What to check before enrolling your child in daycare

Choosing a daycare for your child is a big decision. It is often the first time you hand over care to someone outside your family, and you want to be sure the environment is safe, clean, and supportive. A thorough check before enrollment can give you confidence that the setting meets your standards for health and well-being. This article walks through the key points to look for so you can make an informed choice.

Hand hygiene and sanitation practices

Good hand hygiene is the first line of defense against the spread of illness in any group setting. When you visit a potential daycare, watch how staff and children wash their hands. Are there sinks with soap and paper towels in each classroom? Do teachers clean their own hands after wiping a nose or changing a diaper? A quick observation tells you whether the practice is routine or just occasional.

Sanitation goes beyond hands. Look at the surfaces children touch often: tables, toys, door handles, and changing tables. A healthy daycare will have a clear schedule for cleaning these items, and the cleaning products should be safe for children yet effective against germs. Ask about the disinfecting routine for toys that go in mouths. The answer should be specific, not vague. If the center uses a bleach solution, it should be mixed fresh daily and stored out of reach.

Also check the diaper-changing area. It should be separate from play spaces, have a washable surface, and include a sink for handwashing right next to it. The staff member should wash their hands after every change and sanitize the surface before the next child uses it. These details matter because they reduce the chance of infection spreading through the room.

When you review the center's illness policy, pay attention to how they handle a child who becomes sick during the day. Is there a quiet, comfortable area where the child can wait for pickup? Are parents called promptly? A clear policy helps prevent a mild cold from turning into a classroom-wide outbreak. The best centers also communicate with families about any contagious illness that has been in the room, so everyone can watch for symptoms at home.

Allergy plan and food safety

If your child has any food allergies or sensitivities, the daycare's allergy plan is critical. Ask how they label snacks and meals, and whether they keep epinephrine or other emergency

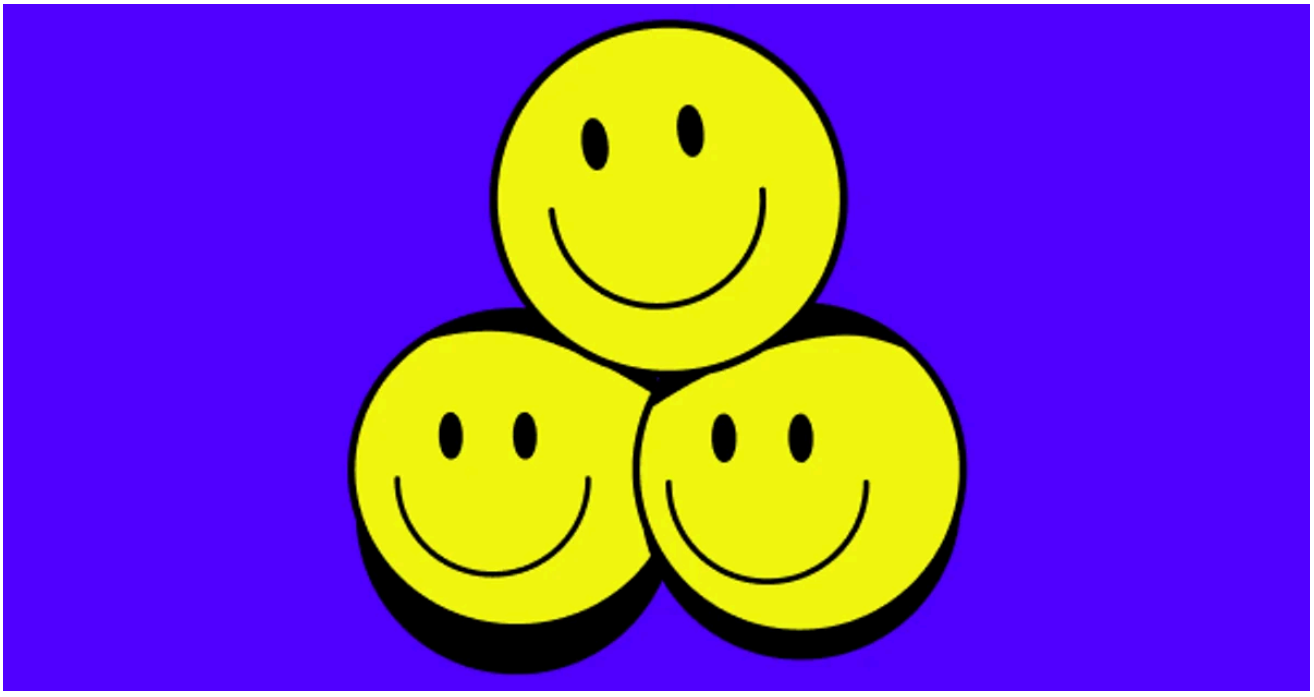
medications on hand. The staff should know which children have which allergies, and the menu should avoid common allergens unless a separate, safe option is available.

Watch how snacks and meals are served. Are children supervised while eating? For toddlers, that means sitting down, not running around with food. The staff should be trained in how to respond if a child chokes or has an allergic reaction. A written allergy plan that is posted in the classroom is a good sign that the center takes this seriously.

If your child has a medical condition such as asthma or diabetes, ask how the staff manage medications. Who administers them, and what training have they had? The center should have a system for documenting each dose and for notifying parents if a dose was missed or if the child had a reaction.

Emergency contacts and authorized pickup

Emergencies happen, and the daycare must know exactly who can pick up your child. The enrollment paperwork should include a list of authorized adults, and the center should check identification every time someone new comes to collect a child. This might seem like a small detail, but it prevents a stressful situation from becoming dangerous.



Ask how the center handles a situation where a parent is late or an authorized person cannot be reached. Do they have a backup contact on file? Is there a procedure for contacting emergency services if needed? These policies should be clear and written down, not made up on the spot.

Also review the emergency evacuation plan. Are there drills for fire, earthquake, or lockdown? The staff should know where to take the children and how to account for everyone. A posted evacuation map and a practiced routine give you peace of mind that the center can keep children safe in a crisis.

First aid and active supervision

Every staff member should have current first aid and CPR training. This is not optional. Ask how often they renew their certification and whether the training covers infants and children. A center that invests in regular training is more likely to handle minor injuries calmly and know when to call for help.

Active supervision means that staff are watching the children constantly, not just glancing occasionally. In a classroom, you should see teachers positioned so they can see all areas where children play. They should be counting children frequently and noticing when a child is quiet or out of sight. This is especially important outdoors, where equipment and open space can hide a child quickly.

Ask about the ratio of staff to children. Lower ratios mean more attention per child and a lower chance of accidents. The state licensing requirements set a minimum, but many centers aim for a higher ratio to improve safety. If the ratio feels too high, that is a red flag to consider carefully.

A healthy daycare environment is one where safety is woven into every part of the day, from the moment a child walks in until they leave. The checklist above covers the essentials: hand hygiene, sanitation, illness policy, allergy planning, emergency contacts, authorized pickup, first aid, and active supervision. When you visit a center, take notes and trust your instincts. If something seems off, ask again or look elsewhere. Your child's health and safety are worth the effort.