How to Find the Right Nursery for Your Child

Choosing a nursery is one of the first big decisions you make for your child's early years. The right setting can support their development, build confidence, and create a love of learning that lasts. But with so many options available, it can be hard to know where to start. This article walks through the key steps to help you find a nursery that fits your child's needs and your family's values.

Start with your child's needs and your family's priorities

Every child is different. Some children thrive in a calm, quiet space where they can focus on individual activities. Others need plenty of room to run, climb, and explore outdoors. Think about your child's temperament, their current interests, and any particular needs they may have, such as a settled routine or extra support with language or social skills.

Also consider practical factors. Where is the nursery located? Is it on your way to work or near your home? What are the hours, and do they fit your schedule? Does the nursery offer part-time or full-time places? These logistics matter because a nursery that is hard to reach or doesn't match your routine can add stress to family life.

Understand the different early years approaches

Nurseries often follow a particular philosophy or curriculum. The most common ones include Montessori, Forest School, and more traditional play-based approaches. A Montessori nursery, for example, focuses on child-led learning with hands-on materials, mixed-age groups, and a prepared environment. A Forest School nursery takes learning outdoors, using nature and seasonal changes as the curriculum. Many nurseries combine elements from different approaches, so it helps to read about each one and visit to see what they actually do day to day.

When you visit, ask how the nursery plans activities and how they support each child's development. Look for balance: time for free play, structured activities, outdoor time, and quiet moments. A nursery that follows a clear approach but adapts it to individual children is often a good sign.



Visit nurseries in person

No website or brochure can replace walking through a nursery's doors. Schedule a visit during a normal session, not at a special event or open day. Watch how staff interact with the

children. Are they warm and patient? Do they get down to the child's level? Do they listen and respond with care? Notice how the children behave. Are they engaged and relaxed? Do they seem comfortable with the adults around them?

Pay attention to the classroom environment. Is it organised and clean, with materials within easy reach of the children? Are there quiet corners for reading and cosy spaces for resting? Is there room for messy play and active movement? The physical space should feel welcoming and safe, but also interesting and full of possibilities.

Ask about the ratio of staff to children. A lower ratio usually means more individual attention. For children under two, many nurseries have one adult for every three children. For older children, the ratio may be one to four or one to five. Check that the nursery meets or exceeds the legal minimum for your area.

Look into the staff and key person system

A child's main caregiver at nursery is called their key person. This person gets to know your child well and builds a close, trusting relationship. Ask how the key person system works at each nursery. Will your child be assigned a specific adult from the start? How does the key person communicate with you about your child's day? How do they support your child's settling in period?

Settling in is a gradual process. A good nursery offers a phased introduction, starting with short visits and building up to full sessions. Your child's key person should work with you to make the transition smooth. You should be able to stay as long as you need, especially at the beginning.

Also ask about staff training and qualifications. Are the staff trained in child development, first aid, and safeguarding? Do they receive ongoing professional development? A team that invests in learning is likely to offer a richer experience for children.

Check the early years curriculum and daily routine

Nurseries in England follow the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework, which sets standards for learning, development, and welfare. Ask how the nursery implements the EYFS. How do they track each child's progress? How do they share that information with you?


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Look at the daily timetable. A good nursery provides a mix of adult-led and child-led activities. There should be time for free play outdoors, story time, singing, creative activities, and quiet rest. Mealtimes and snack times should be calm and social. Ask about food. Is it prepared on site? Do they cater for allergies and dietary needs? Are children encouraged to try new foods?

For a Montessori nursery, the daily routine includes extended periods of uninterrupted work time. Children choose their own activities and work at their own pace. The classroom is carefully prepared with materials that teach practical life skills, sensory learning, and early literacy and maths. If this approach appeals to you, ask how the nursery balances child choice with adult guidance.

Evaluate the outdoor space and nature connection

Outdoor play is essential for young children's physical health and wellbeing. A good nursery has daily access to an outdoor area, whether a garden, a playground, or a nearby green space. Look for natural elements: trees, grass, mud, sand, water, and places to climb and hide. A Forest School nursery takes this further, spending most of the day outdoors in all weathers. Even if a nursery is not a Forest School, it should offer regular outdoor experiences.

Ask how the nursery uses the outdoors for learning. Do they take children to a local park or woodland? Do they have a gardening area? Do they teach children about nature and sustainability? A nursery that values the natural world helps children develop respect for the environment and a sense of wonder about the world around them.

Consider the nursery's ethos on partnership with parents

A strong parent partnership makes a big difference. Look for a nursery that welcomes your involvement and communicates openly. How do they share updates about your child's day? Some nurseries use a daily diary or app. Others have face-to-face chats at pickup time. Ask how often they hold parent-teacher meetings and how they involve you in planning your child's learning.

Good nurseries also support your child's transition to school. They may work with local primary schools to share information and help children feel ready for the next step. Ask how the nursery prepares children for school life, both academically and socially.

Check registration and safeguarding

All nurseries in England must register with Ofsted. Ask to see the nursery's latest inspection report. Look at the overall rating and read the full report to understand the inspector's comments on teaching, behaviour, leadership, and safety. A nursery with a "good" or "outstanding" rating is usually a safe choice, but also consider how the nursery has addressed any areas for improvement.



Ask about the nursery's policies on behaviour, safeguarding, and complaints. How do they handle incidents? How do they ensure that all children are safe and respected? A nursery that

is open about its policies and happy to answer your questions is likely to be well run.

Choosing a nursery takes time and careful thought, but the effort pays off. A nurturing early years setting can give your child a strong start, helping them grow in confidence, curiosity, and social skills. Every child is different, and the right nursery for one family may not be right for another. Trust your instincts. Spend time in the nursery, ask questions, and watch how your child responds. If your child feels safe and happy, and if you feel confident in the staff and the environment, you have probably found a good fit.

Remember that the search is about finding a place where your child can thrive. A nurturing early years setting supports each child's unique journey, and the best nursery is the one that feels like a true partnership between you, your child, and the people who care for them every day.