

FREE Guide to Choosing Preschool or Child Care

Let's face it! Choosing preschool or childcare can be overwhelming whether it's your first child, your first experience, or your current childcare situation has thrown you a curve ball and you need to start searching again. Here are some helpful tips to consider when making this especially important decision for your family.

1. **Start early!** Start looking as far in advance as you can but at least one year prior to attending. Tour dates can fill quickly but are typically offered year-round. Heavier tour months are in the Summer before school starts and then again in January/February when enrollment opens for the next school year. Some schools/centers have year-round admissions and attendance is accepted as long as there is an open slot. If you are expecting a new baby, begin researching your options now! Depending on where you live, you may need to get on a wait list even before your baby is born. No matter what type of care you are considering, finding the right childcare center or preschool is a process that needs to be started as early as possible. After all, you will be searching for the best fit for your child and your family when it comes to providing care and/or preschool, their daily needs, and a safe/happy environment that you trust. Begin thinking about what type of care may fit your family's needs and your child's personal style best.

2. **Where to look?** The best way to find preschool programs is to get recommendations from fellow parents and scope out the programs' websites. Join a local mom blog or neighborhood social media group and get references. Locations close to home or work are a good start but remember they may not be the best fit for your family. It may be worth your while to check out other centers or schools recommended by families like yours in addition to the ones that are closer to home or work.

3. **Make a call and schedule a tour** – Usually you can tour the school while classes are in session, and sometimes you can even bring your child to spend time in the classroom. Bring your child to see how they respond to the setting and teachers. Bring anyone with you who may drop off or pick up as well. Be ready with a notepad on the tour and bring a list of all your questions. If your gut says, "I LOVE it!" and your child responds well, go ahead, and complete the application to, hopefully, secure a spot for your child. If you are still on the fence, schedule a tour for each center/school you are considering. Be patient as this is an important decision.

4. **Know your needs** – Children usually attend preschool for two years between the ages of 3 and 5 years old. Often, preschools run half-day programs for a nine-month school year. Some preschools have half-day and/or full-day programs and some offer before- and after-school care. Childcare centers vary from birth to age 12. Most are year-round five days a week. Some parents opt for a half-day preschool and hire a babysitter if they need additional hourly care. Be specific to what your needs are when it comes to days of the week and hours needed. Do you need to make a different schedule each month and will the facility be able to accommodate it? Do they offer a drop-in program for those unexpected days when your child isn't already scheduled for that day? Grab your pad of paper and write down exactly what you need for your kiddos' schedule.

5. **Ask questions to make an informed choice** – Visit all the childcare facilities you are considering. Before your visits, create a list of questions that you plan to ask and note indicators of quality that are important to your family. Make special note of these key qualities:

- Adult to Child Ratio – the smaller the ratio, the better!
- Group Size – the smaller the group, the better!
- Teacher Qualifications – What is their training and education?
- Turnover – How long have staff/teachers been with this facility?

6. What to look for?

- Observe the staff and child interactions in each classroom. Pay close attention to the language used in the classrooms and the friendliness of the staff. Make note of how the teachers interact with students and with YOU.

- Home-to-school connections are important. Preschools that have high family involvement are often the schools with the strongest programs. When families are involved, children do better, teachers feel supported, and everyone works together for the children's learning and development.
- High-quality preschools have structure and routines. They follow a specific philosophy or model (i.e., play based, Montessori, Reggio-Emilia, faith based, or an outdoor program). Do they have a daily routine? If so, how does that work? What are their guidelines for addressing challenging behavior?
- Discipline policies should emphasize positive approaches to teaching children new skills and proactive strategies for behavior management such as classroom rules, routines and social-emotional lessons or curriculum.

7. **Ask about policies** – find out the policies on potty training, discipline, tuition, drop-off, and pick-up.

8. **What is the philosophy on learning and development or their Core Values?** Ask about their philosophies on learning and development. You'll want to hear an enthusiastic and passionate response to this question. Preferably, you'll want to choose a preschool that follows a play based emergent curriculum. Core values not only help the children but the families and the teachers. It is vital to have a strong partnership between the school/center and the families who are enrolled.

9. Trust your gut and know what's most important for your family- Does the program seem like a place that your child would enjoy coming to each day? Does it seem like a place that you can trust? Will their program accommodate your families' needs and calendar?

10. **Decision made!** Now stay involved as much as you can.

Now that you've found the best fit for your child, the work continues as you are now partners with your chosen childcare/preschool.

Here are some ways to be involved:

- Meet regularly with your caregivers and teachers and ask questions.
- Volunteer whenever needed, like being a special reader for the day, help with fundraisers, or join their parent group or Board (if they have one).
- Enjoy your child's birthday with their classmates.
- Join in special events, field trips, family events, music programs, or for holiday parties or gatherings.

Even if you can't get time off from work during the day, please take a moment to check in at drop-off and pick-up times. Ask how your child's day went, who did they play with today, or how your child is doing. By visiting and/or participating in events at your child's program, it sends the message that you think what your child is doing, and learning is important to you and that you really care.