

My name is Chelsea Spencer, and I live in Morristown. I am here today as a parent who deeply cares about the quality of early childhood education. My experience has led me to understand the difference between simply looking after children, and quality.

I had my daughter during COVID, and when it was time for her to go to child care, we didn't know what we didn't know about differences in quality. We just got into a program that had an opening. The staff was really loving, but there was no structure to their day. She wasn't challenged. There was no opportunity for us to transition. In the mornings, they would tear her away from me.

One day, staff members told me my child might have ADHD or autism. I recognize now this was an inappropriate diagnosis made by staff who lacked knowledge about developmental milestones and about communicating with families. But at the time, it was devastating.

Now, here's what quality looks like. After getting recommendations from other families, both my children are now at Apple Tree Learning Center. When I drop off my son, the teachers don't kick me out. They engage him to ease the transition. They invite him to play bubbles. They have him wave out the window to me. I trust them completely.

My now-four-year-old is thriving. I had her evaluated after that original scare, and she's just more of a sensitive child. The teachers at Apple Tree said, "It's okay. We're very aware some kids are like this." And they know how to support her needs. That is a huge relief for me.

It's comforting knowing that the people taking care of my children all day already meet the professional standards recommended by the OPR. It gives me more confidence as a parent, knowing my children are not only cared for, but are in an environment where they learn and grow, every single day.

This is why I support recognizing early childhood educators as professionals. It's vital to have professional standards and transparency, not only for the benefit of the children, but also for the families who trust these programs with their most precious treasures. I feel I can speak for many parents when I say I don't want someone in a position of trust inappropriately diagnosing my child with ADHD or autism.

And, highly qualified educators like the ones at Appletree deserve to be treated with the same respect and standards as any other profession. I learn every day from my children's teachers. So to me, quality and accountability go hand in hand.

Thank you.