

A Parent's Guide To

# Family-Friendly Child Care Centers





## Support

## Respect

Child care staff are listening to parents\* in a way they may not have listened before. They are becoming more aware of the many pressures that affect families today.

\* *Parent* is used to mean any primary caregiver who has or shares full responsibility for raising a child.

## HOW DOES A GOOD CHILD CARE CENTER BECOME A GREAT CHILD CARE CENTER?

How does a good child care center become a great child care center? It doesn't happen overnight, but good child care centers are transforming themselves into great child care centers by letting go of outdated expectations of families that are not compatible with today's complicated and diverse family life. Child care staff are listening to parents in a way they may not have listened before. They are becoming more aware of the many pressures that affect families today: lengthy commutes, the need to work faster and smarter, and simply having too much to do.

The traditional focus of child care staff on teaching children *for* parents is shifting to working *with* parents. The child care center is becoming an environment in which parents and teachers learn from one another. What is commonly referred to as "parent involvement" or "parent support" is evolving into a new relationship between parents and center staff because the nature of today's families has changed — there are now dual-career families, single-parent families, same-sex partner families, immigrant families, blended families, and grandparents and other family members raising children.

Is your center ready to go from good to great? Then read on. Great child care centers are taking a down-to-earth, individualized approach that leads to what great child care has always been about — a true collaboration between families and staff with children as the focus.

This resource guide is designed for you to use to evaluate your current child care center or to bring along as you observe and evaluate centers you may use in the future.

## THE FAMILY-FRIENDLY CHILD CARE STUDY

Before it was applied to child care, the term family-friendly was coined to describe some companies. Companies that were family-friendly trained their managers to be sensitive to family needs and began offering family-friendly benefits such as flexible work arrangements, family leave time so parents could care for new children in the family, and allowing employees to use their own sick time to care for ill children.

IBM is one company that strives to be family-friendly. IBM has long understood the connection between its business success and high-quality child care for its employees. In the past few decades, IBM has funded and supported activities and research to improve the quality of child care. One such project, called the Family-Friendly Child Care Study, was recently conducted to identify the specific characteristics of family-friendly child care and to encourage parents and child care centers to work together to make their centers' programs and services more family-friendly.

## Goals of the Family-Friendly Child Care Study

### Identify the key elements of family-friendly child care

The study identified six elements of family-friendly child care, which are presented in detail in this guide.

### Understand the business impact of family-friendliness on child care centers and parents' employers

One significant finding in the study was that there is a link between high-quality, family-friendly child care and reduced parental work/life stress. In other words, parents whose children are enrolled in high-quality, family-friendly centers are somewhat more likely than others to report reduced stress and better concentration at work. They also have fewer instances of leaving work early, arriving late, and missing important meetings.

Another important finding was that higher ratings of quality and family-friendliness are associated with higher job satisfaction among the staff at child care centers. Typically, greater job satisfaction among teachers and administrators translates into reduced staff turnover. Staff who remain at a center over time are more able to focus on improving programs and services, which helps a center go from good to great. High-quality, family-friendly centers not only serve families better, but they also tend to have more satisfied employees.

### Develop an audit tool for centers to use to assess the family-friendliness of their programs and services

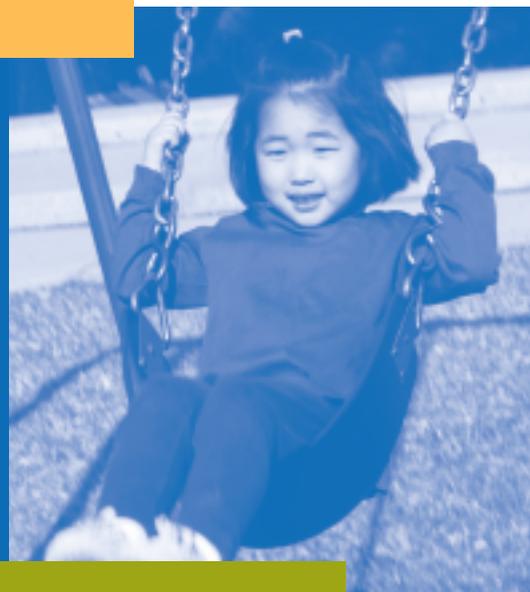
The Family-Friendly Child Care Centers Audit Tool was developed to help centers gather information about how well they are serving working families. The tool is available to centers interested in identifying specific gaps in their services and promoting conversations between administrators, teachers, and parents about family-friendly services and behaviors. See the last page of this guide for information on how to obtain the audit tool.

