

Pick the Right Preschool

Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Waldorf? We help you make the best choice for your child and you

BY STEPHANIE WOOD

Like many parents of almost-3-year-olds, you're about to embark upon a new challenge - picking a preschool for your child. You might think that talking to other parents is all you need to do to make your choice. And that can often work. But many experts feel there should be more to it than that. A preschool that's right for another family might not be the one that's best for yours.

"The preschool you choose needs to be consistent with your child's interests, of course," says educator Amy Flynn, the director of the Bank Street Family Center in New York City. "But it also needs to be compatible with your values. Your child is going to learn a great deal from the children and teachers she's around, so you need to think carefully about what might be talked about and what attitudes will be conveyed.

The first factor to consider is whether a school uses a developmentally appropriate approach. "Developmentally appropriate preschools have goals and build skills, but they achieve these in ways that are particularly suitable for 3- and 4-year olds," explains Barbara Willer, Ph.D., deputy executive director of the national association for the Education of Young Children in Washington, D.C. In other words, the kids get to see and use their ABCs and 123s, but in fun, creative ways rather than through rote practice sessions and drills. Next, think about your own comfort level with a school's style of instruction, its philosophy of nurturing children, and the practices it uses to achieve its goals. The best way to do this is to spend time in a classroom and observe. Watch what's happening and see how it feels. Then ask about what you see. [For a take-along preschool checklist, go to www.sesamestreet.com/parents.]

Finally your child's personality will play a large part in your decision. Of course you want her to enjoy preschool. So the school you choose should fit with her temperament and interests. For example, if you've noticed that your child seems to do best in a pretty structured routine, look for a program that offers that, as long as they let 3-year-olds be 3-year-olds in the process.

The following guide will help you to understand the preschool options generally available within the average community and to think about the kind of environment in which you and your child will thrive. Keep in mind that a preschool might not be strictly one style or another but may offer a cohesive mixture of education philosophies, "As you explore different schools," says Flynn, "ask yourself what would work best for your child, your family, and you."

Play-centered

This is a preschool style you'll often see blended with another. For instance, a program may be both play-centered and Montessori. Playcentered means most of the activities are initiated by children, who are free to move from one thing to another as they feel motivated. For example, an impromptu snowfall might draw everyone outside to examine the white stuff. Overall there is an unstructured or gently structured feel to the day, which is fine with experts. "For 3- and 4- year-olds, half or more of the time at school should be free play," notes Flynn.

"They shouldn't have to sit and listen for long periods or drill letters in workbooks. Playing with other kids is, in itself, a way to learn."

Typical elements of a play-centered preschool: You should see a variety of stations - art, music, blocks, books, housekeeping – and children playing solo or working in small groups. There will be lots of hubbub and discussion between teachers and students. "The teachers should impart concepts and day-to-day rituals, such as cleaning up, through songs and games," says Margaret Leitch-Copeland, Ed.D., an administrator for the New Hampshire Child Development Bureau in Concord.

Is it right for *your* child? Most children thrive in this highly regarded environment. Some kids, however, might do better in a slightly more structured setting than some play-centered schools offer. You as a parent, will need to feel comfortable with what may seem like a noisy, chaotic atmosphere.

Teacher-directed/Academic

Here you'll find a generally structured approach to early learning, in which teachers usually plan the activities and guide children in carrying them out. The teacher might ask specific questions like "Who recognizes this number?" or "What shape is this?" although the queries may be presented in a playful setting, such as a guessing game or while painting. The idea is to acclimate children to the classroom and prepare them for formal learning.

Typical elements of a teacher-directed/academic classroom:

You'll see a greater emphasis on simple academic skills, more pencil-and-paper-type activities and work sheets, and a quieter, more organized environment than in a play-centered classroom. But watch out for a rigid, intense approach. "A 3-year-old shouldn't be sitting doing flashcards for a long time," says Dr. Leitch-Copeland.

"Nor should children have to recognize all 26 alphabet letters or color within the lines," adds Rosanne Pirtle, Ph.D., director emeritus of early childhood education at Marian College in Indianapolis. "You can include these kinds of things, but they need to be approached in a relevant, low-key way, such as through a game or art-project."

