



# Simple Tips for Parents

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Parents across the country, you can relax. Contrary to what you might have heard, choosing the right preschool for your child is not as difficult as applying for an advanced degree. The key to choosing the right preschool is going into the process prepared. Prepared? Yes, prepared with a solid idea of what you want your child to gain from his or her preschool experience. This month's feature offers helpful suggestions for choosing a preschool that is a good match for your child and your family, as well as information on some of the most popular types of preschool educational philosophies. In addition, you'll find links to checklists that you can use when visiting and comparing preschool settings in your area.

## STEP ONE

### Think about the Basics

The best way to keep from becoming overwhelmed by the process of choosing a preschool is to think about how the preschool will fit into your daily life. Here are some questions parents should consider:

- Is it important for the preschool to be near my home?
- Is it important for the preschool to be near my workplace?
- Is it important for the preschool to offer childcare services in the morning, afternoon, or both?
- Am I eligible for or interested in subsidized preschool programs (i.e. Early Head Start, Child Welfare League of America or state-funded programming) that offer services such as childcare programs with a focus on providing educational opportunities?

Answering each of these questions will help you narrow down the general location and type of setting you should research. Narrowing down your choices will make the process of comparing settings easier to manage.

## STEP TWO

### Become Familiar with Common Terms

For many parents, the most confusing part about choosing preschools is trying to make sense of terms such as, "Montessori Approach," "child-centered," "Waldorf Approach" and "faith-based." What do these terms mean and how can these terms help you choose a preschool?

Oftentimes, the key difference between settings is connected to the preschool's "educational philosophy." While educational philosophies are numerous and their definitions are not set in stone, we have provided you with definitions for some of the most popular philosophies.

### • **The Montessori Method**

Focuses on maintaining the individuality of each child in the learning process. This method believes each child learns at their own pace and educational progress should not be rendered based upon comparing students to one another.

### • **The Reggio Emilia Approach**

This approach focuses on providing opportunities for problem solving through creative thinking and exploration.

### • **The Waldorf Approach**

This approach places an emphasis on imagination in learning, providing students with opportunities to explore their world through the senses, participation and analytical thought.

### • **The Bank Street Approach**

This approach places an emphasis on learning through multiple perspectives, both in the classroom setting and in the natural world.

### • **The High/Scope Approach**

This approach focuses on letting children be in charge of their own learning. Children are taught to make a plan for what they would like to do each day and participate in a review session to discuss the success of their plan and brainstorm ideas for the next day.

Outside of the formal educational philosophies, knowing the difference between other common early childhood terms will help you make informed decisions regarding your child's education. Below is a list of some common terms used to describe preschool settings. It should be noted that these terms may be used alone or in combination with one another (i.e. a "child-centered, faith-based" setting).

### • **Child-centered**

This term is often used to describe settings that take the children's interests into consideration when planning activities. For example: in a child-centered setting, the classroom activities are based on the interests of the students, not on pre-scheduled topics chosen by the teacher. These settings often offer increased opportunities for children to choose activities throughout the day depending on their interests.

### • **Teacher-led**

The opposite of a child-centered setting is a teacher-led setting. Teacher-led often means that curriculum and supplemental activities are implemented based on a set schedule developed by the teachers in the setting. This type of setting usually provides children with a structured learning environment.

### • **Child-led**

These settings believe children learn best when they are engaged and interested in learning. Child-led settings wait for each child to initiate or ask for new activities and experiences, fostering individualized learning experiences rather than group experiences.

### • **Faith-based**

This term is used to describe preschool programs that are run through faith organizations such as churches or synagogues, according to their faith's philosophies.

### • **Co-operative**

These settings often ask parents and families to assist in the running of the preschool. Parents and family members may build community by signing up to volunteer during the week, or by assisting in the day-to-day management of the preschool as well as helping with advertising, upkeep and fundraising.

### • **Developmentally Appropriate**

This term means the preschool plans the curriculum and activities based on activities that are appropriate for the age of the children in the class.

### • **Pre-kindergarten (pre-K)**

Sometimes this term is used interchangeably with preschool. In general, a pre-K program is one that has children enrolled in the year before kindergarten, usually at age four. These settings are often more structured than traditional preschool settings.

## STEP THREE

# The Research

Once you have narrowed down the general area you are interested in researching and have a good idea of what type of philosophy would best suit your child, here are a few things you can do to help narrow down your options:

- **Reach out to other parents:**

Ask your friends, your neighbors, your pediatrician, your older child's teacher - ask people you trust for recommendations for quality settings in your area. Be mindful to note the name of the setting and what struck this person as important to mention (low student teacher ratio, close to home, child is excited to arrive, etc.). And, the best question to ask is, "What advice do you wish you had received before choosing your child's preschool?" Most parents will be happy to offer their insight and advice.

- **Go to the internet:**

You might be surprised to learn that your community has an active preschool networking community, a great place to tap into useful advice and resources. Or, you can use the internet to search the names of settings to find out if they have any "red flags" like numerous complaints from parents, health or safety violations, or other noteworthy issues. The Child Care Aware Web site makes it easy to search for preschools by zip code. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Web site allows users to research preschools in their area that have NAEYC accreditation.

## STEP FOUR

# The Visit

Now that you have narrowed down your choices and come up with two or three settings you are interested in, schedule a time to visit each setting. You can learn a lot about a setting by the way staff approach introductory visits with you and your child. During your visit ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I feel welcome here?
- Does my child seem interested in what they have to offer?
- Do the children in the setting seem happy?
- How do the adults and children interact?
- Is the setting clean and safe?

**You should also come to the visit prepared with questions. Some of the basic questions parents ask are:**

- What is the turnover rate for staff members?
- What percentage of the staff hold degrees in early childhood?
- How does the setting handle discipline?
- What are the safety procedures for picking up and dropping off children?
- Is the setting accredited?
- What are the payment options and procedures?

Some parents feel more comfortable going to the visit with a checklist of questions they would like answered. Below are three checklists that may be helpful to you. Parents should not feel like they need to ask every question on the checklist, however, using a checklist is a great way to make note of your observations during the visit so you can compare settings afterward.



- Parent-Teacher Association/Pre-K Now: "Finding High-Quality Pre-K"

Remember, choosing the best preschool for your child does not have to be an overwhelming task. Successful parents go into the process aware, informed and ready to ask questions. Being prepared will make the process efficient, effective and meaningful for you and your child.