



## Education and Childcare

Education can help connect you and your family to your community. This section describes schools in the United States for children, youth, and adults and answers questions you may have about them. It also offers suggestions for finding good childcare, if you have young children at home and need to work.

## Education

To make sure all children are prepared to succeed, the U.S. provides free public education. This section tells you how to sign your children up for school. You will learn how U.S. schools work and how to help your children learn.

### Enrolling Your Child in School

Most public schools in the United States are co-educational. Co-educational means that girls and boys attend classes together. The United States has compulsory school attendance laws. This means that state laws require all children ages 5 to 16 to attend school in most states. Check with your state department of education to find out the required ages for school attendance in your state.

You can send your child to a public or private school. In most states, parents may also teach their children at home. This is called “home schooling.” Public schools are free and do not offer religious instruction. What your children learn in public school is set by the state. However, local teachers and parents decide how it is

taught. Your federal and state income taxes and your local property taxes pay for these schools.

Students must pay a fee (called “tuition”) to attend private schools. Religious groups run many private schools. Some are co-educational. Some are only for boys or girls. Some offer financial help for students who cannot pay the tuition.

Most American children are in school for 12 years. Your children will be placed in a class (called a “grade”) based on their age and how much previous education they have. Sometimes a school may give your child a test to decide what grade they should be in.



## HOW MOST U.S. SCHOOLS ARE ORGANIZED



**Elementary or Primary School**  
Kindergarten and Grades 1 to 5  
Children Ages 5 to 10



**Junior or Middle School**  
Grades 6 to 8  
Youth Ages 11 to 13



**Secondary or High School**  
Grades 9 to 12  
Young Adults Ages 14 to 18



**Postsecondary or Higher Education, Public and Private**  
Community Colleges,  
2-year or 4-year Colleges or  
Universities, Trade Schools  
All Adults May Attend

One of the first things you should do is enroll your child in school. Some questions that parents often ask include:

**Q:** How long is the school year?

**A:** The school year usually begins in August or September and ends in May or June. In some places, children attend school all year. Children are in school Monday through Friday. Some schools

offer programs before or after regular school hours for children whose parents work. You may be charged a fee for these programs.

**Q:** Where do I enroll my child?

**A:** Call or visit your local school district's main office to find out which school your child should attend. Tell the school staff your child's age and the address where you live.

**Q:** What documents do I need to enroll my child?

**A:** You need your child’s medical records and proof that they have certain immunizations (also called “shots”) to protect them from disease. You also may need proof that you live in the same community as the school. If you have lost these documents, ask school staff how to get new documents. To avoid delays, do this before you try to enroll your child.

**Q:** What if my child does not speak English?

**A:** Children who do not speak English may be placed in a lower grade until their English skills improve. Many schools have special teachers, tutors, or English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for children.



**Q:** What if my child is disabled?

**A:** Students with a physical or mental disability can get a free public education, just like a child who does not have a disability. Your child will be placed in a regular school classroom, if possible. If your child’s disability is severe, he or she may be given special education services outside the regular classroom.

**Q:** My child was not in school before coming to the United States. How long can he or she attend school for free?

**A:** Your child can attend school for free until they reach age 21 in most states. If your child has not graduated from high school by then, he or she can enroll in adult education classes to obtain a General Educational Development (GED) certificate instead of a high school diploma. Call your local school district office or your state department of education to find out where GED classes are offered.

**Q:** How will my child get to school?

**A:** Children can sometimes walk to school in the United States. If the school is too far away, they will ride a bus. Public schools have buses, which are free. Students are picked up and dropped off at a school-bus stop near your home. If you have a car, you can also set up a “car pool” with other parents in your area to share driving your children to school.

**Q:** What will my child eat at school?

**A:** Children can take lunch to school or buy it at the school cafeteria. The U.S. government also provides nutritious free or low-cost breakfast and lunch for children who cannot afford to buy food at school. Call or visit your child’s school to find out if it participates in the federal School Meals program. Talk with school staff to find out if your children are eligible to participate.

## FEDERAL SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAM



Children learn better when they are well fed. To improve learning, the United States government provides healthy low-cost or free meals to more than 26 million children each school day. Participation in the **School Breakfast Program** and **National School Lunch Program** is based on family income and size. The **Special Milk Program** provides milk to children who do not participate in other federal school meals programs. For more information about these programs, visit the U.S. Department of Agriculture website at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/>.

**Q:** Who pays for books and school activities?

**A:** Public schools usually provide free books. Students must usually buy their own school supplies, such as paper and pencils. If you cannot pay for these supplies, contact your child's school. Some schools may charge a small fee for supplies or special events, such as school trips. Many schools offer after-school sports and music programs. You may need to pay a fee for your children to participate in some of these programs.

**Q:** What will my child learn?

**A:** Each state sets academic standards for schools. These standards state what all students should know and be able to do. Local school districts decide how this information should be taught. Most schools teach English, math, social studies, science, and physical education. Art, music, and foreign languages are sometimes offered.

