



Child Care Checklist

Nesting conditions for children in child care

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The Evolved Nest

Nested Children,
Compassionate Adults

www.EvolvedNest.org



The Evolved Nest's Child Care Center Checklist: Nesting Conditions for Children In Child Care

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***Darcia Narvaez, PhD, founder
of The Evolved Nest***

Dear Parent,

The Evolved Nest is humanity's system of care that evolved with our species to optimize all aspects of baby and child development, giving them the best chance for physical, mental, social, cognitive and emotional health. Our lab investigates the influence of the evolved nest and gathers findings related to its effects. Our research findings show that the Evolved Nest is related to greater self-control, cooperation, empathy, conscience, wellbeing and happiness, and to less depression, anxiety, and opposition in children and in the adults they become. The evolved nest is a buffer against trauma and challenges that may occur after early childhood. See EvolvedNest.org for more information.

The Child Care Center Checklist has been created to help parents see how well a child care center matches up with the components of the evolved nest. The checklist is intended to be *supplemental* to the other protocols a center has (e.g., literacy, infection prevention, abuse prevention, diaper change frequency).

This is the process we recommend for using this document:

Step 1. Read through this document.

Step 2. Visit the center. Read their materials. Observe. It is a good idea to spend some time at the center observing. Try to observe during different parts of the day and activities, such as play time, meals and nap time. Watch how adults treat each child. Watch children's reactions to caregivers. Get a feel for the place.

If the center's information is unclear or incomplete, ask for the suggested information mentioned in the checklist.

Step 3. Complete the checklist summary page.

We hope this is a helpful resource for parents and caregivers. We wish you and the children you know a satisfying, nested life!

Darcia Narvaez, PhD

The Evolved Nest, Founder

Kindred World, President



What Children Need to Thrive

What do young children need to grow into healthy, intelligent and happy individuals?

Young children’s bodies, brains and personalities are built from experience with others in the early years. Early relationships affect “set points” for happiness, self-control and sociality.

Adults who are appropriately responsive for healthy development keep baby optimally aroused, content, avoiding distress in the baby, so that growth continues. Caregivers warmly, promptly and respectfully care for baby’s needs.

Young children need companionable responsive relationships—long term, friend-like experiences where they learn to synchronize their emotions and actions with those of their caregivers. Companionable responsive relationships fulfill children’s basic needs for being welcomed, belonging in a larger community, building social competence through social experience, with freedom to follow their inner impulses. You can recognize a close relationship by frequent smiling, laughing and kindness.

In welcoming environments, there is no emotional or physical punishment. For young children especially, such punishments have long term negative effects on health and wellbeing. Instead, children learn self-control by the comforting they receive, training up their bodies to calm down. Respectful hugging and cuddling help reassure children that they are safe and cared for. Children are not forced to do anything and their natural rhythms are followed.

Children need a welcoming culture or climate wherever they spend their time. Whole-body, social free play grows self-control and social skills. Stories and imaginative activities encourage social and emotional learning. Spending time in the natural world with a variety of plants and animals helps children develop confidence.

SUMMARY CHECKLIST

Complete this summary checklist after you visit the child care center.

THE PEOPLE		YES	NO
1. Quality of Relationships	Close relationships between caregiver and child and between children are observed including frequent smiling, laughing and kindness.		
2. Caregiver Wellbeing	Caregivers are content, energetic and interested in giving care to children.		
3. Staffing	Caregivers demonstrate consistent warmth and are trained in child development. Staff-child ratio is appropriate (e.g., 1 caregiver for 2-3 babies; fewer children per adult is better).		
4. Responsiveness	Caregivers warmly, promptly and respectfully care for children's needs.		
CAREGIVING ENVIRONMENT			
1. Culture of Classroom	There is a welcoming environment and developmental discipline (no physical or emotional punishment) and no discipline for babies/young children. Stories and activities encourage social and emotional learning. Stress reduction activities are routine.		
2. Play	Children have a great deal of time to play freely. Pre-planned activities are kept to a minimum.		
3. Touch and Movement	Appropriate affectionate touch and free movement is plentiful. Cuddles and comfort are given when needed, child led.		
4. Music	Children have opportunities to sing, make and move to music.		
5. Free Art	Children have opportunities to create art freely.		
6. Group Formation	Children of different ages socialize together.		
7. Nature Connection	Experiences in nature/outside or with natural creatures take place most of or many times during the day.		
8. Placefulness	Children routinely meet with local community members and visit places in the community.		
9. Nutrition	Policies for provision of non-processed food are in place; children are allowed to eat when needed; caregivers make sure healthy food is available at each meal.		
10. Breastfeeding	Education and policies are in place to support mothers who are breastfeeding.		
11. Sleep	Caregivers follow the natural sleep cycle of the baby and babies/children are not left to cry.		

