

STARTING THE PRESCHOOL HUNT

Tips for Finding the Perfect Environment for Your Child

By BECKY LANE

There is a lot to consider when looking for the perfect place to send your little one for her first educational experience. You'll want to do your research before taking that plunge, and that can take some time.

But where do you start? How do you find the perfect preschool? How will you know when you've found it? And how do you even know when your toddler is ready?

Is Your Child Ready?

As a first-time parent, you might be wondering what the typical age is for beginning preschool. That depends on the child, says Judy Molland, author of *Straight Talk About Schools Today* (FreeSpirit, 2007). "Starting at the beginning of the school year once your child has turned 3 is a good general guide, although some preschools accept children as young as 2 1/2," she says. "However, not all children are ready at that age."

Some preschools actually offer programs aimed at 2-year-olds, though. Both my children began their preschool education with a "Mommy and Me" class at age 2. The class, which meets once a week, eases toddlers into a preschool setting by having parents attend class with them, playing and interacting with their children the entire time.

Age aside, it all comes down to when your child is ready, and "readiness has more to do with where your child is developmentally," Molland says. "Is he socially, emotionally, physically and cognitively ready to participate in a daily, structured, educational program with a group of other children?"

So how do you know when your toddler is ready for preschool? Allison Green, a mom of two from Winston-Salem, N.C., says she knew her boys were ready for preschool because they were doing so well in their daycare environment. "They did well in a school setting and socialized well with the other children," she says. Green's oldest son, age 5, was put in a Kindergarten Readiness program at his new preschool, while her 3-year-old son attended a class with other 3-year-olds.

Rana Ayala's daughter was 2 when she saw signs of readiness. "I knew she was ready for school when she was spending longer and longer amounts of time reading, knew most of her letters and seemed like she wanted to know more than that," says the Jacksonville, Fla., mom.

When Should You Get Started?

Once you've determined your child is ready for preschool, you should begin the hunt for the right school right away. "This is [a] good time to ask around for advice in your community," says Robin Posey, a franchisee liaison at Goddard Systems, Inc., franchisor of The Goddard School, which has nearly 300 preschools throughout the country. "If you would like for your child to start in September, but all of the quality programs begin fall enrollment in January, you need to begin your search early. You may be asked to leave a deposit to hold a spot. With rolling admissions, students are accepted year round. Nevertheless, we always encourage families to start looking early. As with any quality program, a reserved spot can be a hot commodity."

"In my area, it is important to sign up for a preschool in February (six or seven months before the next school year starts) and most of the preschools in the area fill up very quickly, so being prepared with your research done is very important," Green says. "In fact, some of the preschools have lines starting at 5 in the morning waiting for registration to start at 9 or so that morning. There are limited spaces so people want to make sure they get their spot."

What's Out There

Before you start your preschool hunt, make sure you know what type of environment you're seeking for your toddler, and what your options are. Narrowing your choices down to those schools or options will make your job a lot easier. "There are many types of preschool programs including child-centered, Montessori and religious-based," Posey says. "Find a program that focuses on the development of the whole child – cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically."

Molland says the biggest distinction in preschools is between high-quality schools designed to get your kids ready for kindergarten and community centers or childcare facilities, which often do not offer the same quality of education. “A good rule of thumb is to find a school accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC),” she says.

Also consider what kind of schedule a preschool offers. “Some schools run on a traditional September to May school-year calendar, while others run sessions for several weeks at a time with breaks in between,” Posey says. “Some schools are open year-round.”

When checking on schedules, don’t forget to find out when and how often a preschool class meets and the duration of the class. There are all types of schedules out there, from two-hour classes that meet twice a week, to morning or afternoon classes, to all-day classes that meet five times a week. Find one that will work with your child’s needs and your family’s schedule.

With all the options available, what’s the best way for parents to find desirable preschools in their area? “Research as many schools as possible,” Posey says. “Ask friends and coworkers for referrals, and use the Internet to make a list of preschools you want to visit.”

