

CHOOSING A QUALITY PRESCHOOL: THE 3 P'S

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You struggled with your inner self about infant care and made a decision to go back to work or not, or maybe you straddled the line by doing a little of both. Now you're on a mission - to find just the right preschool for your perfect three-year-old.

Compared to decisions about infant care, choosing preschool is a guilt-free pleasure. Sure, you have the agony of starting a search, making a decision, and in some cases, "getting into" the program of your choice. But, at least you aren't emotionally torn by the feelings of loss that characterize the decision about infant care. Preschool can be a win for your child and for you.



Many parents see preschool as the chance for their children to learn good habits, while others are focused on concrete skills. Whatever one's beliefs and preferences are, your personal values are the most important factor in selecting a preschool. Everything you see at different preschools will be filtered by whether or not it is personally important to you.

There is help to get you started with your search. You can review published checklists for preschool and there are loads of them on the internet. Try the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (www.childcareaware.org), or the National Association for the Education of Young Children (www.naeyc.org). Each site offers lots of information on programs in your community and some standard FAQs and lists about what to look for in choosing a quality program for your child.

However, a checklist doesn't make the decision. They are simply guides that flag the many things that you should consider as you ponder what to do and how to go about selecting that ideal preschool for your child. So the goal in your process is to find a way to sort through the information clutter and get down to the essentials.

With any child development or preschool program there are three areas in which to focus your search. **The 3 P's are (in order of importance):**

1) The People



- 2) The Program
- 3) The Place.

You can take every checklist and sort the items under these three headings and weigh your options based on what is most important to you.

- 1) Let's begin with The People.

The people are the teachers and the director of the preschool. The quality of the program rises and falls with the competence of the people who manage the center and work with your child. There is no quality indicator as powerful as the staff's education, training and competence. After all, it's the people who turn junk into art or pick a leaf up from the ground and spin stories about the seasons.

The director is the person who binds the staff into a coherent whole, who answers to you, and is accountable for everything that goes on in the center. A poor director may not have the best staff; because he or she cannot attract the best staff to the center. The director motivates and instills confidence in her staff, and ultimately has to have your confidence and trust too.

Directors are responsible for the curriculum, personnel, and a myriad of administrative duties. Their job is quite complex; owing to very disparate responsibilities being wrapped into one job description.

That taken into consideration, your concern is whether the director relates effectively to you. There's nothing worse than feeling that your child has entered into a vortex the minute you turn to leave the center each morning. You have to ask yourself, "If the preschool were your workplace, would you want to deal with this person every day?"



If the answer is no, go to the next program on your list. You will never be happy with that preschool. If the answer is yes, you are more likely to have a great experience and it is likely your child will, too.

The teachers are the infantry of the preschool. There's a lot of evidence that preschool teachers who have completed college classes in child development manage classrooms well and offer high quality experiences for children. Teachers with a B.A. degree top the list, on average. However, most programs cannot pay salaries that attract credentialed teachers to preschool. In light of this, what you should look for are teachers who have a blend of college courses in child development with innate talent and a love for children. Don't be



embarrassed to ask the director what the teachers have studied or how many years they have worked with preschool children. Ideally, this information should be posted somewhere where parents can read about the staff. Teachers should:

- Relate to the children at eye level as much as possible.
- Be warm and affectionate.
- Communicate through conversations, not commands.
- Delight in the projects, the play, and the interactions children have with each other and with adults.

2) That gets us to The Program.

Most of your checklists will focus on the program, which is really an extension of the teacher's skill, interests and ability to convey a love for learning in the children. A high quality program should have the following characteristics:

- Decentralized learning centers so the kids can work in different parts of the room simultaneously.
- Abundant and well-organized books, materials and play equipment should be accessible to the child.
- A program with a purposeful daily plan.
- Teachers who can tell you not only *what* they are doing, but *why* they are doing it.
- A published curriculum, made available to parents by the school.
- A protocol for regular communications about how your child's development and progress.
- An overall program philosophy - to promote problem-solving and creative thinking, for example.
- A clear connection between the activities that the children engage in, to an overarching learning model.



Certainly, your child can have fun in a center where every day is randomly different. But, preschool is about connecting the dots; putting the child's view of the world into a coherent whole. And, the program should support that purpose overall.

3) This brings us to our final consideration, The Place.



For the final essential, we have to evaluate whether the goals of the program can be met within the confines of the place. The preschool curriculum, teacher behavior, and children's behavior is guided by the shape and allocation of the space.

Keep in mind that there are a lot of little children in the classroom, so the neatness factor isn't going to meet military standards. But the room has to "feel" right to you and that feeling is created by the teacher.



If the sinks aren't located near the bathroom, very few hands will get washed after using the bathroom. If there's no quiet corner in the classroom, very few children will seek the solace of a good picture book. If the space in the room is not dedicated to children's usage, it isn't likely that any activity requiring a lot of set up, breaking down, and packing up will be a frequent occurrence.

In the last fifteen years, the design of child development programs has emerged as an important factor in program quality, largely because it supports the people and the program effectively. While doodads and cutesy architectural elements have a lot of appeal for parents, don't let that sway you on overall quality. Look for the relationship of the space to safety and the necessary flow of activity, during the day.

Your final screen isn't about the essentials of quality. It's your practical considerations. If you've looked at five programs, rank them in terms of the essentials, and then determine their practicality. Is the location convenient? Are the fees affordable? Are the hours of operation compatible with your needs? Are you willing to stretch or compromise just a little bit to get the best match of preschool to your child's personality and needs? That's your bottom line, after all. You won't find perfection; but, you will find the best fit. And, in today's preschool environment - without universal systems in place in every state - the best fit is an excellent choice. It reflects your ability to truly weigh what's important to you against what is offered in the preschool market, and make a winning decision for yourself and your child.

