

the *right* fit

Believe it or not, now is the time to start thinking about a preschool for your toddler come fall. The task may feel daunting at first. After all, you have many considerations, including cost, location, and teaching philosophy, to name a few. Here, experts weigh in on key aspects of the preschool search to help you make an informed choice

BY JULIE HALPERT





Is She Ready?

Preschool is more than just academics; it's also about developing social skills. If your child seems to enjoy being around other children and notices or approaches them when your family is at a party or museum, for instance, it's probably time to enroll her in a program. Most children are ready by age 3 or 4.

Source: Roberta Golinkoff, Ph.D., professor at the University of Delaware in education, psychology, and linguistics and author of A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool

Which Curriculum?

No two preschools are exactly alike in their teaching methods. But it's worth noting the benefits of these three common philosophies:

Montessori: Programs focus on each child's independent learning, with teachers acting as guides. Schools embrace multi-age classrooms.

Rudolf Steiner (or Waldorf): Teachers help kids build on their interests, use creative toys made of natural materials, and ask parents to limit TV time.

Reggio Emilia: More art-based, using projects to help children express the concepts they're learning. Parents often volunteer in the classroom.

Source: Sherry M. Cleary, M.A., executive director of the New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute

Finding Cost-Effective Options

The price of some preschools can induce sticker shock. Low-income families can explore federally funded Early Head Start programs, which are free. Those who do not qualify for subsidized schooling and find the added expense burdensome might consider a cooperative preschool. These lower-cost alternatives allow parents to defray some tuition in return for their volunteer services.

Sources: Ed Miller, M.A., senior researcher for the Alliance for Childhood, and Sherry M. Cleary

ASK THESE Questions

1. What happens if my child gets sick or says he isn't feeling well?
2. What is the daily routine?
3. What is the role of play in the classroom and how do the teachers encourage it?
4. Is the class mostly lessons and activities or are there big chunks of creative playtime?
5. What's the teacher's role when kids are participating in free play?
6. What happens when a child has a toileting accident?
7. How do you evaluate children and assess where they are developmentally?
8. How much computer time are kids allowed?
9. Is the school accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children?
10. Do you expect or encourage parents to volunteer at the school?

Sources: Linda Hassan Anderson, M.A., senior director for The National Center for the Education of Young Children and Sherry M. Cleary



Schedule a Visit

When you find a preschool you're interested in, set up a classroom tour and observe.

Staff ratio. An ideal class size is 12 to 15 children with at least two adults. Look for teachers who are nurturing and whose presence excites students' eagerness to learn.

Schedule. The class should have a predictable routine, without being over-structured. Expect a snack time, brief group gatherings (10 minutes or less) that may include singing songs and hearing a story, and outdoor play.

Playtime. You want ample opportunity and space for three kinds of imaginative play: alone, next to other children, and with others. Toys, dress-up gear, and games should abound!

Source: Sherry M. Cleary

A Note on Academics

Try not to worry about the test-driven culture of grade school just yet—the best preschools teach through imagination. Research shows that play leads to an excitement and interest in learning, and allows very young students to more naturally process content and develop abilities that make them better learners later. On the flip side, trying to get these children to do homework and worksheets is misguided; there's no proof that doing so provides any benefit. In fact, an overly structured preschool may cause children to suffer academically, since they haven't developed the skills they get through play.

Sources: Diane Levin, Ph.D., and Ed Miller

Next Steps

Congrats, you found the perfect school! Here's how to ready your child for the transition in the fall.

Play takes practice.

Help your child become familiar with open-ended play materials, like play dough, blocks, even pots and pans. These preschool staples teach him how to engage himself and feel competent in the skills he's mastered.

Work as a team.

Invite your child to assist you with simple household tasks, like setting out napkins at dinner, which helps prepare her for group cooperation.

Learning is all around.

The world is a classroom! When you take your child to the market, talk about the color of the vegetables. The doctor's office is a science lesson. Develop language by talking to her about her experiences.

Sources: Diane Levin, Ph.D., professor of early childhood education at Wheelock College; Roberta Golinkoff