

# The pre-school years

A guide to early education, childcare and play for your two-, three- or four-year-old child



**SureStart**

Making life better for children and families in our county

# Introduction



As your toddler grows into a young child, you may start to think about what learning opportunities are available outside your home.

The Early Years and Childcare Service of Oxfordshire County Council plans for and develops early education, childcare and play across Oxfordshire. We hope this booklet will help you to understand the options available to you from your child's second birthday through to when they start school. We also hope to offer some useful advice on choosing the pre-school option which best suits you and your child.

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# My **two-year-old** child

**Whether you work and your two-year-old is in childcare, or you are at home and choose to introduce them to pre-school sessions – or perhaps a mix of both – you can be confident that all registered providers in Oxfordshire follow a framework for children’s development which is called ‘birth to three matters’.**



‘Birth to three matters’ supports children in their earliest years by providing:

- information on child development and effective practice;
- examples of play activities to promote play and learning; and
- guidance on planning, finding resources and meeting a wide range of needs.

The framework is a milestone in recognising and valuing our youngest children and the contribution made to their development by the adults who care for them.

Although the framework is aimed mainly at those who provide childcare, it is also useful for parents and carers who want more information about:

- children in this age group; and
- the types of play activities which childcare professionals can offer them.

The framework is available on the Sure Start website at **[www.surestart.gov.uk](http://www.surestart.gov.uk)**.



## **A gentle introduction to pre-school sessions**

Some early education providers, including pre-schools, playgroups and day nurseries, do offer places for children from as young as two and a half. These younger pre-school children are usually cared for in smaller groups, probably with more adults and possibly in separate sessions to older children. You will be able to stay with your child to help settle them for the first few sessions.

It is up to you whether you feel your child is ready for this early introduction to pre-school education. The emphasis is on learning through play and having fun. And for some children, it may provide a first opportunity to socialise away from home with other children and adults.

**Please call Oxfordshire Children's Information Service (OCIS) on 08452 26 26 36 for details of early education providers in your area who welcome two-year-olds.**

## **You can play too**

OCIS can also provide information on a range of groups for your two-year-old, from toddler to music groups, where you stay and join in. Call **08452 26 26 36**.





# My pre-school child

**The Foundation Stage is the first stage of the National Curriculum. It focuses on the specific needs of children aged three to five. The Foundation Stage is offered in a range of settings which are described in detail in the next section of this booklet.**

The Foundation Stage of learning covers six areas. These are:

- personal, social and emotional development;
- communication, language and literacy;
- mathematical development;
- knowledge and understanding of the world;
- physical development; and
- creative development.

Children aged three and four are constantly involved in new experiences which they try to understand. As they do this, they:

- explore the world around them;
- ask questions;
- extend their skills;
- develop their confidence; and
- build on what they already know.



Well-planned play is central to children’s learning in the Foundation Stage. That way learning is both challenging and fun!

From the term after your child becomes three until the term after their fifth birthday, they are entitled to five free sessions for 38 weeks a year (33 weeks until April 2006) with a registered, early education provider. Each session should last at least two and a half hours.

Date of third birthday	Government funded pre-school sessions start from
1 April to 31 Aug.	<b>Term 1 - Sept.</b>
1 Sep. to 31 Dec.	<b>Term 3 - Jan.</b>
1 Jan. to 31 Mar.	<b>Term 5 - April</b>



▼  
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▼  
**Good news!**

Whether or not your child has been going to an early education provider before this term, the Government will now pay for the sessions detailed above. However, you may still have to pay for extras, such as:

- lunch clubs;
- any time over two-and-a-half hours in a session; and
- extra sessions.

If you are a working parent and your child is cared for by a provider who is registered for Government funding, again the sessions detailed above will now be free.

Different providers charge in different ways, so ask yours for information on how they approach this.



# It's **your** choice

**Oxfordshire offers a wide range of excellent pre-school, early education provision for two- to five-year-olds. But different names are used to describe similar providers – for example, pre-schools, playgroups and Foundation Stage (nursery) schools and classes.**

This is our guide to the different types of early education provider and some details about what you can expect from each one. **For more information about your local early education providers, call Oxfordshire Children's Information Service on 08452 26 26 36.**

It is up to you whether you choose:

- a private day nursery;
- a voluntary-run pre-school or playgroup;
- an Oxfordshire County Council provider; or
- a childminder.



