



Becoming a parent is a momentous; life-changing event filled with hopes, expectations and naturally some fears. Parents often learn and grow alongside their children, as they face the challenges of parenting, planning and decision making at each stage of their child's development. Universally health is unsurprisingly the primary concern of parents, with other interests shifting and changing as baby grows. Google data indicate that expectant parents frequently search for "pregnancy", as well as "school" and "education". It seems that future parents are considering, budgeting and planning for their child's education pre-birth.

Early development and learning

The period from birth to five years of age sees the most rapid development of your child's brain. Infants and young children have an immense capacity and desire for learning. Parental and other influences during the formative years lay the groundwork and have a profound effect on later formal education. Parents are their child's primary teacher. By age three, they have built what Dr. Sears calls the fundamental person. Your three year old has greater self-awareness and has acquired motor, language, adaptive and social skills that together with their personality and innate abilities make up who they are.

Toddlers tend to show a strong desire for companionship, as well as a yearning to refine the skills they have learned thus far. While the home lays the foundation for attitudes, values and motivation, the school is an extension of your child's learning. Parents of toddlers are faced with the important task of choosing a preschool for their child that compliments and provides an extension of the home.

Finding the best fit

Every child and general family situation are unique, making the decision of why, when, and where to send your child to preschool, a highly individual one. To help you identify and focus on schools that fit with your child's capabilities, needs and personality, the "Picky Parent Guide" has developed a target list to isolate the most important characteristics of your child, situation and school. They have called these features the "Four Fit Factors", namely what your child learns (including their abilities and interests), how your child learns (such as motivation, learning style and disabilities), social issues and practical matters (including location, number of students, orientation and extra curricular activities).

The educational philosophy

Some parents have some idea about the type of schooling they would like for their child and put their name on a waiting list before they are born. Other parents are less definite and circumstances may change over time. In searching for a preschool, you'll need to consider the school's fundamental philosophy or approach. Are you happy with the government school system, or do you want your child to go to a private school from day one? Are you considering alternative forms of education such as Montessori, Waldorf Steiner, or Reggio Emilia? Maybe you want your child to go to a school whose religious values match your own or a co-op preschool, with a high level of parental involvement?

The school environment

Essentially, no one knows your child better than you do. Can you imagine them thriving in a busy, active environment with lots of other children, or a quieter, more nurturing environment, with fewer pupils. Consider the look and feel of the school. Is it warm and inviting, or cold and institutional? Is it clean and organized, or chaotic and messy? What is the condition of both indoor and outdoor equipment? How often is it used? Do the children's creations decorate the walls? Do the children look happy? Are they interacting with one another?

The teachers and staff

Your child is accustomed to being surrounded by loving family members. Preschool is usually

the first time they will spend a significant portion of their day outside the home environment. Is your child's teacher warm and engaging or authoritarian? The best teachers are able to bond with your child and make them feel safe. Once a connection has been formed, learning is able to take place. Observe the teacher during both free play and more directed activities. What is her level of interaction with each child and her influence on group dynamics? For example, does she encourage socialization and sharing?

Your relationship and ability to communicate with your child's teacher is also important. Is she approachable and available for quick interactions at drop off or pick up? Does the school send out updates to parents? How personalized is the feedback?

Find out about the schools mandate regarding class size ratios. Most childcare centers range from 1:3 or 1:4 adults to infants or children, with this number decreasing, as the children get older. You need to consider if this equation will meet your child's needs? (E.g. their level of independence and whether or not they are potty trained).

The curriculum

Another consideration involves what your child is learning and how learning occurs. Your child should be surrounded by words in the early years, in the form of reading, reading instruction, story telling and syllabication (e.g. "B" makes the "bah" sound, "bah" is for ball). This forms the building blocks for learning to read.

They should also be exposed to mathematical concepts, such as greater than less than, bigger, smaller and reinforcement of the number concept (e.g. I see you have three blocks).

Children require stimulation and experiences that tap into different areas of development and modes of learning. Does the school encourage the development of both fine and gross motor co-ordination? Examine the outside play equipment for safety and variety. Are children encouraged to be creative and explore various art and craft materials? Are the projects controlled or open-ended, enabling children to do different things with the same materials? Is there alternating quiet and active play? Are there opportunities for dramatic and fantasy play?

Separation guidelines and discipline

It is important to ask about the school's introduce the child to school policy. Some schools allow parents to linger in and outside the classroom, while others prefer parents' to leave after the second day. Make sure that you and your child are comfortable with and able to handle the schools policy in this regard.

Many schools have disciplinary rules. Establish whether or not these correspond with your home rules and values. Does the school use time out? What does this involve? Does a child sit alone or with a teacher? Are children punished for inappropriate behaviour? How are conflicts and issues such as throwing, biting and hitting addressed? Do parents and teachers address issues together as they arise? Ask for specifics to ensure you are satisfied with the schools approach.

Practical considerations

Cost and distance from home may also affect your decision. The benefits of selecting a school close to home include having your child's playmates nearby, your family forming part of a community, and having the practical support of other parents.

Familiarize yourself with the schools hours and calendar. Do they offer an aftercare programme? When are the school and other special holidays? This information is essential if you need to plan backup childcare and budget ahead of time.

Real mom feedback

A good way to get honest feedback is to talk to other parents who send their children to the same school. Most parents will be happy to share information, which may help in the decision-making process.

Trust your intuition

Starting preschool is one of the biggest milestones in a child's life. Navigating preschool options, narrowing down the choices and ultimately selecting what you hope is the "right" school for your child, is one of the innumerable tasks of parenting. Once you have an idea of what schools you are interested in, set up a time to visit and explore the school environment. Making appointments at different kinds of schools helps you identify what you like and what you don't.

Once you have established your expectations, means and priorities, considered your child's unique needs and personality, and explored viable options; it is time to select a school that fits for your family. Finding a preschool is an exciting, sometimes scary, important process. Trust your intuition and select an environment in which your child can thrive and build the foundations for further learning and development.

- <http://www.pbs.org/parents/education/going-to-school/choosing/preschool/>
- <http://www.pbs.org/parents/education/going-to-school/choosing/comparing-preschool-philosophies-montessori-waldorf-and-more/>
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- <http://www.greatschools.org/find-a-school/defining-your-ideal/98-considering-your-childrens-needs.gs?page=all>
- <http://www.essentialkids.com.au/younger-kids/starting-school/choosing-a-school-20080630-2z7d.html>
- <http://searchenginewatch.com/sew/study/2343598/google-reveals-what-new-expectant-parents-search-for>