

# A Guide to Choosing the Right Preschool

If you are considering sending your child to preschool next year, you're not alone. The number of children attending preschool has exploded in the last 30 years. You may have many preschool options available to your child, public schools, private schools or Christian schools. But the preschool's philosophy is more important than the label it carries, and carefully researching your school choices is important to ensure a good fit with your child's needs.



## Preschool or Not?

The first decision you must make is whether or not to enroll your child in preschool. Children who receive adequate stimulation at home and have the opportunity to play with other kids their own age may not need the experience preschool provides. Expense, driving distance and time required for parental involvement may also be considerations.

## Philosophy and Programs

The values you promote at home should be reinforced, or at least respected, by the preschool program. Your child's temperament should also be considered. While a calm classroom setting with lots of "circle time" and craft activities may be fine for a precocious girl, a preschool boy's rambunctious behavior could make it difficult for him to fit in. A good preschool curriculum will accommodate different rates and levels of development in children.

Most preschools stress social skills like cooperation, sharing, listening, and following instructions. The majority of educators feel that reading and counting are not priorities for preschool education. But teachers often incorporate early reading and math skills into classroom activities. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which accredits nursery schools nationwide, stresses a curriculum with art materials on tables; toys, puzzles, and blocks in bins or on low shelves; books in designated "quiet" areas; water and sand in specially designed tables; a kitchen; and a large, safe outdoor play area. By providing the appropriate materials and a supportive atmosphere, preschools can get kids hooked on learning.

## Making a Choice

Pay a visit to the school that interests you. Consider hiring a sitter so you can give the visit your undivided attention. Allow enough time to observe in the classroom, tour the facility, and have an in-depth conversation with the director. Be sure to cover financial obligations, school rules, security, provisions for caring for sick children, and discipline. A second visit with your child, or again by yourself, is a good idea. When you visit, look for the following:

- A high teacher-student ratio (one teacher for approximately ten 3- or 4-year-olds)
- A teacher who really listens and responds to the kids
- Enough space both indoors and outdoors
- A neatly organized classroom which is free of clutter
- More than one activity set up at a time with children working in small groups
- Toys within easy reach, separated into play areas like dress-ups, blocks, and other "construction equipment", puzzles, etc.
- Children's "free-form" artwork hung at their eye level
- Solidly built play equipment outdoors and an indoor area for large motor activity in inclement weather
- Positive approaches to discipline that include encouraging kids to express feelings constructively
- Children enjoying themselves!

A good preschool experience should help your child feel more competent, learn to trust adults, grow personally and socially, and build a strong foundation for the rest of his or her education.