Our list of recognised providers covers around 570 settings all over the county. It includes:

- pre-schools and playgroups in the voluntary sector;
- Oxfordshire County Council Foundation Stage (nursery) schools;
- Oxfordshire County Council Foundation Stage classes or units (nursery and reception classes) in our primary schools;
- partnership Foundation Stage units;
- private day nurseries;

- independent school nursery classes; and
- childminders working within an approved childminder network.

To be included on our list, providers must:

- follow our quality framework for the Foundation Stage; and
- demonstrate clear professional standards in areas such as quality in education, special needs support, staffing and premises.

They must also have regular inspections by The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

Your choice will depend on whether you prefer group or home-based care and on things like whether you will be working full or part-time.



It's your choice



## Staff to child ratios

For children over the age of three, adult-to-child ratios vary from:

- one adult to eight children in pre-schools and private childcare; to
- one adult to ten children in Foundation Stage schools, classes and units.

For children under three, there will be one adult for every four children.

When parents offer to help, there are more adults to give attention to the children, so parents are often encouraged to become involved.

For childminders, the ratio is one adult to no more than three children under five years.

## Inspections

Ofsted's nursery education inspectors will inspect and report on the quality of education provided in all settings which offer early education. There are different Ofsted inspections for voluntary and private providers than for schools run by Oxfordshire County Council, and different 'quality gradings' are awarded.



# It's **your** choice

## Pre-schools and playgroups

Pre-schools and playgroups are usually run by volunteers through a management committee. Parents are encouraged to take an active part in caring for and educating their children, and are often members of the management committee.

At least half the staff should hold (or be working towards) an early years and childcare qualification at level two.

Pre-schools and playgroups use a variety of premises based in the local community. These range from community and school buildings to purpose-built premises.

Most children start at three years old, but some pre-schools and playgroups accept younger children. Each pre-school or playgroup sets its own admissions policy based on local needs.

Children can stay in a pre-school or playgroup until the term after their fifth birthday. But in Oxfordshire, many now start school earlier (see page 20 'And so to school').

Pre-schools and playgroups are open during school term time and many also offer holiday childcare. Snacks may be provided for half-day sessions.

## Oxfordshire County Council Foundation Stage nursery schools, units and classes

We provide a range of settings for pre-school children. What is available to your child will depend partly on their age and where you live. The three years of the Foundation Stage are set out in Oxfordshire as:

- **F1 (age four and above)** – sessions usually in Foundation Stage classes in schools;
- **F2 (age three to four)** – sessions usually in a pre-school or in a private nursery or similar establishment, or a Foundation-Stage school or unit; and
- **F3 (age two to three)** – sessions usually in a pre-school or in a private nursery or similar establishment.



Some Oxfordshire County Council settings offer extra care such as extended day care or breakfast or after-school clubs (for a fee). And some may offer full-time places. Please contact individual providers for more information on these arrangements.

All of our Foundation Stage settings employ teachers and early years assistants who are specially qualified to work with children under five.

Snacks may be provided for half-day sessions. And a midday meal may be provided for children with full-time places. If you receive Income Support, your child will qualify for free school meals.

### Partnership Foundation Stage units

Many schools and pre-schools are working together on the same site to provide the whole of the Foundation Stage curriculum. This may mean sharing the indoor space, the outdoor space or both.

Arrangements are made for staff to plan together and to share their skills, experience and resources. This means that children receive a consistent and continuous education throughout their Foundation Stage years.

You will need to register your child with both the school and the pre-school.





# It's **your** choice

## Registered childminders

Some registered childminders who belong to a childminding network and are accredited can offer government-funded early education for three- and four-year-olds. Childminders who offer these sessions will have a level 3 qualification in early years and childcare and are inspected by Ofsted for the education they provide. You can use their services alongside a place at a pre-school, playgroup or nursery that offers early education sessions.

## Day nurseries

Day nurseries take children up to the age of five. They may be run by individuals, community groups, partnerships, Montessori organisations or commercial companies.

At least half the staff must have a childcare or educational qualification which is recognised by Ofsted.

There may be up to 24 children in one room. But there will be at least one adult for every eight children aged from three to five.

Day nurseries draw up their own admission policies and will normally give you a copy of the policy if you ask.

Day nurseries usually offer care from 8am until 6pm, but some may offer longer hours. They are open all year, except possibly for a week or two in the summer and at Christmas. However, you will have to pay for any time your child attends which is over the basic government-funded limits set out on page 5.

Children who are there full-time receive snacks and at least one meal a day. The nursery may provide this, or your child can bring food from home. If the nursery provides your child's meals, they must be varied and nutritious. And the nursery should respect your wishes and provide special meals for cultural and religious reasons.



