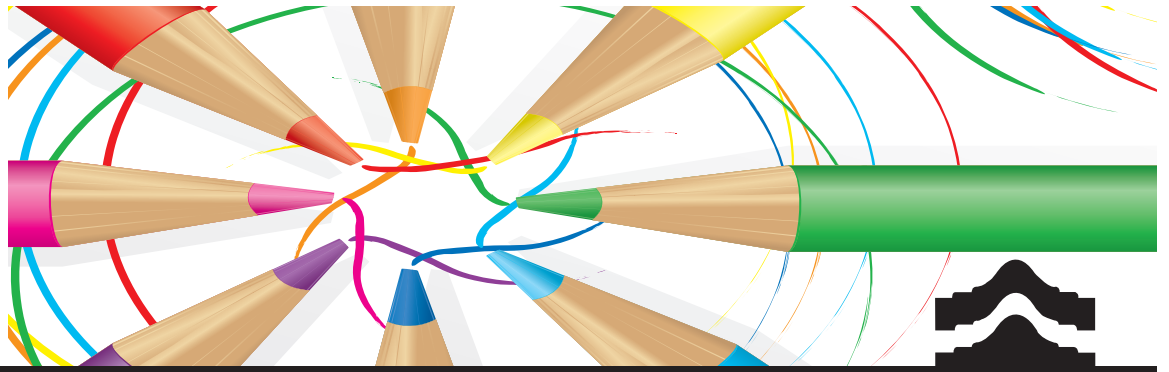


Finding the Right Preschool



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Alamo Title

How to Find the Best Preschool for Your Child

Once you decide that your child is ready for preschool, you need to find a good program. Start your search early. Some families - we kid you not - apply to the best schools when their child is born, especially in big cities. After you've identified two or three promising schools, apply to all of them. That way, if you don't get into your first choice, you'll have a backup or two. To find the best program for your child, follow the six steps below.

Identify your priorities

First, decide what you want. Are you looking for a preschool near your workplace, or would one closer to home be more convenient? Do you want the curriculum to include activities such as dancing and storytelling? Are you looking for a specific approach to learning? Write everything down so you have a list to refer to as you size up potential programs.

Do your research

Ask around to find the most reputable preschools. Friends and family can give you the names of schools they've liked, and we all know that personal references are the best kind. Ask some experts. The Childcare Aware hotline (800-424-2246) can give you the number of a local childcare resource and referral agency, which in turn can direct you to licensed preschools in your area. Go online. Visit NAEYC and the National Association of Family Child Care for guidelines and contact information. NAEYC also has a searchable online database of accredited centers and preschools.

Visit and interview

You can ask a few preliminary questions over the phone (to find out fees, for example), but you won't get a sense of what a preschool is really like until you go there and meet the staff and director. Ask the director about everything from hours, fees, and vacation schedules to philosophies on childrearing issues such as discipline and nutrition. Also, get a schedule of daily activities. Pay attention to your gut feelings about the place and how the director handles your questions. When you visit the classrooms, check the teacher-child ratios (1:5 is ideal for 2- to 3-year-olds, 1:7 is ideal for 3- to 4-year-olds, 1:15 is acceptable for 5-year-olds), and note how many children are in a classroom. "It's easier to give one-on-one attention and be responsive when there are fewer kids in a room," says Stephanie Glowacki, director of accreditation programs at NAEYC. You'll want a regular, challenging curriculum; a warm, clean, safe environment; and experienced teachers who are paid well and happy with their jobs. Ask about staff turnover. If the teachers change every six months, move on. Children crave consistency and need to form strong relationships with their caregivers, so you don't want a preschool where teachers come and go.

Check references

Positive word-of-mouth is a powerful endorsement. If a certain preschool has a buzz, ask parents why they're raving about it. Ask each school you're considering for a list of parents whose children have attended the school. Call them, and ask specific questions. Don't just ask whether they like the preschool; ask what exactly they like about it and what they don't. If their child is no longer there, ask why. You may also want to call your state's Better Business Bureau to see whether any complaints have been filed against the school or its teachers.

Kid-test it

Visit the school with your child. You'll want to see how he and the teachers interact and whether he seems comfortable in the preschool's environment. Do the teachers seem interested in getting to know your child? Does he enjoy the activities?

Get on the waiting list

If the preschool of your dreams has no openings, don't despair. Put yourself on the waiting list, and, while you're at it, write a letter spelling out why you like the school so much. It won't guarantee you a place, but it can't hurt to let the school know how enthusiastic you are about the program. In the meantime, if you've applied to more than one school, you'll likely have other options to consider.

Ten Signs of a Great Preschool

How to spot a top-notch program for your child.

If your child is between the ages of 3 and 6 and attends a childcare center, preschool, or kindergarten program, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) suggests you look for these 10 signs to make sure your child is in a good classroom:

- Children spend most of their time playing and working with materials or other children. They do not wander aimlessly and are not expected to sit quietly for long periods.
- Children have access to various activities throughout the day. Look for assorted building blocks and other construction materials; props for pretend play; picture books; paints and other art materials; and table toys such as matching games, pegboards, and puzzles. Children should not all be doing the same thing at the same time.
- Teachers work with individual children, small groups, and the whole group at different times during the day. They do not spend all their time with the whole group.
- The classroom is decorated with children's original artwork, their own writing with invented spelling, and stories dictated by children to teachers.
- Children learn numbers and the alphabet in the context of their everyday experiences. The natural world of plants and animals and meaningful activities like cooking, taking attendance, or serving snack provide the basis for learning activities.
- Children work on projects and have long periods of time (at least one hour) to play and explore. Worksheets are used little if at all.
- Children have an opportunity to play outside every day. Outdoor play is never sacrificed for more instructional time.
- Teachers read books to children individually or in small groups throughout the day, not just at group story time.
- Curriculum is adapted for those who are ahead as well as those who need additional help. Teachers recognize that children's different background and experiences mean that they do not learn the same things at the same time in the same way.
- Children and their parents look forward to school. Parents feel secure about sending their child to the program.

By Betsy Bozdech