Nesting Conditions for Children in Child Care

THE PEOPLE

1. **Quality of Relationships.** One of the best ways to recognize a health-promoting center is to notice the quality of relationships between the caregivers and children and among children. In a healthy environment there is a lot of social pleasure—e.g., laughing, smiling and kindness.

- Do the babies/children seem attached to caregivers?
- Do the children get along? Are child friendships apparent?

2. **Caregivers Personal Wellbeing.** Caregivers should be responsive not only to children's needs but their own. Exhausted caregivers or people who hate their jobs (burn out, empathy fatigue) can seriously harm children. But joyful and happy caregivers have big impact on the environment and children's own wellness.

- Do the caregivers look content and energetic?
- Are the caregivers warm and positive?
- Do the staff members get along?

3. **Staffing.** Young children need warm, responsive caregivers whom they get to know in deep relationships. Caregivers tend to be more responsive when they understand child development.

- Are caregivers trained in child development?
- What is the rate of staff turnover? 15% or less is better.
- Staff/child ratio should be higher than what is legally required in the state, preferably no more than 1 staff per three babies, five toddlers or eight preschoolers. Lower is better.
- How many children are assigned together?
- How many caregivers/teachers are assigned to a group?

Also consider:

- Are children's needs a priority over adult needs?
- Are caregivers clearly warm and responsive to children?

4. **Responsiveness.** Respectful, responsive and warm relationships are characterized by listening and responding appropriately with congruent emotions, words and nonverbal gestures. Young children need positive encouragement.

Children are treated as persons with dignity. The caregiver has an attitude of prioritizing respectful relationships with the children rather than being primarily task oriented. The caregiver is not rushed in relating to the child. The caregiver does not act on a child but communicates quietly about what needs to be done or will happen and waits for the response from the child and adjusts action accordingly.

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The caregiver often reflects and always responds skillfully to the child's emotions to help the child build emotional intelligence ("You look sad, do you want me to hold you?" "Instead of hitting me, what can you do you with your body when you feel angry?") Caregivers talk children through what's expected for many senses (what does a good lunch day look like, sound like, feel like), which helps foster self-regulation. As part of fostering socioemotional intelligence, the caregiver is also honest about their emotions, with words matching body language.

- Ask how staff members are trained to be responsive.

CAREGIVING ENVIRONMENT

1. **Culture of the Classroom.** Young children need to feel welcomed and comfortable with themselves in order to grow. Discipline needs to be developmental and oriented toward building a confident cooperative character rather than punishing and shaming. There is no discipline for babies or young children.



- Is there an independent mastery orientation where students learn to master tasks as they feel motivated to do so?
- What techniques are used to move children away from harmful action? Is redirection of attention or presentation of alternatives used rather than saying "no"?
- What, if any, boundaries of behaviors are set? Is bullying handled with respect for all children?
- When a child is upset, is nurturing the first response and is social and emotional support provided?
- When there is peer conflict is guidance provided (not imposed), mirroring of feelings and then a calm resolution?
- Are children educated about feelings when feelings get hurt?
- Are sympathy and compassion fostered for one another?
- Do the stories used educate children about feelings and getting along?
- Are videos, television used? Rarely or never is better.
- Are teachers educated to not use negative touch (pinching, grabbing, slapping, rough handling, etc.)?
- Are there multiple daily stress-reduction practices (e.g., napping, listening to music, meditation, deep breathing, large muscle movements)?
- Do caregivers participate in games and activities at least some of the time (instead of just watching)?