Is it right for *your* child? If you've observed that your child thrives on a lot of direction and structure or demonstrates the ability to follow instruction, he may do well in this environment. A kid who is very physically active or has had little experience being in a

group or following instruction (such as might occur in day care) could have difficulty with this approach.

Your First Preschool Assignment

Since many preschools offer a blended style of philosophies, your homework from educator Amy Flynn is to watch classes in action and get more information:

If a program claims to follow a particular philosophy, ask the director to define in clear terms you can understand- what that means in the day-to-day workings of a class.

How does the school work with the family when a child has issues? If, for instance, your child has a lot of trouble separating, ask how the school and teacher might handle it. Do they encourage parental involvement?

How are discipline problems handled when it comes to things like hitting or biting? Ask specific questions, such as, "What do you do if a kid bites another kid?"

Ask about other health and safety issues: What happens when a child falls down or has a fever? What are the school's security policies?

Ask about inclusion. Find out if the school accepts kids with physical or developmental challenges.

How does the school accommodate children of different abilities? How do they handle developmental issues, such as late talking or toilet teaching?

Look at the mix of kids in the classroom. Is it compatible with your feelings about diversity?

Ask about anything you observe that raises a red flag: "I saw a teacher say such and such to a child. Is that usual?"

Cooperative

The teaching approach of a cooperative school may be based on almost any philosophy, but with an important difference: Parents help make it happen as well as run the business of the school, says Adele Falcone, former president of the cooperative Radnor Nursery School in Devon, Pennsylvania, and a mother of five. At Radnor, the board of directors is made up of parents who do everything from hiring the teachers to assembling the swing sets. "Each parent is expected to help out in the classroom about once a month, as well as serve on a committee," explains Falcone. As a result, you'll get a close look at how your child is growing and developing.

Typical elements of a co-op program: At their best, these schools offer an educational approach that's in line with their parents' values

and expectations. You'll want to check out the kind of families the program attracts to see if you'll be comfortable with the parents with whom you and your child will be spending so much time. You'll also need to consider your own calendar: This might be an awesome responsibility to take on if you work full-time.

Is it right for *your* child? Since there are parents in every classroom, co-ops can have a very nurturing feeling- ideal for a child who is slow to warm up. However, Falcone notes, "occasionally we see kids who at first have a hard time seeing their mother pay attention to another child. " Dr. Pirtle adds, "Some kids prone to separation anxiety actually do better when their parents are gone." You need weigh these kinds of issues as you make your choice.

Montessori

This unique and systematic teaching method, conceived in Rome in 1907 by Maria Montessori, combines individualized attention with careful structure. Children are usually grouped in three-year age spans, forming a close-knit community in which older kids help younger ones and all learn at their own pace. Teachers play a less demonstrative role in both instruction and nurturing.

The Montessori approach is to teach life lessons. For example, a 5-year-old may learn to peel an apple with a real knife. Some feel Montessori has a heavy focus on academics. Yet Academics are not forced, asserts Tim Seldin, president of the Montessori Foundation and chair of the International Montessori Council in Rockville, Maryland. "Children are intrinsically motivated to learn," he says. "They're drawn to the activities of the older children in their group."

Typical elements of a Montessori preschool:

These schools appear noticeably different than others. You rarely see toys notes Seldin, "because we teach children how to handle real objects rather than pretend ones. That means arranging flowers in breakable vases or even using a low-heat iron. The idea is to teach them how to hand and respect valuable, or what some may consider dangerous, things." Montessori educators feel kids are already creative, so you usually won't see dress-up costumes in classrooms either.

To find a true Montessori school - knock-offs are common – ask if a school is affiliated with groups such as the Montessori Foundation and if teachers have been trained in the Montessori method. Still these preschools can vary, so consider each one individually.

Is it right for *your* child? Many kids do well in the realistic Montessori environment. But some may find the structured curriculum and task-oriented activities difficult. The most important factor, says Seldin, is that the parents are comfortable with the Montessori goals and way of teaching.

The ABCs of Any Good Preschool

A low teacher-to-child ratio For 2- and 3-year-olds, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (www.naeyc.org, 800-424-2460) recommends 2 teachers to every 10 to 14 children. For 4- and 5-year olds, 2 teachers to every 15 to 20 children.

