

Choose the Right Preschool for Your Child

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It's your child's turn to start preschool, the first step in a lifetime of learning, and it's up to you to make the right choice to meet your child's individual needs. Since preschool can greatly influence how your child views school and learning, you'll want to choose wisely.

There are the obvious elements every preschool should have: a certified preschool teacher, a secure facility, licensure with the state, clearly defined hygiene and illness policies, hands-on crafts, plenty of imaginative toys and a 12-to-one student to teacher ratio; but what about some of the other subtle things that make a qualified preschool the best -- the one with a waiting list?

Here are some factors to consider:

Word of mouth is still one of the best ways to get reliable information, so listen to parents with older children as you begin your search. Find out where they sent their child and whether or not they had a good experience. Experienced parents will often share how a teacher handles behavioral problems such as separation anxiety or learning difficulties, which probably won't be listed in a brochure.

The quality of the teacher and staff are top considerations when choosing a preschool. The main preschool teacher should have a degree in early childhood education, hands-on experience working with young children, an approachable personality and a keen eye for safety. The support staff, depending on their role, should also have special training and experience with children. Bottom line: these very important people need to be properly trained, experienced, patient and friendly. Preschool is not the place for adults who snap easily at children. Notice if the teacher kneels down to your child's level when they meet. Plan to visit the school, meet the teacher and trust your first impressions.

The Location of the preschool will greatly affect your schedule because you will be going back and forth frequently. Although a preschool on the other side of town may have a top notch reputation, driving an hour round trip to and from school could quickly wear on your nerves, especially if you have a cranky baby in the car. Also, if other students

live nearby, you can easily set up play dates on off days, helping your child to further develop his or her social skills.

The class size can make or break your child's preschool experience. Nobody knows your child better than you, so determine beforehand if your child thrives in smaller or larger group situations. The average preschool class size is 12 students, but if there is an additional aide, the class size could double. With more students comes more noise and activity. Your child may thrive in a large class, or they may withdraw and not learn amidst the chaos.

How much will it cost? Average tuition costs for preschool in the northeast Ohio area vary based on the number and length of preschool days, association with a private school, whether or not before/after day care is offered and quality of the facilities. Expect to pay anywhere from \$100 to \$200 per month. Cooperative preschools, where parents manage the fundraising and operations as well as assist the teacher in class, usually cost less. Co-ops require a bigger time commitment, though.

Review the curriculum and daily schedule. A good curriculum will include hands-on, sensory-based learning. Young children learn through actively using all of their senses, so find out if they can get their hands dirty with arts and crafts. What does the teacher expect them to know at the end of the school year? Will you receive progress reports? The curriculum and schedule should prepare them for Kindergarten, which include alphabet and number recognition, the ability to write their name and take care of individual needs, like putting on their shoes and coats. And as important as letter and number recognition are, make sure the school still schedules good old-fashioned play time into the day. Children learn through play. A good preschool will have a stimulating, colorful play area with plenty of imaginative toys -- and the children will be allowed to play in it at their own free will for a portion of the day.

A good preschool staff can identify and recommend resources for developmental delays. Preschool provides opportunities for social development giving you a sneak peak into how your child will handle group learning. This may be your child's first opportunity to be required to sit in a group, pay attention, absorb the material and answer questions with someone other than you. How will your child handle these new demands and how will the teacher respond? This is where an experienced, patient preschool teacher is vital. If your child has any developmental delays, a good preschool teacher will spot the clues right away and provide guidance, which is critical because early detection and intervention are the keys to successfully managing learning difficulties.

Ask how they have handled past cases and what resources the teacher refers families to in case a child shows signs of developmental delay.

Drop off and pick up logistics will affect your child and your family's schedule, so ask about these procedures. How does the teacher handle clingy children at drop-off? Will you be required to go into the building to drop off and pick up? Some parents value this because they are looking for social connections. Others want speedy transitions to get back home or to work. If you have a sleeping infant or a cranky toddler in the car, an outdoor pick-up/drop-off routine will make your life much easier.

Religious affiliation. Just because a preschool is in a church doesn't mean it is a religious-based program. Some churches offer preschool programs with religious-based curriculum while other churches lease space for non-religious preschools. If having a religious-based preschool is important to you, ask how they incorporate religious teachings into the curriculum, whether or not the students attend religious services and what requirements may be needed for enrollment.

Special needs preschools offer programs geared to children with learning disabilities such as autism, Asperger's Syndrome, ADHD or sensory-based learning delays. These schools tailor their teaching methods to the child, allowing them to learn and grow at their pace and level.

Does the school stand alone or is it affiliated with an elementary school? Most Catholic schools offer preschool through 8th grade classes, a convenient and community-building feature for parents with multiple children attending school. Other preschools stand alone and operate as a business or non-profit organization, such as a co-op. Others operate as part of another business or organization, such as the preschool at the Jewish Community Center.