Also consider:

- Does the center and the separated areas have a welcoming, nurturing climate?
- Are classroom sounds pleasant?
- Do adults speak in calm voices?
- Is a general climate of playfulness evident?

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- Is there evidence that a sense of community and belonging are promoted (e.g., student photos, art work on the walls)?
- Is the environment free of hazards for young children (e.g., electrical outlets covered, no sharp edged tables)?

2. Play. Self-directed, unstructured, play fosters children’s brain and body development. Young children need lots of whole-body, active play with others, preferably of different ages and in the natural world of trees and hills. The more time for each of these, the better for the child.

- How much time during the day do children get to engage in self-directed play? More is better. Play should be allowed when the child is in the mood for free play.
- How often are children engaged in pre-planned structured activities? Less is better.
- Can children choose not to participate in pre-planned activities? Yes is better.
- Throughout the day, can children change activities at will? Yes is better.
- Do adults stay out of the way of play behavior?
- Are staff encouraged to have an attitude of noninterference when children are absorbed in a task?
- Are there frequent times for creative play (e.g., dress up, dance)?

3. Touch and Movement. Young children need good touch and free movement. Centers have strict safeguards against sexual abuse that must be followed. But young children need positive touch to restore calmness when upset. Hugs, cuddles, carrying with respect and holding hands are forms of positive touch. Babies should be carried in arms as much as possible. Children also need freedom to move to grow well. Free movements means when even as babies, they are free to move their arms and legs. Toddlers and older children can move at will and have opportunities for gross and fine motor skill development.

- Throughout the day, are children provided with respectful positive touch when they indicate needing it (carrying, cuddling, hugs, lap sitting)
- Are babies held while being fed (ideal) rather than being left in a car seat or high chair?
- Are babies able to practice rolling, crawling, standing, and walking instead of being confined to equipment such as swings, chairs, bouncy devices?
- Are pet animals part of the classroom? Can students hold them to calm down?
- Are cozy pillows, furniture, stuffed animals available?
- Can children move freely when needed?
- Are active games, dancing, exercises part of daily routine?
- Are fine-motor activities a daily experience?

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4. Music. Music develops children’s brains and bodies holistically through dancing, singing, and rhythmic play, such as through folk song games. Ideally, children have access to music-making instruments and the freedom to use them to make music together. They have demonstrations from musicians and others on music making.

- Every day there are times for listening to music, dancing to music, and singing.
- Children have opportunities to make music freely.

5. Arts. Children’s development benefits from free expression and there no better way than the arts. Ideally, there are opportunities to use clay, draw or paint freely each day and to dramatize animals or scenes, and listen to stories. Structured art projects should be rare (e.g., everyone drawing on a worksheet with a picture to fill in).

- Art materials are available for children to use such as markers, paint, clay.
- Free art time is scheduled each day.
- There is at least one story time each day.
- Drama and dress up are encouraged.

6. Group Formation. Ideally, children of different ages spend time together, especially when they are a few years apart. The younger like to learn from the older and the older generally like to help the younger. This maximizes learning, cooperation and reduces aggressiveness.

- Does a child have a choice about which staff to be close to throughout day?
- Are children assigned to primary caregivers with one staff member responsible overall?
- Are children of different ages kept together or do they have shared play times?
- Do caregivers remain with the same group for multiple years?
- Maximum group size should be lower than legally allowed in the state as well to contribute to a calm, quiet environment.



7. Nature Connection. Feeling connected to the natural world is linked to better mental health and provides a larger sense of community beyond human relationships. Children should experience complex outdoor environments, like forests, as much as possible.

- How much time do children spend outside each day? More time is better.
- How much attention is given to natural entities as part of routine experiences (planting or maintaining community garden; walking or exploring the forest)?
- Do children have opportunities to leave the center and explore other natural spaces such as parks or trails?
- Are there allowed times for water play and mud play?



Also consider:

- Is the outdoor space variable? (grass, trees, plants, woods, water)
- Are natural entities part of daily experience (e.g., plants, animals, trees)?
- Are children encouraged to lie or go barefoot on safe ground (directly on earth, soil, or grass)?

8. Placefulness. It is important for children to feel connected to their neighborhood, community, and place on the earth. Individuals who feel bonded to the larger community are happier and healthier.