It's your choice





# How **do** I choose?

**Choosing the right early education provider for your child is very important. We hope the information in this section will help you to make that choice.**

## An early visit

Before registering your child with a provider, visit the setting with your child. Try to pick a time when other children will be there. Imagine how it would feel if you were your child. Or, if you can, ask your child how they feel, and trust your instinct.

You are looking for a combination of:

- good-quality care and education;
- enthusiastic staff;
- good resources and equipment; and
- an approach that will meet the needs of your child and yourself.

Here are some useful questions to ask and things to think about when you visit.

## A warm and supportive approach

- Are you and your child made to feel welcome?
- Does it feel like a great place to be a child or be with a child all day?
- Does each child have a 'key worker' – a staff member who has special responsibility for them?
- Do staff interact with children in caring, respectful and positive ways?
- Does the setting provide a consistent routine which the children can understand and follow?
- Does the setting follow a positive approach to discipline?
- Do the staff have specific early years training and experience and can they cope with special educational or medical needs?
- Does the setting have an 'open door' policy for parents?

## Great resources

Does the setting have:

- ✓ indoor and outdoor space for playing and quiet time?
- ✓ a variety of indoor and outdoor play equipment?
- ✓ a good range of books?
- ✓ living things to grow, look at and take care of?
- ✓ imaginative play items such as a dolls' house, garage and dressing-up clothes?
- ✓ musical instruments?
- ✓ materials for drawing, painting, writing and making things?
- ✓ sand, water and home area?
- ✓ building bricks?
- ✓ resources for science and technology?
- ✓ table-top games and puzzles?

- Do you see natural and everyday materials for children to play with and not just plastic toys?
- Can children learn about their own and other cultures through art, books, music and other activities?
- Do you see displays of what the children have been doing?

## Meals and snacks

- Are the foods and drinks healthy and varied?
- Do the staff eat with the children?
- Does everyone seem to enjoy mealtimes?





# How **do** I choose?

## Communication

- Are there a variety of opportunities for informal and formal communication?
- What records do they keep on each child's progress? Can you see your child's records and contribute to them?
- Do staff talk and write to you in your own language, or arrange for someone to interpret and translate for you if necessary?
- Are there arrangements to contact you in an emergency?
- Is there an illness policy?

## Premises and safety

- Are the premises secure, bright, attractive, clean, well-ventilated and with good natural light?
- Are the toilets nearby and easy for children to use on their own?
- Are effective health-care policies in place and put into practice?
- Do staff know which children are there at all times?
- How secure are the arrangements for other people to drop off and collect your child?
- Are there clear procedures for emergency medical treatment? Is there a list of first aiders?
- Are there emergency procedures and evacuation routes which are practised regularly?

## Information

You may want to ask the setting for more written information such as:

- information about the setting, day-to-day arrangements and policies; and
- a free copy of the most recent Ofsted inspection report and current action plan. This will tell you more about their planned developments and strengths.

- ▼ During your settling-in period there should be the chance to discuss specific items with your child's key worker, such as **diet**, **medical issues**, and **special educational needs**. You should also be able to stay with your child.





## So **what** next?

**We hope you now have a good idea of the early education options available for your child and what free, early education sessions they are entitled to. Now you need to know what to do next. The following questions and answers should help with this.**

### How can I find out about registered providers?

You can choose a place from any provider in the public, private or voluntary sector, as long as the setting is registered with the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP). **Please contact Oxfordshire Children's Information Service (OCIS) on 08452 26 26 36** for a list of providers in your area, or visit the OCIS website at **[www.oxoncis.org.uk](http://www.oxoncis.org.uk)**.

### How do I register my child?

All you have to do is to check that the provider you have chosen is a registered provider and then register your child with them. You can register your child at any point during the year, although some providers may have a waiting list.

### What is my child entitled to?

All three- and four-year-olds now have the right to an early years education paid for by the Government.

In Oxfordshire, children qualify for free sessions in the term following their third birthday.

Date of third birthday	Government funded pre-school sessions start from
1 April to 31 Aug.	Term 1 - Sept.
1 Sep. to 31 Dec.	Term 3 - Jan.
1 Jan. to 31 Mar.	Term 5 - April

These children have a right to:

- five, free, two-and-a-half-hour sessions of pre-school education a week for 38 weeks a year (33 weeks until April 2006).

### How do I claim funding?

Your provider will claim the grant for you after checking with you that your child is not receiving free sessions anywhere else. They may reduce your charges at the start of the term, or may pass the grant on as a refund cheque when the funding arrives. Ask your child's provider to explain how this will work for you.

