

What to Consider when Choosing a Preschool or Childcare Center

When beginning to search for the right preschool or childcare center, you will want to consider what you value in your child's early education. Are you interested in your child engaging in free play or more structured activities? Are you looking to have the teacher direct the day, or would you prefer your child to choose activities based on his interests? In general, a preschool or childcare center will promote itself as either play-based or academic.

In a play-based program, children choose activities based on their current interests. The term "play-based" is often interchanged with "child-centered," which could be used to describe the majority of available early childhood programs. Typically, a play-based environment has activity centers such as a home center, science area, water table and sensory station, reading nook, space with blocks and other toys, an art center, or other areas where exploration and creativity is encouraged. Valuable skills, including important social skills and cooperation with others, literacy, and early math skills are practiced as children engage in hands-on learning activities and play.

In academic programs, teachers lead the children in structured activities, planning the lessons, and guiding the children as they work through them. This design is aimed at preparing children for the kindergarten setting. For the most part, classroom time is devoted to learning letters and sounds, distinguishing shapes and colors, telling time, and other skills.

Although parents may take comfort in knowing their child is in a more academic setting, research shows this only makes a difference in the short term. It is important to remember that preschool should not look like elementary school. It should be organized so there is a plan and routine for the day, but it should not feel regimented.

A quality preschool program or childcare center can set the foundation for a successful transition to kindergarten and beyond. Most importantly, children should be in an environment that engages and stimulates intellectual curiosity while imparting social skills.

Before visiting a childcare center or preschool, here are some questions to ask, and things to look for to ensure that the learning environment will be right for your child and you. Be sure to call in advance to arrange a tour. You may want to have an initial visit without your child and then arrange for a follow-up visit with your child to observe how he functions in the learning environment.

Before You Go:

- **Ask yourself, "What kind of childcare or school environment would I like to have my child enrolled?"** Do you picture your child in a busy, active place with lots of other children, or are you interested in a small, nurturing environment with just a few kids? Are you looking for a particular educational philosophy? Do you want a school located near your workplace or your home? What kinds of needs do you have regarding your schedule?

When You Get There:

- **Consider if this school is a good fit for your child — and you.** Can you picture your child thriving here? Will this school engage his interests? How will your child do socially in this environment?
- **Spend time observing.** Schools and childcare centers will often conduct thorough tours. Watch silently in the classroom and observe the interactions. Ask yourself, “Is this the kind of environment I can see my young child thriving in?”
- **What is the educational philosophy?** How does this school or center approach learning? Some philosophies are play-based, some introduce reading and math earlier than others, and many programs incorporate multiple philosophies. Some preschools follow specific educational models such as the Montessori Method, the Waldorf approach, the Reggio Emilia system and more.
- **How large are the classes and what is the teacher-child ratio?** Class size ratios in childcare settings vary by state. Ask your school what the mandate is. Most childcare centers range from 1:3 or 1:4 adults to children or infants, and then vary by age as the child gets older. The important thing to consider is how your child’s needs and your own will be met by this equation.
- **What is the look and feel of the school or center?** Does it feel warm and inviting? Is it clean and organized? What is displayed around the classroom? Do you see original student artwork? Are the displays placed at eye level so young children can see them? Is there an outdoor play area? How often is it used? Is there an indoor gross motor room?
- **Is the atmosphere exciting?** Do students seem happy? Are they having positive interactions with each other and the adults in the room? Do the teachers seem like they enjoy teaching here? Would your child be happy here? Would you be comfortable with your child in this learning environment?
- **What kinds of activities are the children doing?** What is happening in the art center and the block area? Are children working cooperatively, individually, or both? Are the projects controlled or open-ended, enabling children to do many different things with the same materials? Are there opportunities for dramatic and imaginative play?
- **Is there a literacy focus?** If you are researching a preschool, ask if it focuses on teaching early literacy skills. Does this approach seem right for you and your child? A good preschool program should make all children feel successful.

More Questions to Ask When Choosing a Preschool or Childcare Center

- **Are children working all together or individually?** Is everyone doing the same project or activity at the same time? Are individual interests being accommodated? Will your child’s learning style be suited well to this school’s approach?
- **Assess the staff and teachers.** Do they seem happy and excited? Ask, “What is staff turnover rate?” and “How long have teachers been with the program?” Are teachers certified or trained in Early Childhood education?

- **How much do the children play?** All children need plenty of opportunity for active and imaginative play. When visiting a preschool or childcare center, note what kinds of play are allowed and encouraged. Children need to be able to explore their interests through play — in a dramatic play area, in a block area, and using materials like sand and water.
- **How do parents get involved in the school?** Is there an active parent’s organization? Are parents invited to volunteer in the classroom? What are some of the volunteer opportunities?
- **How is information communicated to parents?** How do teachers and the administration keep parents informed? Are regular newsletters or emails used to communicate with parents? Can you e-mail the teachers with questions? How often do you meet with your child’s teacher?
- **How does the school address social-emotional issues?** How does the staff help children resolve conflicts? How are issues like hitting, throwing, and biting addressed? Is there a specific approach used for teaching social-emotional skills?
- **What are the discipline policies?** Many schools have specific disciplinary rules involving everything from time outs, to meeting with the teacher or principal, to expulsion. Do parents and teachers work together when discipline issues arise? Ask for specifics and consider if they will be right for your child and for you.
- **Is this school or childcare center accredited?** Public schools need to meet state and district requirements. Private schools and daycare centers get additional accreditation from organizations like the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). Be aware that accreditation standards vary from state to state, and that some centers may meet standards without being accredited by outside organizations.
- **Request a copy of the class schedule.** How is the day structured? Is this the right fit for your child’s intellectual, social and physical needs? Is the day broken up into many different classes or does one activity flow into the next?
- **Is the space safe?** Is it up to code? What evacuation plans are in place?

This is a very special time and with a little preparation ahead of time, you can make the right choice for your child’s first educational experience outside the home and set the stage for a lifetime of learning.

Principia School Acorn Program