Green did exactly that when researching schools for her boys, including using a local online resource called Babevine. “It’s a network of mothers in my area who are available to answer questions, provide parenting information and resources, etc.,” Green says. “When I asked about preschools on Babevine the woman who actually ended up being my oldest son’s teacher wrote back about the program. I talked to lots of different people about the school, teachers and their experience in general.”

Sizing Them Up

Once you have several schools to choose from, the next step is to visit each school. It’s the only way to get a true sense of what the school is like, Molland says. “Plan to spend an hour or two there,” she says. “And while you’re there, put yourself in your little one’s place and consider what you see from her point of view. It’s also a good idea to make a list of things to look for before you go and ask about anything that concerns you. Be prepared!”

Look at each school you visit in terms of staff and the school environment as a whole, and ask the same questions at each school, so you have something for comparison, Molland says. Green says she did all these things, as well as talked to parents of the preschool’s students, before she committed to a school.

“Once you have narrowed down your top two or three choices, revisit these schools at different times of the day to observe different parts of their program,” Posey says. “Ask if your child can come back to try out the classroom for a day. Consider it a red flag if a school does not encourage you to visit or is not open and responsive to all of your questions about the program.”

The Staff

Preschool staff should be one of your first considerations on the tour. “Be sure to ask about the school’s management team,” Posey says. “Who can you go to with questions or concerns?” Communication is a crucial part of your family’s experience at a preschool, she says. “For example, a daily activity report lets parents know about their child’s day from snacks and favorite books to what new words were learned in sign language and Spanish.”

As for teachers, “The right combination of education, experience and caring is key when it comes to finding the best teacher for your child,” Posey says. “Qualified teachers should, at a minimum, be pursuing a degree in early childhood education or a related field. Continuing education is also important. Through a program called Goddard University, we regularly bring ongoing training to each school that ensures our teachers have the latest information in early childhood education.”

Molland agrees. “The professional qualifications and training of staff are crucial to a quality program,” she says. “Ask about the degrees and certificates held by the director and teachers, and find out what steps the preschool takes to provide staff with ongoing training.”

Staff ratio is another important consideration, Molland says. “A low child-to-teacher ratio is important since it determines how much individual attention your child will receive,” she says. “The NAEYC recommends at least one adult for every six older toddlers (2 to 3 years) or for every 10 3- to 4-year-olds.”

Fosca Shackleton White, founder and director of the Montessori Academy of Chicago, also thinks a low teacher-to-student ratio is important. “As a result we try at all times to make certain that there is a minimum of one adult for four children in the toddler classroom,” even though Illinois’ state mandated ratio is only one to five, she says.

Staff quality, especially the staff turnover rate, was one of the most important things Green considered when she chose her sons’ preschool. “The turnover rate of the teachers is important because it shows that the teachers like the environment they work in and want to stay,” she says. “Also, the level of educational background of the teachers is important to me.”

The Facility

Make note of the preschool facility itself when visiting a preschool. “A huge factor is the ‘feel’ of the facility,” Molland says. “Are you greeted personally and do you feel welcome when you visit? Do the children receive warm, individual attention? And of course health and safety are priorities.” Molland says to look for the following:

1. Children are supervised at all times.
2. The facility looks clean and well cared for.
3. Equipment, toys and play materials are clean and in good shape.
4. Outdoor play equipment is sturdy and well anchored.

“Today’s parents often put security at the top of the list,” Posey says. “Ask about the school’s policy on entering the building and releasing children for pickup. A staff member should be present in the lobby to greet and identify anyone who comes into the school. Parents should ask about the policy on releasing children to family, friends or relatives. Are written permission from parents, picture ID check or family passwords required? These measures help to protect your child at school.”

Finally, ask about health and safety, Posey says. “Ask about the school’s policies on diaper changing, hand washing and sanitizing toys and equipment,” she says. “For example, Goddard has an 18-step diaper changing procedure!”