**Q:** How is my child's work judged?

**A:** Teachers assign grades based on the work your child does during the school year. Grades are usually based on homework, tests, attendance, and class behavior. You will receive a "report card" several times a year. This report card tells you how your child is doing in each subject. Schools have different ways of grading students. Some use letter grades, with A or A+ for excellent work and D, E, or F for poor or failing work. Others use number grades. Others summarize your child's performance with words like "excellent," "good," or "needs improvement." Ask school staff how students in your child's school are graded.



**Q:** How can I talk to my child's teacher?

**A:** Most schools have regular parent conferences for you to meet with your child's teacher. You can also schedule meetings to talk with teachers or school administrators about how your child is doing in school. If you do not speak English, ask if there is someone at the school who speaks your language and can help translate.

**Q:** What if my child misses school?

**A:** Being in school is very important. Parents must send a written letter to the teacher or call the school to explain why their child was not in school. Let the teacher know in advance if your child will be out of school. Students must usually make up any work they missed.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO



Most public and private schools have a Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). These groups help parents learn about what is going on in their child's school and how to get involved in school events. Anyone can join, even grandparents. The PTA/PTOs also support schools by sponsoring special activities and by providing volunteers to help out in the classroom. You can get involved even if you do not speak much English. Many schools have information specifically for parents with limited English-speaking skills. Call or visit your school office to find out when the PTA/PTO for your child's school meets and how you can join.

**Q:** What if my child gets into trouble?

**A:** Many schools have a list of rules that students must obey. These are called “codes of conduct.” Ask your child’s school about its code of conduct. Students who break school rules may be punished by being required to stay after the school day is over. Or they may not be allowed to participate in sports or other school activities. Physical punishment is NOT permitted in most U.S. schools.

Children may be suspended or expelled from school if they behave very badly and break school rules often. Your child will no longer be able to go to school if he or she is expelled. You will need to meet with school staff to find out how to get your child back in school.

**Q:** Is my child safe in school?

**A:** Most American public schools are safe places to learn. But some schools—mainly high schools—have problems with violence, street gangs, or drugs

and alcohol. Talk to a teacher, school counselor, or administrator if you are worried about your child’s safety.



## Higher Education: Colleges and Universities

Young adults can continue their education in a 2-year community or technical college or a 4-year college or university after high school. These are called “postsecondary institutions” or “institutions of higher education.” There are public and private institutions of higher education. Public colleges and universities cost less than private ones, especially for residents of the state they are located in. Young adults can also choose to attend schools to learn specific jobs, such as repairing computers or being a healthcare assistant.

Students in higher education choose a specific subject to study in depth (this subject is called their “major”). Choosing a major helps prepare them for employment or further education in that field. Some postsecondary degrees include the following:

<b>Degree Type</b>	<b>Type of School</b>	<b>Years of Schooling</b>
Certificate	Community College/ Trade School	6 months to 2 years
Associate's	Community College	2 years
Bachelor's	4-year College or University	4 years
Master's	4-year College or University	2 years
Doctorate	University	2–8 years
Professional	Specialized School	2–5 years

A college or university education can be expensive. Some schools provide financial help called “scholarships.” The U.S. government also provides financial aid for students. Most students take out a loan or apply for financial aid or scholarships to help pay for their schooling.

### Federal Financial Aid for College Students

The U.S. government provides financial help to students attending certain institutions of higher education. This aid covers many school expenses, including tuition, fees, books, room and board, supplies, and transportation. Students qualify for this aid by their financial need, not their grades. There are three types of federal aid:

- Grants—money that you don't have to repay.
- Work Study—money that you earn while you are in school.

- Loans—money that you borrow that you must repay later with interest.

For more information on federal financial aid programs, call 1-800-433-3243 or visit the U.S. Department of Education website [http://www.studentaid.ed.gov/students/publications/student\\_guide/index.html](http://www.studentaid.ed.gov/students/publications/student_guide/index.html). Information is also available in Spanish.

### BEWARE OF FINANCIAL AID FRAUD



Be careful when you are searching for information on student financial assistance. Avoid offers that seem too good to be true or that promise you results in exchange for money. Every year, families lose millions of dollars to “scholarship fraud.” If you are the victim of fraud, or for free information, call 1-877-382-4357 or 1-866-653-4262 for hearing impaired, or visit the Federal Trade Commission website at <http://www.ftc.gov/scholarshipcams>.

## Adult Education

Learning does not have to end when you become an adult. In the U.S., people are encouraged to become “lifelong learners.” If you are 16 years of age or older and have not completed high school, you can enroll in Adult Secondary Education (ASE) classes. These classes prepare you to earn a General Educational Development (GED) certificate.

A GED certificate is an alternative high school diploma. It shows that you have learned high-school-level academic knowledge and skills. To earn a GED, you must take and pass tests in 5 different areas: reading, writing, social studies, science, and mathematics. Most U.S. employers consider a GED credential to be equal to a regular high school diploma. In many areas, GED preparation classes are free or low-cost. Look in the phone book under “Adult Education” or call your local school district office for information.



