

Chicago Parent

How to pick the preschool perfect for your child and you

by Lisa Applegate

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The preschool Melanie Myatt chose for her first child seemed just about perfect.

"We found one that went with the flow, let kids be kids and do messy projects," she remembers. "If kids were having a good time at something, they let them keep doing that."

There was one problem, though. Her daughter, Zoe, just wasn't a go-with-the-flow kind of child.

"My daughter was lacking the structure and routine that I didn't know were important to her. She was only 3, so I just didn't realize" until well into the school year, she says.

Myatt did switch Zoe to a more routine-oriented preschool the following year, but she says Zoe did fine throughout the entire experience. However, it taught Myatt, who lives in Chicago, an important lesson that's been helpful as she selects preschools for her younger two children.

"It's not going to make or break them if they have a less-than-stellar year in preschool," she says. "It helped me to see that and feel more relaxed about" choosing preschools.

The moral here, one repeated by child development experts, is this: While preschool can be an important first step toward school, it won't determine whether a child studies at Harvard or wins a Nobel Prize. Parents should research their options, and determine what kind of school fits with their schedule and approach to child-rearing. And then, they should relax.

It's natural for parents to feel anxious about choosing just the right preschool, says Associate Professor Jon Korfmacher. Brain research has discovered that children can absorb more information at younger ages, and this has increased the emphasis on learning in the first years of life. As a result, preschool has become an almost essential part of a child's education.

"The things that children are expected to learn in preschool are what I used to learn in kindergarten or first grade, and that has increased parents' anxieties a bit," says Korfmacher, who studies early childhood education at the Erikson Institute in Chicago.

But the basics of preschool, such as learning social and emotional skills like following directions and taking turns, are usually covered in even the most basic programs, he says.

Still, the Chicago area offers a dizzying number of options for preschool, from two-hour parks and recreation programs to full-day schools that require academic testing prior to admittance.

Here's how to narrow down the choices:

First, let's clarify the difference between preschool and child care. In general, Korfmacher says, preschools are part-day programs that have a curriculum or pre-academic focus. The focus of child care is to offer a safe and nurturing place for children all day. Sometimes, both of these approaches are included in a combined, full-day program.

Preschools label their approach to curriculum in a variety of ways, from Montessori to play-based to rigorous academics. What matters most is whether the preschool's philosophy fits with yours.

"There hasn't been a lot of evidence that a particular philosophy really works better than another one," Korfmacher says. So parents should consider how a particular approach fits with their child's level of curiosity and their comfort level with structured or free play.

Young children, especially 3-year-olds, should focus on socialization skills and learning routines. For older children, a preschool curriculum may include academics like basic math or pre-reading skills.

"For me," Korfmacher says, "it's not so much about which curriculum is chosen, but that they have one that (teachers) can talk about, and that they are thoughtful, and aren't rigid about it."

Next, consider the practicalities of preschool. With a wide range of scheduling options—from two part-days to five full-days—parents need to decide what works for their schedule. How close is the school to your workplace or home? How many hours of care do you need? Does your child still nap and need morning school hours?

The cost of preschool varies as much as the hours. Many public schools offer a preschool option, and some are free. At the other end of the range, some private preschools cost thousands of dollars annually. While cost may be an indication of quality, Korfmacher says, it isn't always the case, especially with preschools.

Also consider how much time you have to get involved with the school. Some preschools require parent involvement, either in the classroom or in fundraising activities. Others simply offer it for parents who are interested.

Ask neighbors and friends for their preschool recommendations, search the Internet for preschools in your area and pick up information from your school district.

Visit several schools. This helps parents get a sense of which programs they gravitate towards. Pay attention to the emotional climate in the preschool, and how teachers and children interact with each other.

Ask about staff turnover. A little bit of turnover is normal, Korfmacher says, but heavy turnover may be a sign of a problem. Find out how the school integrates new teachers into the program, such as pairing new ones with more experienced teachers.

Don't worry too much about the physical space. "It doesn't have to be state of the art, with 10 new computers, for example," he says. "What's really important is the interaction between the kids and teachers."

Finally, and most important, listen to your gut instincts about which preschool felt right. Then relax.

If it turns out, as it did with Myatt, that your child would fit better at another preschool, it's OK to switch. Korfmacher says children do make friends in preschool, but not the extremely close bonds seen later in school.

"Children tend to be pretty resilient at this age," he says.

Preschool can be an ideal time for parents to learn about their child's learning style and classroom preferences. This can be invaluable information when it comes time to jump the next hurdle: choosing an elementary school.

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