- Do the children have relationships with nearby centers (e.g., schools, retirement community)?
- Do the children learn about the local landscape's weather, geography so they feel like it is home? Do they get to go outside in all kinds of weather?
- Do children go on walking field trips to local areas? Do they create stories and/or artwork about their experiences?
- Are community members encouraged to visit and share their gifts of song or story, etc.?
- Are parents encouraged to participate and even drop in?

9. Nutrition. Young children are growing rapidly, especially their brains, and need good foods to facilitate healthy growth.

- Does the center feed babies when requested by baby (understanding the signals)?
- Does the center coordinate feeding with the mother's normal feeding schedule?
- Does the center develop a feeding plan for babies with families that evolves with the child's development?
- Is there a policy for providing nutritious foods?
- Is there a policy against giving children processed foods?
- Is there variability in foods provided?
- Are children allowed autonomy in trying foods or leaving food on the plate?
- Are children allowed to decide when they are full? And conversely, do caregivers make sure children focus on eating enough nutritious food at each meal?

10. Breastfeeding. Breast milk is the powerhouse liquid that babies' bodies are ready for. For parents who are breastfeeding, here are questions to address.

- Does the center clearly support breastfeeding? Is there a written policy that supports the mother's breastfeeding preferences and needs, including how staff provide breast milk?
- Are mothers encouraged to visit and breastfeed their children? Is there a suitable location for breastfeeding?
- Does the center have a policy to support breastfeeding and breast milk provision?
- Is the staff trained about the importance of breastfeeding, how to recognize cues for feeding, and how to store and safely prepare bottled breast milk?
- Does the staff know how to support breastfeeding mothers? Do they have a list of resources to provide mothers (support groups, WIC Breastfeeding Coordinators, lactation consultants)?
- Does the plan ensure that breastfed babies are fed according to their mother's instructions, which may include the request they are not given anything to eat or drink other than their mother's milk?
- Is refrigerator and freezer space provided to store bottled breast milk, which is labeled with baby name, date and time of pumping? Back up breast milk is frozen for possible need.

•More here: <https://www.health.ny.gov/prevention/nutrition/cacfp/breastfeedingspon.htm>

9. Sleep. Caregivers follow the natural sleep cycle of the infant/child and children are not forced to sleep at the command of adults. Children also are provided other options or activities if they do not want to nap. Caregivers immediately tend to children if they are upset or crying both when they are going to sleep or waking up.

- The center follows natural sleep and rest cycles of the baby or child.
- Babies/children are not left alone to cry in order to sleep.
- Children who do not want to take a nap are provided other quiet activities to do
- Babies/children have autonomy over sleep



We Hope This Information Was Helpful!

THE EVOLVED NEST RESOURCES

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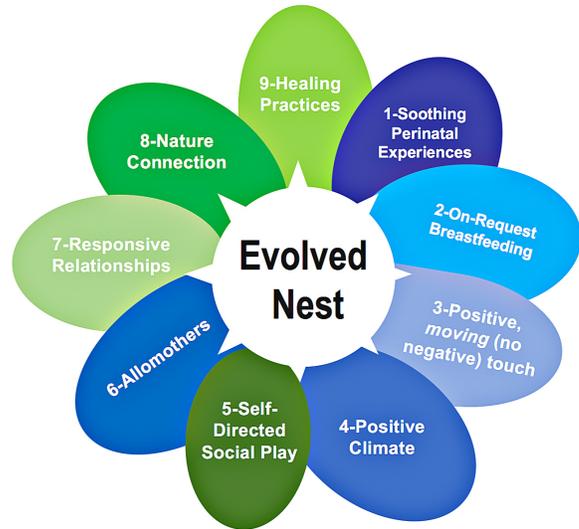
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Take the [28 Day Eco Attachment Dance](#) challenge with your children, friends and family members.



OUR GRATITUDE

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In addition, we accessed decades of neurobiological science reports, child development and parenting books are summarized at KindredWorld.org and EvolvedNest.org

For a list of our publications, see: <http://sites.nd.edu/darcianarvaez/the-evolved-nest-evolved-developmental-niche-edn/>