

Signs of a Good Preschool

Choosing a school for your child, even a preschool, means being picky and asking a lot of questions. Start your search several months before you want your child to start preschool, and use the following list as a guide. A good preschool should have:

A good reputation

A good preschool should have a welcoming, friendly atmosphere and be known for its nurturing environment and stimulating curriculum. Ask the school for names and numbers of other parents and call them, or stop by during afternoon pickup time and approach other parents then.

Of course, take anything you hear about a school with a grain of salt and wait to judge it until you see it for yourself — disgruntled parents may simply have had a personality conflict with the preschool director. Also, your own first impressions definitely matter here. Be sure to observe the children when you visit: If they don't seem happy to be there, that's probably a signal to look elsewhere.

Bottom line: If you don't hear too many good opinions about a certain school, and if it doesn't feel right, look elsewhere.

Established ground rules

It's important for a preschool to be flexible — letting you pick up and drop off your child at different times, for instance — but it should also have clearly established written regulations for everything from operating hours to how to handle emergencies. That way you know the staff takes its responsibility — your child — seriously.

Along the same lines, look for a school with a strict sick-child policy. Find out which illnesses mean your child has to stay home, and for how long. A tough policy may inconvenience you if your child is ill, but keeping sick children (and staff) away makes sense. A good preschool helps cut down on illness by requiring all children and employees to have current immunizations and regular checkups.

If a preschool doesn't encourage parents to stop by unannounced anytime, chances are it has something to hide. Keep looking. A great preschool will go beyond merely letting you in; it will invite you to become part of its community by helping with activities, accompanying the children on field trips, and so on.

Bottom line: If a preschool is poorly organized and has lax or nonexistent rules, it's not likely to be right for you.

A stimulating curriculum

The best preschools have daily schedules that include plenty of time for physical activity, quiet time (including regular reading sessions), group programs, socializing, crafts, individual activities, meals, snacks, and free time. TV and videos should not play a big part in your child's day. A well-thought-out curriculum stimulates your child's development and makes daily life more fun. At this point, teachers can begin helping children learn things like letters and numbers in an everyday context (counting toys, cutting out pictures of things that start with the different letters of the alphabet, etc.). Don't evaluate the school based on how many numbers and letters your child is learning, though — preschoolers aren't ready for a rigorous academic program.

The curriculum should change over time, providing your child with the chance to try something new, and should be adjusted to match each child's abilities and skill levels. Some preschools (such as Montessori) have specialized educational philosophies, but overall, look for a program that encourages independence and inspires your child's individuality and creativity.

Look for a school with a wide range of age-appropriate toys that will encourage your child's development and, as she gets older, stimulate creative, imaginative play.

If you have to bring your child's food, find out the school's guidelines. Some may require you to pack only nutritious foods; that's okay — preschools that don't restrict candy or other sweets may not have your child's best interests at heart. If the school does have a food plan, find out what it serves at meal and snack times. Does it encourage healthy eating habits and cover all the food groups? If not, keep looking.

Bottom line: If your child won't get a wide range of age-appropriate activities, move on.

A qualified, caring staff

A trained, qualified staff is one advantage preschools and daycare centers have over nannies and home daycare providers, who often have no specialized education. Preschool teachers should be educated, with at least two years of college, a background in early childhood development (though many states don't require this), and CPR and other emergency training.

When you're at the center, note how the staff interacts with the children. Teachers should also be responsible, enthusiastic, and well prepared. Look for a preschool with a staff that shares your philosophy about sleep, discipline, feeding, and other care issues. Good teachers will ask detailed questions about your child's health and care requirements to help determine whether their preschool is right for you.

Make sure the preschool has plenty of staff so your child will get the attention and care he needs. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), a preschool should have one teacher for every seven children, with no more than 14 kids per group (so, two teachers per group of 14). Note that preschools aren't required to follow NAEYC's recommendations, so ask what each school's teacher-child ratio is and decide whether that's okay for you. A good preschool will keep groups of children small no matter how many teachers they have, to encourage interaction and development.

Look for a preschool with good staff benefits. Preschools that pay their employees well and offer them good wages, vacation time, health insurance, and an education allowance, for example, are more likely to have teachers who stick around. Low turnover is key to ensuring consistent, stable care for your child.

Bottom line: If the staff doesn't stick around long, seems overwhelmed, or doesn't have enough experience, the school isn't for you.

Clean, safe facilities

A good preschool is clean and safe; in fact, it has to be to meet most states' licensing requirements. Nevertheless, make sure floors, walks, and the kitchen area are clean, food preparation areas are far from toilets, trash isn't be left sitting unemptied, and the building is adequately heated, lit, and ventilated.

Make sure the preschool follows the basic rules of safety, too. Toys and play equipment should be in good repair, upstairs windows (if any) should have screens or bars, all medicines and other hazardous substances should be out of reach, and the outdoor play area should be level and secure. Smoke detectors should be in place and working, radiators and heaters should be covered or otherwise protected, and a first-aid kit and fire extinguisher should be close at hand. The school should be secure as well so strangers can't just walk in off the street.

Look for a school with an outdoor play area. Children should have the chance to play outside every day — running, jumping, and skipping are good for them physically, mentally, and socially. If you live in a city, where it can be difficult for even the best preschools to have enough space for a safe outdoor play yard, make sure they have a spacious indoor area (the next best thing). According to NAEYC, preschools should have at least 35 square feet of indoor space per child and 75 square feet per child outside.

Bottom line: Spot a safety hazard? A missed hand wash? Keep looking.

A current license

Ask to see a preschool's license and credentials, then double-check with a call to your local social services department. Because they're technically classified as daycares rather than educational institutions, preschools have to meet the same licensing requirements as other childcare centers.

If possible, look for a facility that has passed the stringent accreditation process required by NAEYC, a benchmark of quality, by searching the NAEYC database. To be licensed, preschools must meet state licensing regulations for health and safety. Of course, a license isn't a guarantee of quality — that's why you have to evaluate the school and the teachers themselves.

Bottom line: A license isn't everything, but if a preschool doesn't have one, pass.
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