Programs and Class Curriculum

Class curriculum can vary widely from preschool to preschool, with some schools placing more emphasis on academics, while others focus on socialization. “Most parents seek a balance of learning and play for their children, but this is an issue you will need to decide for yourself and of course, for your child,” Molland says. “Most kindergarten teachers agree that their greatest challenges are not the kids who don’t know their numbers, but the kids who lack the social, emotional and self-regulatory skills necessary to be in a classroom.”

“I wanted a preschool that would allow the children to play and be kids and not only concentrate on academics,” Green says. “The programs at my children’s preschool include Wood Shop Clay Shop (weekly class where they work with wood, hammering, nails, clay, pottery, etc. My older son brought home many wonderful things he made!); Spanish; science (a Ph.D.-level scientist came to the school once a week to teach age-appropriate experiments and did hands-on projects with them); music, etc. They encourage the children to use their imaginations and to be creative.”

Also, make sure the program will be appropriate for our child’s age and developmental stage, Shackleton White says. “For instance, toddlers need constant reassurance in their daily lives,” she says. “Giving them activities that they are capable of completing themselves, for instance, helps them gain security in themselves.”

One more thing to consider with a preschool’s program is whether they are welcoming of parents in the classroom. “A school should have an open door policy and allow you to visit your child at any time throughout the day,” Posey says. “Parents must feel welcome to visit their child at school at any time, whether it be to ... enjoy lunch with their toddler or sit in on class with

their Pre-K child. Look for diverse socialization opportunities where friends and family members are encouraged to visit the school for activities like Grandparents' Day Tea or Thanksgiving Feast."

Green likes the level of parental involvement at her sons' preschool. "There is an open door policy at the school and parents are encouraged to be involved with their child and the classroom," she says. "There is a lot of parental support and involvement at their preschool, which is great! There is a lot of communication between the teachers and parents, which is very important as well."

Finally, before you commit to a school, "confirm what's included in the tuition," Posey says. "Some schools charge additional fees for things like meals and even phonics instruction. Other schools have inclusive programs, allowing all children to participate in all programs. If it is important to you that your child experience physical as well as social growth, look for a program that does not charge more for nutrition and fitness opportunities, such as yoga."

Information is power, and the more you know about a preschool option, the more comfortable you'll feel making a decision that will work for your whole family. "Go with your gut!" Ayala says. "Listen to you and your child's instinct." You'll be glad you did.

HOMESCHOOLING YOUR PRESCHOOLER

Home schooling as an option is becoming more popular for some families these days. So what about home schooling for preschool?

Rana Ayala, a mom of one and one on the way, began considering home-preschooling when she was pregnant with her first child. "I met with local homeschooling groups and researched various methods and philosophies, mostly Montessori and Charlotte Mason, as well as learning styles for toddlers," Ayala says. "The most important things to me in my child's education are that it encourages and answers her natural curiosity and quest to find the truth of the matter, that it is always interesting, encourages her strengths as well as areas that may not come so easy, changes as her needs and interests change and never harms or causes disinterest in the learning process or her." Ayala felt she could accomplish this best by teaching her daughter at home.

But some experts aren't sure this is the best preschool option. "If you have training in education, home preschooling is definitely an option," says Judy Molland, author of *Straight Talk About Schools Today* (FreeSpirit, 2007). "But most experts nowadays recommend that getting your child into a quality prekindergarten situation is the best way to guarantee his success in kindergarten."

Interaction is also a concern. "Most parents cite socialization as a top reason for enrolling in a preschool," says Robin Posey, a franchisee liaison at Goddard Systems, Inc., franchisor of The Goddard School. "Preschool is a perfect way for a child to learn that they can be content without a parent at their side at all times (usually much harder for the parents to accept). Being in a school environment with other children is one of the best ways to work on skills such as sharing, taking turns and effective communication."

All this doesn't concern the Ayala family. "We are all happy with our decision," she says. "My daughter loves home school and is excited every morning. I have been there to see her learn so many new things, and reach further every day."