Many adults take classes to learn more about a subject that interests them or to learn new skills that can help them in their jobs. Many public school systems and local community colleges offer classes in a wide range of subjects for adults. Anyone can enroll in these classes, which generally have low fees. Check with your local school system or community college to find out what classes are available, how much they cost, and how to enroll.

## Learning English

There are many places where you can learn how to speak, read, and write in English. Most children and adults enroll in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. These classes help people who do not know English to learn the language. These classes are also called English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) or English Literacy classes.

Children who do not know English will learn it in school. America's public schools provide help and instruction for all students who need to learn English. Students who need extra help are often called Limited English Proficient (LEP) students.

Students just beginning to learn English may take an ESL class in place of a regular English class. Students with more English language skills may be placed in a regular classroom and given extra help. Some schools also offer after-school programs and tutoring to help students learn English. Your children's school will tell you what kind of help they will get if they need to learn English.



Adults who do not understand English can enroll in an ESL class offered in a public adult and community education program or private language school.

Public adult and community education programs are often offered in local communities by school districts and community colleges. These programs may provide ESL classes along with tutoring from local volunteers. These programs are often free, or you may pay a small fee. Classes may meet during day or evening hours. Call

your local community college or school district office to find the nearest ESL program. Look in the blue pages of your phone book under the heading “Schools—Public.”

Most large cities also have private language schools that offer day or evening ESL classes. The cost for these classes is often based on the number of hours of instruction. Private language classes are generally more expensive than public classes. To find a private language school,

look in the yellow pages of your telephone book under the heading “Language Schools.”

Some community organizations, libraries, and religious groups also offer free or low-cost ESL classes. Check with your local public library, social service agency, or place of worship. The reference librarian at the local library can also tell you about ESL programs and show you where to find ESL books, tapes, CDs, and computer software at the library.

## CALL 211 FOR INFORMATION ON SOCIAL SERVICES



You can now call 211 in many states to get help finding the services you need. Call 211 to find out where you can enroll in ESL classes in your neighborhood. You can also call 211 if you need help finding food, housing, a drug treatment program, or other social services.

Some states and counties do not yet offer 211 services. If you call and get no answer, this 211 service is not yet available in your community.

## Childcare

If you work and your children are too young to go to school, you may need to find someone to watch them while you are at work. Sometimes children in school need someone to watch them when school is over, if their parents cannot be at home. If you or other family members are not able to watch your children, you need to find someone to take care of them. Do not leave young children at home alone.

### Finding Childcare

Choosing someone to care for your children is an important decision. As you make this decision, think about the quality and cost of care. Try to find a caregiver who is close to your home or job.

There are many resources you can use to find a good childcare provider. Ask other parents, friends, and co-workers who cares for their children. Some states have a childcare referral agency that can give you a list of state-licensed childcare programs. Licensed childcare

programs meet specific requirements set by the state for the protection of your children. You can also call your local school district office to find places where other children in your neighborhood are cared for.

### ▶ TIP: Finding Good Childcare in Your Area

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has a National Child Care Information Center; call 1-800-616-2242 for information. You can also find information and answers to questions about how to choose a good program for your child on the department's website at <http://www.childcareaware.org>.



## TYPES OF CHILDCARE



You have a number of choices when choosing a childcare provider.

**In-Home Care.** A caregiver comes into your home to watch your children. This type of service can be expensive, because your child gets more individual attention. The quality of care depends on the person you hire.



**Family Childcare.** Your child is cared for in somebody else's home with a small group of other children. This can be less expensive than other types of childcare. The quality of care depends on the person who watches your child and the number of children they are caring for.

**Daycare Centers:** Daycare centers are programs located in schools, churches or other faith-based organizations, and other places. Centers usually have several caregivers who watch larger groups of children. Centers must meet state standards and their staff usually have special training and experience.

**Head Start Programs:** The federal government provides funding for “Early Head Start” and “Head Start” programs for low-income families. These programs provide care and educational services to young children to get them ready for school. To learn more about these programs, call the Department of Health and Human Services at 1-866-763-6481 or visit the website <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/hsb/>.

Some childcare providers will take care of children for a full day or only part of the day, depending on the parents' needs. Cost is also a factor in choosing a caregiver. Check to see if you are eligible for federal or state childcare assistance. Many states offer financial assistance to low-income parents who are working or participating in job training or education programs.

▶ **TIP:** Make sure the childcare provider or program you are using is licensed or accredited. “Licensed” means that the program meets minimum safety and care standards set by the state. “Accredited” programs meet higher standards than those required for a state license.



### How Can You Tell if a Childcare Provider Is Good?

Think about these basic questions when you visit a childcare program.

- Are the children happy when around the staff?
- Are toys available that are appropriate for the children’s ages?
- Were children doing an appropriate activity?
- Did the provider talk to your child while you were there?
- Is the space clean and organized?
- Is there a curriculum or routine for the children?

Be sure to ask for references so that you can talk to other parents about the program.