



## Choosing a Preschool Program

Early childhood education is a beautiful way to give your child opportunities to interact with other children, learn new skills, and make new friends. It will also help your child get used to being in a classroom setting, which will make the transition to kindergarten easier. Research shows that children benefit from a preschool that is higher in quality, but it's not always easy for parents to tell a higher-quality program from a lower-quality one. Here are some guidelines for recognizing quality.

### The Basics

The preschool should be licensed by your local health department. It is best if the teacher has a bachelor's degree and/or has a certificate in early childhood education. The ratio of adults (lead teacher plus assistant teacher) to children in the classroom should be high. The National Association for the Education of Young Children recommends that for 2 ½ - 5 year olds, there should be 1 teacher for every 9 children if there are 18 children in the classroom. There should be child-sized toilets and sinks, outlets should be covered, wires should not be visible, and the school should appear clear and sanitary.

### Signs of Higher Quality

#### Play and materials

Preschoolers learn best through hands-on experience. A preschool classroom should have materials of different kinds – for example, arts and crafts, a sand table, a dress-up area for pretend play, a reading corner, toys, musical instruments, plants/pets, and dolls. These materials should be used for activities that teach math (for example, stacking blocks), science (for example, growing plants), literacy (for example, reading aloud), music, and art. There should be a place for children's supervised physical play like running and jumping. Children's artwork should hang on the walls. Some time spent on free play is fine. All activities, including free play, can teach children important social skills such as sharing, taking turns, cooperating, and being kind. Activities should accommodate all the ages and special needs of the children in that classroom. During activities, teachers should ask children questions to help them reach new understandings on their own rather than lecture them.

#### Routines

The day should be structured, and daily routines should be consistent. Predictability makes your child feel more secure, less anxious about separating from you, and more open to learning.

## **A happy environment**

The teachers should look like they are enjoying themselves, not stressed or bored. The children should be busy, and should work with each other in small or large groups. Teachers should step in when children have conflicts to help them see each other's point of view and think of solutions. Children should feel like they belong. The classroom should acknowledge and celebrate differences in family and cultural backgrounds. The center director and teachers should know parents and welcome family involvement.

## **Signs of Lower Quality**

- Children regularly watch TV or videos
- Teacher doesn't notice or step in when children fight with each other
- Regular use of flashcards or worksheets, either during the day or as homework