



Quality Child Care Helps Children and Families Thrive

A child's brain develops fastest in the first three years, forming more than 1 million new neural connections per second, the infrastructure for learning, memory, emotion, and behavior. High-quality child care during this critical growth period sets children on a path toward higher achievement in school, increased earnings and better health as adults.

When parents go to work, they need access to high-quality, affordable, safe child care that fits their needs whether a licensed child care center, a family home child care or friends, family and neighbor caregivers. In Washington state, 16.5% of children that have all caregivers working outside the home are in licensed child care.

Types of Child Care in Washington State

Licensed Child Care

Foundational quality standards ensure safe, healthy, and nurturing environments in care licensed by the state's Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF). Children birth through age 12, depending on the program.

Washington's licensed child cares can serve about 216,225 children under 12.

Licensed programs must meet DCYF standards for health, safety, facility space, staff qualifications, and more. Some staff have age, education, certification, and training prerequisites and all licensed programs have set child-to-teacher ratios designed to support safety and quality care.



Child Care Centers

In a commercially zoned setting. Capacity based on square footage. Larger centers with children typically grouped into structured classrooms by age, with group-based learning. Most often have standard, weekday hours.



Family Child Care Homes

In a provider's home or small setting. Capacity up to 12 children. Smaller settings, typically mixed-age groups and often meets diverse language and cultural needs preferred by families. More likely to offer nonstandard hour care.



School Programs

In district school settings. Capacity based on square footage. Care for children during non-school hours including before/after school programs.



Outdoor Schools

Outdoors on public land. Capacity based on square footage. Ages 4 -12. Regularly scheduled nature-based child care, either by age or mixed-age groups.

Special Programs & Supports

ECEAP and Head Start

State funded Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) and Federally funded Head Start for low-income families' children ages 3 and 4. Often run in licensed settings, with oversight and professional standards.

Working Connections Child Care

Washington's child care subsidy program, helping low-income families pay for child care. Providers must be licensed or certified. Eligibility up through age 12.

Early Achievers

Washington's Quality Recognition and Improvement System (QRIS) available to all early learning programs and required for licensed child care receiving state subsidy. Providers and programs are given a quality rating based on multiple standards including learning environment, curriculum, family engagement, professional development, and child outcomes.

Transitional Kindergarten (TK)

For children who need an extra preparatory year before kindergarten; offered in many school districts.

License-Exempt Care

These care types may operate legally without formal state licensing. Those that accept state subsidies often still meet some limited regulations and have some professional development opportunities.

Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) Providers

Child care provided by individuals including grandparents, aunts and uncles, elders, older siblings, friends, neighbors, and others. Often informal, flexible and affordable (or sometimes unpaid) FFN often meets diverse language and cultural needs preferred by families. A limited number of FFN providers receive subsidy and meet limited DCFY oversight, serving about 3,500 children in Washington.

Family, Friend, and Neighbor care is the most common type of child care.

Child Care Programs Less than 4 Hours per Day

Programs that provide care for four hours per day or less are exempt from licensure and follow their own professional standards. This includes private programs and some programs affiliated with organizations like colleges.

Private In-Home Care

Options such as nannies, au pairs, nanny shares are not subject to state licensing but are regulated by other standards depending on context.