### Will I have to pay for extras?

Some providers may ask you to pay for extras such as lunches, a registration fee, school uniform or extra sessions. They should tell you beforehand about these charges.

### Can my child go to more than one provider?

You can divide your child's five free weekly sessions between as many providers as you like, as long as the providers agree. However, you need to consider whether this would suit your child – would they be confused by this arrangement?

If your child goes to more than one provider or attends for more than five sessions a week, you will need to be clear how many of the free sessions your child will be receiving from each provider and which you will pay for yourself.





## So **what** next?

### What if my child goes to a primary or Foundation-Stage school run by Oxfordshire County Council?

Sessions with our providers are funded through the scheme and will automatically count towards your child's five free sessions. Places with these providers will normally be for all five sessions.

### What if my child has special educational needs?

All registered providers must:

- follow the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice; and
- have an SEN co-ordinator (SENCO) who is trained to support children with special needs.

If you have any concerns about your child's development, talk to your health visitor or family doctor. They will be able to put you in touch with assessment and support services or may refer you to the Pre-school Teacher Counsellor Service (PSTC). Providers can also refer you to Area Special Needs Co-ordinators (SENCO) if you agree.

The PSTC or Area SENCO will help you to contact other professionals and will help you to find a suitable provider for your child.

Call OCIS on **08452 26 26 36** if you would like a copy of '**Your child and you**' – a guide for parents and carers of disabled children and children with additional needs.

### My child attends a day nursery – will they get early education sessions?

Some parents worry that their child is missing out if they are in full- or part-time childcare and can't go to 'pre-school' because of the parents' work or study commitments. This is not the case as all pre-school settings which are registered with the EYDCP (see page 6) follow the Foundation Stage curriculum.

If your child's childcare setting is registered with the EYDCP, your childcare bills will simply become cheaper in the term after their third birthday. Different providers bill in different ways, so ask your provider for information on how they approach this.



### I'm in part-time study and a two-and-a-half-hour session doesn't allow me enough time to get to college. Can I extend the session?

Many early education providers offer extended sessions for a fee. This usually takes the form of a lunch club, but some may also offer breakfast, or after-school clubs in the afternoon. **Please contact OCIS on 08452 26 26 36 for more information.**





# Other useful information for families with young children

**Our Early Years and Childcare Service plans and provides a wide range of services for children and their families across the county.**

- ▼ The service also supports our Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP). This is a partnership made up of groups which all have an interest in early education, childcare, play and health services. It includes parents, playgroups, day nurseries, district councils and health visitors.



## Oxfordshire Children's Information Service

When you have a young child, it can be really useful to have information on:

- where you can go to meet other parents or carers who are in the same boat as you;
- your childcare options; and
- early education opportunities.

Oxfordshire Children's Information Service (OCIS) is dedicated to providing independent, helpful, clear information about what's available, where and when.

**PHONE: 08452 26 26 36**

**[www.oxoncis.org.uk](http://www.oxoncis.org.uk)**

OCIS gives you the opportunity to make informed choices about your childcare arrangements. It has information about all registered childcare across the county, so you have peace of mind when choosing the childcare that's right for your family. And it can also help you find information on tax credits available to help you pay for childcare.

- ▼ The service also offers a wide range of information about activities and services for children, such as toddler groups, mother-and-baby sessions and after-school clubs for your baby's big brother or sister!

**You can contact OCIS:**

- **by phoning**  
**08452 26 26 36** (local rate);
- **through the website at**  
**[www.oxoncis.org.uk](http://www.oxoncis.org.uk)**;  
or
- **by e-mail to**  
**[enquiries@oxoncis.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@oxoncis.org.uk)**.





# Other useful information for families with young children

## Family and community support

Family centres offer a wide range of activities in a safe, stimulating, lively environment throughout the year. These centres are open to young children, parents, parents-to-be, relatives, childminders and other carers.

Qualified staff at the centres arrange activities to give advice and support and to involve families in a stimulating play environment. Most centres will usually run things like family drop-ins, support groups, individual support, indoor and outdoor play activities, adult education and family learning, celebrations, outings and events.

