

Parent Brochure

How Can Parents Identify a High Quality Preschool Program?

Choosing a Preschool Program

School readiness is the first of the National Education Goals and includes the objective that all children will have access to high-quality preschool programs to help prepare them for the next level of schooling. The Goals also acknowledge the value of parental participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children. A vital role for parents lies in the careful selection of a preschool to ensure that the program gives your child the right start.

Many different types of agencies around the country operate preschool programs in a variety of settings. Some programs are operated by local schools. Some, like Head Start and migrant programs, are sponsored by federal agencies, and others are run by nonprofit groups such as churches and charitable organizations. Some are provided by employers while others are owned by individuals or franchise chains. The quality of the preschool varies from program to program.

As a parent, you will want to assess how well a preschool program will satisfy your needs and preferences. When looking for a preschool, you can start by contacting a local child care resource and referral agency.

When you choose a preschool program, it is important to consider the characteristics of your child, the program, and the preschool staff; as well as the preschool's physical environment; and which combination of these factors would provide the best experience for your child.

Characteristics of the Child

Some children are more comfortable in large groups and will do well in preschools that have large classes. However, if your child is uncomfortable in a crowd, look for a preschool that offers small classes or consider a family day care home arrangement. A child who is especially fond of vigorous physical activities and outdoor play may need a preschool that has good outdoor space and equipment and that emphasizes physical activities in its schedule. Since children's temperaments vary, each child's level of comfort in large or free-play activities should be considered when trying to meet his or her special needs. Whereas more active, outgoing children may react positively to situations where multiple activities are going on within one area, other children may feel more comfortable and safe when participating in more structured activities.

Characteristics of the Program

The directors of good programs usually encourage parents looking for a preschool to visit at any time with their children, but calling ahead for an appointment is a courtesy to the

staff and will ensure that the director has time to talk with you. Parents should visit as many preschools as possible before making a choice. If you are making such a visit, give yourself time to get a feeling for the classroom's general atmosphere and the extent to which children appear comfortable and involved. A good educational and organizational climate is usually indicated by friendliness among the staff and children.

Children in a good preschool are usually not easily distracted by visitors and continue to be absorbed in their work or play. When children rush toward visitors and stay close to them, abandoning their activities, it very likely indicates that the activities do not stimulate or interest the children enough.

You can ask the following questions about the preschool:

- Does the program have a clear written statement of its goals and philosophy?
- Do the goals address all areas of a child's development, including his or her social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development?
- Does the preschool offer a balance of individual, small-group, and large-group activities; and spontaneous play and teacher-guided activities?
- Is there a balance between rest and quiet periods and vigorous outdoor activities?
- Do the preschool's activities encourage self-expression; help children to develop various motor skills; and regularly expose the children to literature, the language arts, music, science, and nature?
- Do the staff encourage and respond to children's natural interests in reading, writing, and counting?
- Does the preschool provide snacks and meals that are sufficiently nutritious?
- Do the staff pay attention to, and follow up on, the children's interests in the world around them?
- Do the content and materials of the preschool program reflect cultural diversity and nonsexist attitudes?

Characteristics of the Staff

Questions to ask about the program staff include:

- Are the teachers trained in early childhood education?
- Does the director have experience as a teacher?
- Does the ratio of adults to children comply with state requirements? (Check with the local branch of the state agency that regulates preschool programs.)
- Have the staff been stable over the years?
- Do the staff welcome parents as visitors and participants, communicate regularly

with them, and respect their preferences and ideas:

- In their work with children, do the teachers express warmth, interest, and respect for each child?
- Are the teachers engaged with the children most of the time?

Characteristics of the Physical Environment

Questions to ask about the physical setting:

- Is there an attractive, spacious outdoor area for safe, vigorous activities?
- Is there a sufficient supply of equipment?
- Are children always supervised when outdoors?
- Can children find small, quiet places in the classroom if they want to?

Conclusion

Most preschool programs must conform to state regulations and satisfy minimum standards of health and safety. Even so, it is a good idea to ask the staff whether the program is up to date with its state license and is accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Studies suggest that preschools are more likely to offer high-quality programs when the number of children is small enough to allow the staff to get to know all the children and their families. Whenever possible, it is helpful to speak to other parents who have children in the program about their experiences and recommendations.

Where Can I Get More Information?

Child Care Action Campaign
330 Seventh Avenue, 17th Floor
New York, NY 10001
212-239-0138

ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education
University of Illinois
805 West Pennsylvania Avenue
Urbana, IL 61801-4897
1-800-583-4135
217-333-1386
<http://ericps.ed.uiuc.edu/ericeece.html>

Family Resource Coalition
200 South Michigan Avenue, Suite 1520
Chicago, IL 60604
312-341-0900

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
1509 16th Street NW

Washington, DC 20036
1-800-424-2460

National Association of Child Care Resources and Referral Agencies
2116 Campus Drive SE
Rochester, MN 55904
507-287-2020

National Association of Family Day Care
1331A Pennsylvania Avenue, Suite 348
Washington, DC 20004
615-834-7872 (Accreditation)
602-838-3446 (Publications and Membership)

The National PTA
330 North Wabash Avenue, Suite 2100
Chicago, IL 60611-3690
312-951-6782

Sources

Most of the following references -- those identified with an ED or EJ number -- have been abstracted and are in the ERIC database. Documents with an ED number can be found on microfiche at more than 900 locations or can be ordered in paper copy from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service at 1-800-443-ERIC. Call 1-800-LET-ERIC for more details.

Bredekamp, S. 1987. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*. (Rev. ed.). Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Howes, C., D.A. Phillips, and M. Whitebook. 1992. "Thresholds of Quality: Implications for Social Development of Children in Center-Based Child Care." *Child Development* 63 (2): 449-460.

Katz, L.G. 1993. "Multiple Perspectives on the Quality of Early Childhood Programs." ERIC Digest. Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. ED 355 041.

Katz, L.G. 1989. "Pedagogical Issues in Early Childhood Education." ED 321 840.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. 1991. *Guidelines for Appropriate Curriculum Content and Assessment in Programs Serving Children Ages 3 through 8*. Washington, DC: ED 426 212.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. 1990. *How To Choose a Good Early Childhood Program*. Washington, DC.

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