

Choose the proper preschool

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Tips for a couple who recently moved and are looking for a play-based preschool: See for yourself. Check out classes in action. Some preschool directors "talk the talk" but don't "walk the walk," says Carolyn Walker of Cornelius, N.C., who has more than 12 years of experience teaching preschoolers. "A true play-based preschool allows children the freedom to play, with observant teachers ready to step in to foster aha moments as they naturally occur."

A play-based preschool program:

--Allows children to select from several choices.

--Includes a dramatic-play area with rotating props.

--Has teachers who encourage interaction and negotiating between children rather than always telling children what to do next and how to do it.

The first step in finding a play-based preschool is to look at the school's philosophy or mission statement. From there, ask to visit a classroom while it is in session. If possible, sit in a corner and just watch how children play, and how adults and children interact.

The chosen curriculum is a clue. Montessori, for example, is more structured. Others, such as the "Creative Curriculum for Preschool" by Teaching Strategies allows for more flexibility. "In my experience, we explained to parents that while we used the best ideas from many curriculums, our main curriculum was the child," says Walker. "This allowed us to treat each child individually with what he needed at the time he needed it. Teachers were considered facilitators, not entertainers."

Seek out answers to these questions during visits to schools:

--Do children feel confident to ask for help when needed, and do not need to ask for permission to proceed to a new task?

--Do teachers tell children what to do or let them negotiate appropriately in most instances?

--Are there lots of materials for children to make selections?

--Is the art based on the process of doing, or a teacher-directed process where everything the children make looks the same?

--Are adults telling children what and when to play, or are the choices spontaneous?

A child who gains a love of learning gets a chance to figure out how things work, even something as simple as two halves snapping together to make a plastic egg, or two square blocks to form a rectangle.

Goals of high-quality, play-based preschool teachers include: The children are able to listen and follow directions; have strong self-help skills; and develop gross and fine motor skills such as cutting and climbing. Instead of rote counting or work sheets, a child visualizes the number 6, for example, by working with six objects. That concrete work builds a bridge to a symbolic equation that comes later.

In "Kindergarten Success" (JosseyBass, \$14.95, 2006), author Amy James says children are ready to enter kindergarten if they are able to:

--Verbally communicate needs and wants.

--Use complete sentences to recount an event.

--Ask questions.

--Take care of their own bathroom needs.

--Share and take turns.

--Separate easily from parents.

--Approach new activities with curiosity.

--Follow two- and three-step directions.

--Run, hop, walk, skip and throw a ball.

Kindergarten success comes through early play, research has shown. Among those researchers, Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, professor of psychology at Temple University in Philadelphia, says pressure for early academics squashes a young child's natural curiosity. Bottom line: Play equals learning, says Hirsh-Pasek, who has spent much of her career pushing for the importance of play for preschoolers.

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