## OVERALL QUALITY COUNTS TOO

The researchers conducting the Family-Friendly Child Care Study made an important discovery — that overall high-quality care (defined by the teacher:child ratio, the quality of the educational program, and the level of training and experience of the staff) serves as the foundation for family-friendly care. In other words, all child care centers must have a basic level of quality in order for the family-friendly elements to develop. Family-friendly elements are *enhancements* or *improvements* to high-quality care that can make a good center a great one.

# Communicating

Family-friendly child care focuses on building a culture of strong support for working parents.



# Caring

## WHAT IS FAMILY-FRIENDLY CHILD CARE?

**Family-friendly child care begins with the premise that families are the center of children's lives.**

Family-friendly programs reflect and respect the unique characteristics of all members of a child's family. This includes not only the child and the child's mother and father, but all other significant adults who are involved in caring for the child as well. Family-friendly child care focuses on the needs of the whole family, on building a culture of strong support for working parents with an emphasis on parent connection and participation in the center.

**Family-friendly child care centers adopt policies that put family needs first.**

A family-centered program is one that provides services that give you more time to spend with your children when you are at home and one whose staff can "put themselves in your shoes." The *family-centric*, rather than *center-centric* point of view shapes policies and practices in order to help you feel good about the care your child receives and reduces parental stress.

THE STUDY IDENTIFIED THE FOLLOWING METHODS OF COMMUNICATION AS MOST VALUED BY BOTH PARENTS AND STAFF:

- Written notices placed in cubbies or posted on the doors to children's rooms.
- Conversations at drop-off and pick-up time.
- Individualized written notes.
- Individual parent conferences.

Although it may seem subtle, shifting the discussion from what constitutes a high-quality center (staff:child ratios, teacher training, and the educational program) to what constitutes a family-friendly center changes the focus from *what the center as an organization does to provide care for the children* to *how well the center works together with families to provide care for the children*. Focusing on the joint responsibilities of the center and the children's families addresses the needs of both parties while keeping the focus on the care of the children.

## THE SIX ELEMENTS OF FAMILY-FRIENDLY CHILD CARE

1. Positive relationships between teachers and children.
2. Meaningful interactions between teachers and parents.
3. Quality relationships between staff and families.
4. Respect for diverse families and cultures.
5. Responsiveness to family needs.
6. Communication between staff and families.

### 1. Positive Relationships Between Teachers and Children

Family-friendly teachers pay attention and respond to children's ideas and feelings and provide closeness, cuddling, and a feeling of safety and trust. Warm, sensitive, and responsive interactions help children develop a secure, positive sense of self and encourage them to respect and cooperate with others. Children who see themselves as highly valued are more likely to feel like part of the community.

### 2. Meaningful Interactions Between Teachers and Parents

The connections between staff and parents are key to creating a positive and relaxed atmosphere in the center. Think about a recent, meaningful conversation you had with a child care provider at your center. Did she or he take the time to really listen to you? Did you feel as though you were working together to solve a problem or that she or he understood your request or your child's needs? If the answer is yes to these questions, the staff of your center are probably tuned in to family-friendly interactions.

### 3. Quality Relationships Between Staff and Families

Staff at family-friendly centers actively build quality relationships with families. This means making you feel welcome and included at the center, both in your interactions with staff and in your interactions with other parents. You should feel a sense of partnership and mutual support.

### 4. Respect for Diverse Families and Cultures

Family-friendly programs embrace the diversity of the families they serve. Teachers respect the goals and values families have established for their children, and the kind of people they hope their children are growing up to be. Staff also individualize their interactions with people at the center whether they are stepmothers, fathers, grandparents, children, or other staff.

### 5. Responsiveness to Family Needs

Staff at family-friendly centers actively plan ahead for the needs of the families in their care. It's important for the administration and staff to be aware of what's going on in your family in order to be responsive to your needs. They use this information to plan programs that address the broad needs of all the working families in their care, and to keep resources on hand about community programs that may be helpful to you.

### 6. Communication Between Staff and Families

Communication is an essential element of family-friendly care. Talking with administrators, staff, and other parents is the way you build relationships in centers. Never underestimate the power of a good conversation! For example, take the time to greet staff at drop-off in the morning or spend a few minutes chatting at evening pick-up. Exchanging written notes, e-mails, or phone calls are also valuable ways to connect about a specific issue, or just get to know each other better.

# WHAT FAMILY-FRIENDLY FEELS LIKE IN A CHILD CARE CENTER

## 1. Positive Relationships Between Teachers and Children

Family-friendly staff understand the importance of sitting on the floor with children and providing low tables for them. They also know that couches, stuffed chairs, plants, and soft lighting go a long way toward making child care rooms feel friendly to the children and adults who use them.