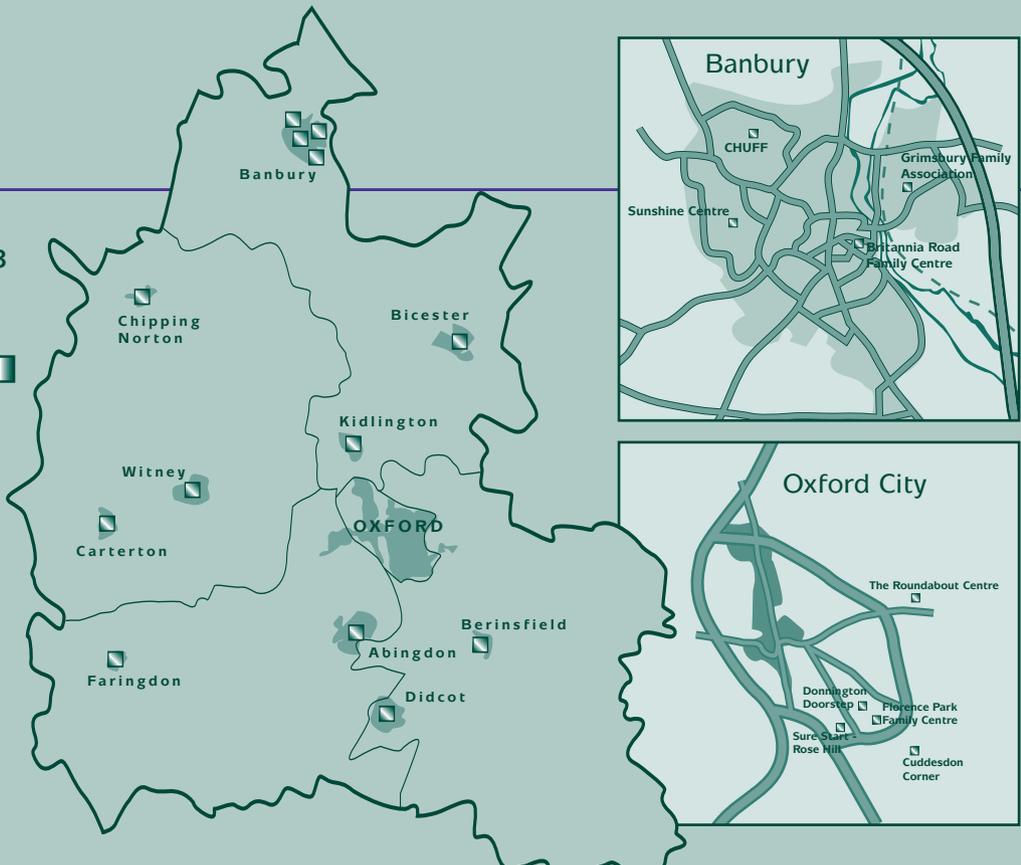
If there is no family centre near you, there are other family support groups, such as toddler groups, the Oxfordshire Playbus and Homestart. Homestart is a voluntary organisation which offers support to families with young children who are having difficulties.



**For more information about family centres, toddler groups, the Playbus and Homestart in your area, call Oxfordshire Children's Information Service on 08452 26 26 36.**



Here are your 18 Family Centres in Oxfordshire indicated by a 



### A career working with children

Working with children is a rewarding, challenging and interesting career. It gives you the opportunity to change lives for the better. OCIS can provide advice, guidance and information packs covering a variety of opportunities for jobs working with children. **Just call 08452 26 26 36** or to see current job vacancies, **visit the website [www.oxoncis.org.uk](http://www.oxoncis.org.uk)**.

### Tax credits

Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit can top up your family income and may include help with the cost of childcare. For more details:

- check the Inland Revenue website at **[www.taxcredits.inlandrevenue.gov.uk](http://www.taxcredits.inlandrevenue.gov.uk)**; or
- call OCIS on **08452 26 26 36**.

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## And **so to** school

**At the moment, children can start school in Oxfordshire the September after their fourth birthday. Four-year-olds will usually start on a part-time basis (mornings or afternoons only).**

For their first year at school, children will continue to follow the Foundation Stage curriculum which focuses on the six key learning areas set out earlier in this booklet (see page 4).

Most parents and carers start visiting local schools to help them make their choice around 18 months before their child is due to start school. Some schools may ask you to fill in a registration form to register your interest for a school place. (This is not an application for a school place and does not guarantee your child a place). You will be able to collect a booklet for stating a preference for a primary school from any Oxfordshire primary school in the September after your child's third birthday.

**Don't forget when you register your child for a pre-school place you need to ask about the timetable for starting school.**







For more information about anything you've read in this booklet,  
please contact **Oxfordshire Children's Information Service:**

**Phone:** 08452 26 26 36

**E-mail:** [enquiries@oxoncis.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@oxoncis.org.uk)

**Website:** [www.oxoncis.org.uk](http://www.oxoncis.org.uk)



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