

How To Select A Pre-School

By Curt Hagedorn

Not so long ago, most children stayed home with Mommy until the ripe old age of five or even six before tearfully boarding that big yellow bus to Kindergarten. Nowadays, however, children are often in day care from the moment they are born, and most enter preschool around 3, or even as young as two (potty training seems to be the line of demarcation.) Naturally, as more parents are looking for more pre-schools, the best ones become more competitive and the other should be looked at carefully to ensure that your child is well taken care of, supervised and prepared in whatever way you think best to continue into regular public or private kindergarten.

Of course, one of the best ways to select a pre-school is to talk to other parents, as well as to the school Principal or counselor or Kindergarten teacher at the public or private school the child will eventually attend. From these individuals you can develop a list of schools that you at least can trust and that have been proven to prepare children for eventual passage into the upper grades. Once you've talked to a number of people, you'll also be able to form a better opinion on your own of what you want your child's pre-school experience to be, if you want more rigor or more freedom, and what if anything specific you expect your child to learn while there. All parents have different expectations and though recently there's been a small but increasingly vocal backlash against over scheduling and overtaxing children at earlier and earlier ages – yes, that's homework your little one is bringing home from Kindergarten – you need to make the choices you feel are right for you and your child.

Once you've made some sort of initial decision on a few preschools, and of course have found out whether there is space available at all, try not to get caught up in the "I hope my child gets in syndrome" but rather look at it as "I hope this school meets with my approval." In other words, you should take at least a few hours from your workday to go to the school and observe and participate before applying or enrolling your child. And it's best to do this without a great deal of notice, what you want is a typical day, not a guided tour. If the school can't understand why you might want to pop in unannounced, you might want to continue your search – there's little that you can do that's so disruptive to the education of a room of three year olds to justify keeping you out, unless of course they're all napping. Make sure you do as thorough an assessment as you can, looking at not only the facilities and space – pre-schools can vary widely in what they provide to your children, you may find a completely equipped computer room or state of the art equipment for art, music and sports. Check and see what any outdoor play areas consist of and evaluate their safety. And make sure you take a look at the safety and supervision aspects as a whole –

how easy would it be for a child to wander off? Finally, observe a class and the interactions between teachers and children – are children as obedient as can be expected, are they engaged, how do teachers deal with the inevitable free spirits and loose cannons in the class – what are the underlying lessons your kids are learning about self discipline and self esteem?

When you get to this point, you're also probably going to experience some sticker shock at the cost of pre-school – particularly if you have more than one child. It's this phenomenon that is often leading parents to a further step – deciding against pre-school and having one or the other parent stay at home with the child during these formative years. It's really only after you analyze all the expenses of pre-school – you may be surprised to find that some can cost as much as a college education – that you can truly decide whether or not pre-school is the right choice for your child personally and educationally and for your family economically.

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