

10 Important Steps to Selecting a Preschool

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Finding the right place

Sending a child to preschool for the first time can be a frightening prospect. For many children, this will be their first experience apart from mom and dad. Parents are rightly concerned about their child's comfort, the quality of care, the education, and the people who will now influence their children. How do you find the preschool that's right for your child—and for your family?

If you're a resident of Glenview, you can relax. You live in a town with many quality preschools that offer strong foundations for your child's ongoing education. Now you just need to figure out what qualities you value in a preschool and find the one that best fits your needs.

Below, you will find 10 steps to help you select the preschool that is right for your child and you. As you identify and evaluate schools, keep in mind that the connections you make in preschool can follow you throughout your child's education. Engaging in the community of families—knowing the parents and the children—helps keep children on the right path throughout their education.

Gather a list of schools

- Talk to your friends and neighbors, search the web. The best recommendations may come from the people you know and trust. Ask your neighbors and friends where they send their kids for preschool and why. Decide whether you share the same values and would include the same schools on your short list. Search the web to find out if you've missed anything.
- Visit the Preschool and Child Care Fair each year in January, hosted by the Glenview Public Library. Check out www.glenviewpl.org for date and location.

Find out if schools are accredited

Find out which schools on your list are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the largest and most widely recognized accreditation program for early childhood programs. While not required for preschools, the accreditation shows that a school meets all 10 NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards such as promoting

positive relationships, promoting nutrition and health, and employing qualified teaching staff. You can learn more about the accreditation and standards at www.rightchoiceforkids.org.

Understand the school philosophies

As you research schools, you may hear about academic vs. play-based learning philosophies. While the American Academy of Pediatrics advocates a balance between the two, there is a push to promote child-driven play time. "Play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength."¹

Play-based schools embody this sentiment, fostering the natural development process of recognizing numbers and letters in the context of play. Research has shown that children with a child-centered developmental foundation tend to do better academically in later years.² A play-based environment fosters social and emotional development that leads to security and confidence. You might ask the following questions to determine if a school embraces this philosophy:

- How much time do students play outside?
- How long are students expected to sit quietly?
- How do students learn their alphabet and numbers?
- Is children's artwork on display in the classrooms?
- Do children have access to a variety of activities?

Evaluate the curriculum

Look at the classes offered by the schools on your list and make sure they fit with the age ranges of your child or children. Ask to see class descriptions, making sure the curriculum builds upon itself from year to year. While repetition is good, four-year-old programs should include kindergarten readiness skills. In fact, the preschool should communicate with the school district to incorporate kindergarten requirements into their curriculum. If you are looking at a play-based school, make sure the curriculum follows this learning philosophy.

Consider the class times and sizes

Most schools offer morning and afternoon programs. Consider whether your child is more active in the morning or afternoon or if your child still takes an afternoon nap. Do you have other obligations at drop-off or pick-up times?

If your child is more reserved in a group, he or she might do better in a smaller class. Afternoon classes tend to be smaller, but it depends on the school and the year, so you should ask the administrator.

Ultimately, the school should follow Illinois Department of Children and Family Services requirements for teacher-student ratios. You can access licensing requirements at www.state.il.us/dcfs.

Ask about school security

- Do the school doors lock while children are in class? If it's a shared facility, is the preschool separated from other areas? How are children prevented from leaving the classroom or playground without the teacher's knowledge?
- What are the procedures for parking lot safety?
- Does the school have a risk management plan?
- Does the school work with local emergency resources to establish safety procedures? Do they practice these procedures regularly?

Understand the opportunities (or expectations) for parent involvement

How involved can you afford to be in your child's school? You'll find that almost all schools rely on parent volunteers to some degree—for class activities, school events, the parent board.

While many parents consider this an opportunity to meet new people, put their skills to use, or simply get involved with the school, others (perhaps working parents or parents with smaller children) may find it hard to fully take advantage of these opportunities. Find out what the expectations are at the schools on your list. Most offer the chance to be involved on your own time, after hours, and at home.

Visit the school, meet the teachers

Most schools offer open houses in December and January prior to registration deadlines. This gives you the chance to meet more teachers, visit the classrooms, and see the school in action. You'll also get to meet other parents of current and prospective students, with whom you can speak directly about their own experiences. Contact the schools on your short list to find out when their open houses are scheduled. If you can't make it, most will accommodate a private meeting and tour.

Make sure you feel comfortable

Most importantly, make sure you, the parent, feels comfortable in the school and with the teachers and director. Remember: the family connections you make now can follow throughout your children's educational experience. It is very important to feel at ease with the preschool you choose for your child to attend.

¹ American Academy of Pediatrics, The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds, January 2007

² Marcon, RA. Developmental Psychology, 35(2), 358 – 375, 1999

Resources

Healthychildren.org

A resource from American Academy of Pediatrics
www.healthychildren.org

American Academy of Pediatrics

www.aap.org

Department of Child and Family Services

www.state.il.us/dcfs

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

The largest and most widely recognized accreditation system for all types of early childhood programs and child care centers
www.rightchoiceforkids.org

Education.com

Free information and articles for parents.
www.education.com