- Staff respond quickly and sensitively to children's requests and nonverbal cues. For example, they offer affection, help with toileting, and they spend time answering and expanding on children's questions.
- Staff demonstrate that they know and appreciate each child in their room. For example, they integrate individual children's interests, friendships, temperament, food preferences, and napping habits into all activities.
- The center has a relaxed and cheerful atmosphere. Children seem to be comfortable, engaged, and having fun.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY CLASSROOMS MIGHT PROVIDE A JOURNAL FOR PARENTS TO WRITE NOTES TO STAFF ABOUT THEIR CHILD. FOR EXAMPLE:

Charlotte likes to count the ducks on her bath towel and lately she only wants to count in Chinese. If you'd like to count along, here's a rough pronunciation guide:

- 1 ya chat (like the English word yacht)
- 2 yee
- 3 sam (rhymes with mom)
- 4 say
- 5 mmm (as in mmm, good)
- 6 look
- 7 chut
- 8 bot (like the end of robot)
- 9 gao (rhymes with cow)
- 10 sup

## 2. Meaningful Interactions Between Teachers and Parents

Young children's learning and development are integrally connected to their families. Consequently, to support and promote children's optimal learning and development, staff will recognize the importance of children's families. They will establish relationships built on mutual trust and respect and invite all families to fully participate in the program. Family-friendly staff will intentionally plan daily schedules and curriculum informed by what they know about individual children and their families. They will be approachable, wanting to hear what parents have to say, whether it is positive or negative. They will listen carefully, picking up on what parents say about their children, and be able to respond in a flexible and sensitive manner.

- Staff ask parents for information about their child and the child's interests to help plan daily activities.
- Staff and parents work together to solve problems such as finding a child's lost belongings, long naps that interfere with evening bedtime, or a child who bites.
- Staff take the time to help parents understand how the center's curriculum and activities contribute to their child's learning and development.

SOME FAMILY-FRIENDLY CENTERS USE DIGITAL CAMERAS TO SHARE CHILDREN'S DAILY ACTIVITIES WITH PARENTS.

Using e-mail, staff can periodically send digital photographs home to parents showing their children at work and play.



### 3. Quality Relationships Between Staff and Families

Staff efforts to connect with families are critical to building a sense of community. No matter what the level of parental involvement — whether parents visit for lunch, bring photos to post on the bulletin board, or participate on a policy committee — staff assure parents that they will go the distance so that the whole family feels like part of the child care center community.

Staff understand the concept of empathy — standing in someone else's shoes. Their efforts to deepen their understanding of families constantly improve the children's experiences and the family's comfort level.

- Staff encourage parents to express their own feelings of sadness or concern when a child is adjusting to the center.
- Parents feel welcome to suggest ways they can be involved in the life of the center and feel that their opinions are welcome.
- The center values and appreciates parents' efforts to donate their time and skills and to share their various cultural experiences at the center.



#### IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS THAT COUNT . . .

Like making sure the administration of the center introduces every staff member to new families, from the director to the cook and custodian. This both validates the team it takes to manage a center and gets new relationships off to a good start.

### 4. Respect for Diverse Families and Cultures

Family-friendly programs are constantly striving to better understand how parents think about their children and their work and family life, which helps them find common ground and improves their ability to respond appropriately. Relationships are based on mutual respect, trust, and cultural sensitivity.

- The staff respect and value the unique characteristics and circumstances of all families at the center.
- Staff are empathetic and understanding about parents' schedules and the demands on parents' time.
- The center respects the confidentiality of parents and children.

#### FAMILY-FRIENDLY ALSO MEANS FATHER-FRIENDLY OR GRANDPARENT-FRIENDLY.

Family-friendly centers help fathers, grandparents, and other family members feel welcome in what is often perceived as the female world of young children. What can a center do to make all family members feel involved and connected?

- Meet and greet dads and grandparents at the door.
- Engage them in conversations about children's progress.
- Recognize unique contributions of various family members.
- Take an interest survey to find out interests or skills of dads or grandparents.
- Display images of men and grandparents with young children around the center.

## 5. Responsiveness to Family Needs

By asking questions or creating opportunities for parents to share relevant information, staff help ensure that the center is responsive to parent needs. Confidentiality, flexibility, and sincerity are the characteristics that define the interactions between staff and parents that help staff respond to parents' needs. Staff members have open minds and take a "why not?" approach, which legitimizes parents' concerns and requests. A "why not?" approach leads to innovation and better care.

- Staff ask parents questions about their jobs and family circumstances so they can better understand the needs of the family.
- Staff work with each family to create a personalized transition plan to help each new child adjust to the center.
- When a parent inquires about a service the center currently doesn't offer, staff are open to new ideas.

