a copy of the menus if this has not been provided in the correspondence sent out to you. It may also be displayed for you to see. This is also an opportunity for you to ask how they will cater for your child if he or she has any dietary requirements or allergies, and how they will have these met without them being made to feel different from other children. You may also choose to ask the following questions:

- How is the food prepared? (e.g. the nursery may have a chef or cook on their premises or they may use a catering company)
- How is the menu planned? (e.g. how does the nursery ensure the menu is nutritionally balanced and can parents and children input into the menu?)

- Will the nursery offer alternatives if your child doesn't like something?
- How will you know what your child has eaten during the day, e.g. will they provide a diary?
- How can the nursery cater for any needs your child may have? (e.g. gluten intolerance)
- Is the food cooked from fresh ingredients?
- Do children have access to fresh fruit and vegetables throughout the day?
- What drinks are offered and how will you know as a parent whether your child has drunk enough during the day?

See the Children's Food Trust guidelines for early years providers:

<http://www.childrensfoodtrust.org.uk/resources/ebsb-resources/guidelines>

Staffing

You may have already asked about how the nursery ensures that they recruit staff who are suitable to work with children but you also may choose to ask about the qualifications of the staff within the nursery. Although there are minimum standards for qualifications, a sign of a good nursery is one that invests in staff training and employs staff who have qualifications above these minimum requirements.

The legal requirements state that nursery managers and supervisors **must** have a level three early years qualification and half of all other staff **must** hold a level two early years qualification.

Quality nurseries will value training and will encourage all staff to participate in a training programme that meets their needs and those of the area of the nursery they work in. You may ask about supplementary training as this will give you an indication of the level of knowledge and training within the nursery.

Staff to child ratios

There are specific regulations relating to how many staff are required for the numbers and ages of children within all nurseries, these are currently:

Age	Adult:child ratio
Under 2	1:3
2-3	1:4
3-8	1:8

These ratios are currently being consulted on by the Government.

Quality nurseries may choose to increase the staffing levels to provide more support for the children within the nursery, especially when your child is settling in. The numbers above are the minimum number of staff you should expect to see across the setting and you may choose to look for this as you travel around the nursery.

Key person

Each child in the nursery **must** be assigned a key person who should be responsible for settling the child into the setting and developing a strong relationship to support their care and developmental needs. They will be the person that is likely to report back to you about your child's day and their personal routines, e.g. nappy changes and bottle feeds.

You should consider asking how their key person system operates and how the key person is nominated. Some nurseries will appoint an initial key person and review this after a few weeks to see who your child is bonding with the most in their room.

Nurseries will want to collate information on your child's dislikes/likes/interests in the first few weeks in order to care for your child appropriately and provide

activities that meet their needs. You may choose to ask the nursery what systems they operate for this, e.g. questionnaires, diaries, time spent with the parents at settling-in visits, home visits. Some of these may suit your needs better than others.

You may also choose to ask for information about the Early Years Foundation Stage so you have a better understanding of how the nursery supports your child to develop through play. This can support you to continue this learning at home should you wish to.

Fees

Although cost will not be the only deciding factor it can impact on your final decision and you should find out as much as possible when you first visit the nursery. It is important to spend some time discussing this with the management.

Here are some questions that you may find useful:

Key questions:

- What do the fees cover?
- Do we need to pay extra for nappies, wipes and milk/food or do we need to provide our own?
- Do we pay for sessions when our child is absent, e.g. holidays, or when the nursery is closed for unforeseen circumstances such as bad weather?
- Does the nursery close over Christmas and Bank Holidays? If so, do we pay for these sessions?
- Ask to make sure you see a copy of the terms and conditions/contract before you make a decision
- Does the nursery increase its fees on an annual basis?
- What kind of support is available for the cost of fees? e.g. the nursery may

take childcare vouchers, they may be able to offer you information on working tax credits and if your child is over two or three years old you may be able to claim some free sessions using the nursery education funding.

- What is the nursery's policy on late fees?

Additional information

You may decide you have specific questions to ask around the care of your child, e.g. the nursery's procedure on toileting or potty training, weaning, promoting positive behaviour or emergency procedures. These may come up naturally as you walk around the nursery or you may choose to discuss this at the end of the visit.

Finally

When you leave the nursery it is important to find time to gather your thoughts and make notes if you feel you may forget specific details. This will give you a basis to make an informed decision. Ask yourself:

- Did you and your child enjoy your visit?
- Was the nursery visit relaxed, friendly and informative? Did the staff answer all the questions posed in a clear and concise manner?
- If you took your child along, did they settle and appear happy and relaxed? How did the nursery staff interact with you and your child?
- Did the nursery appear clean, safe and secure?
- Is the nursery able to support any individual needs your child may have?
- Did the nursery make you feel welcomed, confident and relaxed?

We have created a simple table at the end of this factsheet where you can mark different areas of the nursery out of ten and this will help you to compare the nurseries you visit a little easier.

Remember if you are not happy with any aspect of this nursery, look elsewhere, and if you leave the visit and have further questions, any quality nursery will be happy to answer these over the phone, or welcome you for a further visit.

Compare your nursery visits – use this table to help gather your thoughts about your nursery choices

Question	Nursery 1	Nursery 2	Nursery 3
Marks out of 10			
1. How safe and secure did the nursery feel?			
2. How confident did you feel about the nursery staff?			
3. How would you rate the nursery environment? – indoors and out			
4. How well do you think the nursery provides for your child's early education?			
5. How suitable is the location of the nursery?			
6. What are the fees for the nursery and what do they cover?			