

Picking a Preschool

**Suggestions by
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1. **Think about your child.** What's important to your child? What makes the difference in your child having a good day? Is it having plenty of time to run, move and climb? Is it having stretches of time for more quiet activity like reading books, doing art projects? Is it playing with friends? Set out to look for a place where you know your child will have a good day and have his or her essential needs met.
2. **Visit several preschool programs** and stay long enough to get a feel for the place. The key question is: Would my child be happy in this setting?

Observe classrooms where your child might be for a stretch of time--an hour or more. What are the teachers and the children doing? Are they happy? It is better if your child does not accompany you on such visits because you will want to have your full attention on observing and imagining what this setting might offer your child over a period of months, even years.

2. **Talk to the director.** He or she is critical in setting the tone of the school, supporting the teachers and families, and making the program a stimulating and inviting place to be.

Ask about teacher turnover: How stable is the program? Who are the teachers and what are the criteria for being hired? What are their qualifications? How long have the teachers been working in this program? What kinds of professional development opportunities do they have to support their continued growth and development?

Ask the director how staff help young children make the transition into school, separating from parents and learning to be on their own for several hours at a time?

Also ask about the role of parents in the program: when do they visit? What expectations are there for parent involvement?

3. Do not be swayed by the **material resources** of the setting! The number of computers does not make the difference in a strong or weak program--the quality of good play, conversations among the children and with teachers, and the quality of good sustained activity do make the difference!
4. Watch the **interactions** of children among themselves and with teachers. Is there respect shown to all in the room and staff who assist in the center? Do teachers ask questions to further children's interests? Do they show interest in what children do and extend their efforts?

What happens when there is a fight, a disagreement, a time when a child is upset? How do the teachers respond? What forms of guidance and encouragement do teachers use? Will your child learn about the range of human emotions and experiences through the words and nurturance of these teachers? Is this a setting where kindness and respect are practiced daily?

Finally, can you imagine your child finding comfort and encouragement when and if he or she experiences difficulties separating from you and staying in school?

5. Ask to see **the daily schedule**. Is there a rhythm and balance between structured teacher-lead group times and ample periods of time when children can choose activities? Throughout the day you will want to see plenty of opportunities for literacy-based activities: singing of songs, reciting of nursery rhymes, listening to teachers reading aloud, children dictating stories and their stories as well as good books being acted out. Children ought to have plenty of access to writing materials with which to experiment. There should also be lots of time and space for physical movement, climbing, running, jumping, both indoors and outdoors. Children's learning is a very physical enterprise in the early years!

You will also want to see opportunities for art activities, playing math games, working on computers, with the materials for these experiences easily accessible to the children.

6. The **space for the preschool program** will want to be clean and reflect a sense of order as well as being inviting. How is food handled in the setting

as well as toileting routines? Where will your child keep his or her coat and personal belongings? Think about all of the small details that your child will experience!

7. Can I imagine **my child** in this setting being content? Use your instincts to guide you in thinking about the program and its staff. Don't rely solely on other parents' experience with a program; people differ in what they respond to and what is likely to help one's own child feel at home.
8. **Be prepared to learn and grow.** You might have expectations for your child that maybe different from what a teacher or director will recommend for your child. Listen carefully to the ideas of others and then judge for yourself whether the ideas being proposed fit your child and family circumstances.

Enrolling your child in a preschool may bring expectations for your involvement and participation. Stay open to what this new experience in your child's life might bring you before you turn away saying, "I'm too busy."

9. **Visit more than one program** to stimulate your thinking and help you be sure of your choice. When you think you have settled on one, revisit the program to check your impressions.

You may want to ask the administrators about bringing your child on this second visit to see how your child reacts to the setting. Undoubtedly you will be talking to your child about going to preschool in the near future. Visiting the school with you might be a good way to introduce your child to the setting.

If your child is not ready for this step, do not worry about it. In the long run, what matters is that you feel confident in the teachers and director who will help you navigate your child's entry into the program.

10. Remember, you are not likely to find heaven--a place that you think is perfect! There will inevitably be shortcomings. When it comes to our children, this can be really painful. You may prefer one program over another but the distance or timing of the preschool program that you are looking for does not match your needs/schedule.

Give yourself a few days to mull over your choices and figure out what you are comfortable with and able to do.

Remember, when your child is content and well cared for, your whole day will go well from start to finish! You need to be confident that your child is having a good day in order to have one yourself!

Visit the website for the National Association for the Education of Young Children for further ideas and information: www.naeyc.org/families