## 6. Communication Between Staff and Families

Family-friendly child care is all about relationships, and relationships are all about communication. The most important goal in family-friendly centers is for staff and parents to work in partnership. Staff regularly involve parents in decisions about their child's care and education. In addition, they keep parents informed about their child's daily life and progress in the classroom in order to increase the parents' understanding and appreciation for what is going on with their child. Staff keep the lines of communication open in a variety of ways: by phone or e-mail throughout the day or by leaving notes or questions in journals or logs used by parents and staff.

- Staff greet parents and children in the morning and say goodbye in the evening.
- Parents and staff share information about meaningful daily events related to the child. For infants and pre-verbal toddlers, there is daily written communication to parents about the child's daily activities. For older children, there is daily written communication about the group's activities.
- Parents have more than one way to communicate with the center (e.g., notes, phone calls, and e-mail).

### THE STUDY ASKED PARENTS WHAT SERVICES THEY WOULD BE INTERESTED IN THAT WERE NOT OFFERED AT THEIR CENTER.

At the top of the list:

- Information on community activities for children and families.
- Information on support services for families.
- Computers with software for children.
- Enrichment classes (for a fee) such as dance, martial arts, music, or gymnastics.
- Flexible payment plans.
- Food programs with hot meals.
- Backup child care for enrolled children on unscheduled days.
- Occasional social activities for center staff and families.





There are a ways to jump-start the process of transforming your center from a good to a great center.

Teamwork

Diversity

## STARTING A FAMILY-FRIENDLY CONVERSATION AT YOUR CENTER

Although the number of working mothers has increased dramatically in recent years, the attitudes of child care staff have not quite kept up the pace. Caring for children all day is hard work. Sometimes child care providers feel that their job is to save or rescue children. Sometimes when staff have had a difficult day with a child, they have strong feelings. It may be easier for them to direct negative feelings at a parent rather than the child. But when parents value the teachers' work and role, their relationships with teachers are more constructive. Similarly, when teachers value working with parents, it makes for a better relationship.

Although the value of high-quality, family-friendly care seems clear, the transformation of a center from good to great will depend on the unique culture and circumstances of each center. There is no such thing as a "one size fits all" child care center. Keep in mind that financial or staffing constraints may prevent a center from offering certain services. Timing is also important – there may be other important center activities going on like fundraising or physical improvements. On the positive side, however, many of the elements of a family-friendly center cost little or nothing.

By planning ahead for a dialogue with your center's administrators about family-friendly programs and services, there are ways to jump-start the process of transforming your center from a good to a great center.

## Tips to Help You Prepare for your Conversation

- Consider the family-friendly elements and ideas presented in this guide to clarify and expand your own thinking about what is reasonable to expect from your center.
- Determine the level of overall quality that exists at your center. How would you rate your center on staff:child ratio, the educational program, and the experience level of staff? If its rating is only poor or good, your conversation should focus on improvements in basic quality first.
- If the level of quality at your center is excellent, start a conversation with the administrators at your center. Discuss with them the family-friendly elements presented in this guide. Acknowledge the elements that are already present in the center's program and plan together how to incorporate others into the program and get staff and parents involved.
- Use your own experiences to "bring the elements to life." Tell stories about your own communication with staff or a time when you felt your family values were honored.
- Ask the administrators of your center if they are ready to engage in the process and if they can allocate some resources for the process.
- Use the Family-Friendly Audit Tool to help initiate the process and start a conversation.
- Use the Family-Friendly Audit Tool results to develop a training plan for staff and an improvement plan for the center.
- Encourage the administration to commit in-service training time and resources for professional development of staff.
- Modify the existing performance review system to ensure that family-friendliness becomes integrated into the culture of the center.

Today, the diversity of families and their ever-changing needs challenge child care centers to respond to each family individually. The shift in focus to working with families is an idea whose time has come and an opportunity for your center to make the leap from good to great.



### HOW DO YOU THINK STAFF AT YOUR CENTER WOULD ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS?

Do we...

- Use what we know about each child to make activities feel special for all children?
- Work with families to build trust?
- Avoid making families feel vulnerable or inadequate?
- Work as a team with parents to solve problems?
- Try to find out what families think is important?
- Communicate in a variety of ways with as many families as possible every day?

### IF YOU ARE LOOKING AT NEW CENTERS FOR YOUR FAMILY:

Use the family-friendly elements described in this guide as your criteria for selecting the right center for you. As you tour potential centers for your infant or look at new centers for an older child, determine whether the elements are present. Ask administrators about the elements that are most important to you.

To download a copy of  
Family-Friendly Child Care Centers: An Audit Tool  
go to <http://www.abcdpendentcare.com>  
and click on Tools and Assessments.