Well-trained teachers At least one adult in each classroom should have a degree in early childhood education. Teachers should interact frequently with kids, bending or sitting down at a child's eye level.

Openness Parents should feel free and be free to observe classroom activity.

A good space Your child's school should be spacious, safe, clean and up to-date.

Plenty of age-appropriate materials These might include picture books. Blocks, art supplies, dress-up clothes, toy kitchens, and workbenches that are easily accessible to children.

Playtime Kids should play and get physical daily. There should be outdoor play equipment as well as an indoor gym area for inclement weather.

Reggio Emilia

This innovative approach to preschool education, developed in Reggio Emilia, Italy, after World War II, is cropping up increasingly in the United States. Reggio programs are designed to bring out a child's potential rather than teach predetermined skills. One way they do this is with a strong emphasis on the arts - drawing, sculpture, dramatic play, music. "Reggio programs are very community oriented, with everyone from the school's cooks to the custodians to the parents involved in planning along with the teachers," notes Dr. Pitle, who infused the Reggio approach into her teacher-training programs. "Relationships and cooperation are encouraged; competition is not fostered."

Typical elements of a Reggio classroom: Authentic Reggio programs must have a consultant trained and approved by the Reggio Emilia school district. You'll most likely find an aesthetically pleasing classroom with an emphasis on plants, seashells, and other natural things. Materials should be easily accessible to children. The whole atmosphere should be exciting on a sensory level. The atelier, or art studio, is an important part of every Reggio classroom. And, since hands-on research is another key learning strategy, expect to see lots of projects evolving around the community or nature.

Is it right for *your* child ? Kids who love messing with paints and clay and crayons are going to thrive in a Reggio environment. In fact most children will do well in this creative, communal-style program. However, a child who is used to and enjoys a lot of solo activity might find the Reggio focus on group projects trying, at least at first.

Preschool Prep, Sesame Style

Sesame Street has long set the Gold standard for helping children reach their highest potential. And that includes getting them ready for preschool. The TV show is designed to foster children's desire to learn, to investigate, to try new things, and to explore their environment. Just the kinds of skills preschoolers should have according to Rosemarie T. Truglio, Ph.D., vice president for Sesame Street research. "We emphasize cognitive, social, physical, and emotional areas of development, all extremely important when a child has her first school experiences," she says. And it's all done in that uniquely fun Sesame way!

Waldorf

The Waldorf approach to education originated in Germany in 1919 under scientific and philosophical scholar Rudolf Steiner. These preschools are play-centered, but with a definite structure built around routine and rhythm. Kids are in mixed-age groupings and stay with the same teacher from year to year. "Our aim is to educate the whole child-head, heart, and hands," explains Joan Almon, co-chair of the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America in Spring Valley, New York. "To do so, we emphasize a healthy rhythm of activities. We'll alternate more focused activities with more physical games and free play and do storytelling the same time daily." Creativity is honored, while academics are de-emphasized. Waldorf educators model behavior, rather than instruct it.

Typical elements of a Waldorf program: You'll find a peaceful, harmonious environment filled with natural material like rope, cloth, stones, and shells. "These are items children can stretch their imagination with and use in many ways," says Almon. You'll see children acting out scenes from their lives while their teacher works in the background, offering gentle guidance only when necessary .

Some Waldorf programs are run out of homes by trained educators, serving families who may not have a Waldorf school nearby.

Is it right for *your* child ?To choose Waldorf for your child is to believe in it wholeheartedly. "If the Waldorf spirit of nurturing creativity is practiced at home, too, children will blossom even more fully, Almon suggests. A wide range of children, even those who are very shy or aggressive, often feel at home in Waldorf schools, because the approach is gentle and nurturing and offers balance for children.

For More Information

The Montessori Foundation Log on to www.montessori.org for a directory of schools, recommended reading and more, or call 800- 655-5843

Reggio Emilia

visit the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education at <http://ericeece.org/reggio.html>, or call Reggio Children/USA at 800-424-4310, ext. 238.

Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America

Find recommended books at www.waldorfshop.net/wecanbooks, or call 845-352-1690