

PRESCHOOL READINESS

The decision to begin preschool is an important and exciting one. It is the beginning of an experience that will most likely last for more than twelve years. When, how and why children begin school can have a significant impact on their feelings about school, their adjustment, and their later education. There are many good early childhood schools, but no one school is right for every child. It is not unusual for children from the same family to begin preschool at different ages or go to different schools. Deciding when and where your child should begin preschool is a very personal decision, and one that should include several considerations.

Basic Goals of Preschool Programs

Good preschool programs are based on the development of the whole child. They provide safe, nurturing environments that foster the development of emotional, cognitive and social development. Academics and a focus on the acquisition of skills is not a vital component of a good program. Children who are drilled to learn certain tasks before they are ready do not, in the long run, end up being at an advantage academically. In fact, such a stressful situation may be damaging to their self-esteem. Instead, good programs help children develop self-esteem by giving them opportunities to learn about themselves and their world by providing experiences that will challenge but not frustrate or overwhelm them. They provide experiences that will help children develop a sense of competence and mastery that will allow them to feel successful.

Probably the most important thing children learn in preschool is how to get along well with others and how to function effectively in a group. They learn how to play together and how to share toys. They learn what behaviors are appropriate at different times and places. While they may differ on many factors, most good preschool programs share the following goals:

- To provide an environment that is safe, warm and nurturing as well as stimulating
- To develop in each child a feeling of confidence and self-esteem
- To engage children in a variety of physical activities to enhance gross motor skills and coordination
- To teach children respect for themselves and for others
- To expose children to a wide variety of new materials and experiences that stimulate a love of learning
- To teach children social skills including how to be a part of a group, to share and to take turns
- To help facilitate language development and their ability to communicate clearly and effectively with other children and adults
- To expose children to a wide variety of literature and instill an interest in books and reading
- To promote initiative and independence
- To encourage children’s natural curiosity and interest in exploring their world

Visiting a preschool

No matter how many wonderful things you hear about a school, regardless of how reliable the source, the school still may not be right for your child. Every parent has a different set of priorities and preferences. Therefore, once you have an interest in a particular school, make a visit yourself. Most schools encourage prospective parents to schedule a visit without their child, to tour the school, visit the classrooms and observe the children working and playing. During your visit, the most important thing you can do is keep your eyes and ears open. The following is a list of things to consider when observing a preschool. This is obviously not an exhaustive list so keep in mind your own priorities and needs when observing.

- **Staff** (Do the children appear to like the teachers and treat them with respect? Do the teachers seem enthusiastic and interested in the children and do they treat them with respect? Do they facilitate interaction between the children? Do the teachers and the director seem like the sort of people you would feel comfortable working with? What is the background and level of experience of the faculty? What is the rate of faculty turnover?)
- **Educational materials** (Are there books and pictures and age appropriate materials and toys around? Are the materials well organized and readily available to the children? Are there a variety of creative materials such as art supplies, dress up clothes, musical instruments, sand/water play and kitchen toys?)
- **Physical Space** (Are the classrooms clean, bright and spacious enough for the amount of children working in them? Are the walls freshly painted? Is the equipment clean and in good repair? Are the bathroom facilities close and kept clean? Is there an outdoor play area? Is the overall space set up well for children?)
- **Activities** (Do the children seem to be busily involved and happy? Is there enthusiasm and excitement? Are the children smiling? Are the activities adult or child oriented? Is the focus on process or product? Does the children’s work appear to be individualized or does all the artwork look the same? How much time do children spend in group activities versus independent activities? Are all of the children included or does one or two seem to be on their own?)
- **Philosophy** (Is the school open about its shortcomings as well as its strengths? Are the children grouped developmentally or chronologically? What kinds of parent-teacher contacts are encouraged? How does the school handle separation? Is the parent required/permitted to stay in the classroom and for how long? What are the opportunities/expectations for parent involvement? Does the school feel right to you? Is this the kind of place to which you would be happy bringing your child every morning?

Beginning School At Two

Children are ready for school when they have a basic sense of trust, a sense that no matter what happens they will be taken care of, they will be safe. Once this is established, they will be able to separate from their parents and form new relationships with others.

Two-year-olds love to explore by touching, tasting, smelling and feeling everything in sight. Many love water and sand play, filling up their pails and then dumping them out. Children this age are also fascinated by books and like to carry them around. They can walk and run, ask for things by name, and even make three word sentences. At around two-and-a-half, some children get into a stage of disequilibrium. They may be bossy and demanding, often resent change and like to have familiar routines rigidly adhered to, and are not ready to share their possessions with others. There is usually a good deal of pushing and hitting when two-year-olds get together and it typically requires a lot of adult supervision.

Overall, two-year-olds who are developing normally and have supportive families do not need to be in preschool. Some children might benefit more from spending another year at home, perhaps in an informal playgroup. These are the children who need to get used to being around other adults and other children in a gradual manner. Some of these children are so closely bonded to their parents that they consistently refuse to leave their laps in a new environment despite the enticements of friendly adults or interesting toys. Other children have difficulty concentrating on anything for more than a moment and run from one toy to another. There are however, a few children this age who seem really hungry for new experiences. These are the children who may benefit from a preschool setting. Most programs for children this young are called “toddler programs” as they recognize that it needs to be different than a watered down three-year-old program. Such programs attempt to create an atmosphere similar to one at home, that is, nurturing and secure as well as stimulating. Children in these programs are not expected to share everything or made to participate in group activities before they are ready. In addition, these programs should be interesting and stimulating but not overly noisy or confusing with too many activities going on at the same time. Other children who might benefit from a two-year-old program include:

- * Children without ready access to other children or to an outdoor play space
- * Children from two-career families who might otherwise stay home alone with a nanny who may have little training in child development
- * Children living in homes where English is not the primary language
- * Children with special needs
- * Children from difficult home situations

Beginning School At Three

Three-year-olds can talk with other children rather than just at them. They can tell you what they like and don’t like, and they love to ask questions. They can express their opinions and desires and some have a vocabulary of over one thousand words. They can feed and dress themselves and are toilet-trained. They love to be read to.

Three is the age many preschools begin. Most three-year-olds are ready for a warm, nurturing, child-centered school environment. Three-year-olds are curious about other children and adults, and they are ready to begin to have a sense of the classroom as a community. Most three-year-olds are able to manage quite well verbally, physically and socially at school. They can communicate their likes and dislikes. They can follow rules, help make things, and make friends and play in a group. Most children who are three are able to separate from their parents, and trust new adults.

Predictors of Readiness for School

- sense of confidence and security
- an emerging independence shown by doing things for themselves
- a desire to explore and have new experiences away from home
- ability to separate from parents or caregiver
- sufficient verbal skills to communicate with other children and adults
- a beginning ability to relate to other children, to share, take turns and be part of a group
- ability to stay focused, and engage in an activity briefly
- ability to meet the physical demands of the environment (stairs, toilet)

To be ready for school, children *do not* need to know their colors, shapes, numbers or alphabet.

Beginning school at four

Four-year-olds are definitely ready for preschool. They are in constant motion and are full of enthusiasm, excitement, and questions about everything they see. They enjoy playing with other children, engaging in pretend play, making up rhyming games and telling silly jokes. They want to bring things to school to share with their friends, and invite friends over to play.

Four-year-olds are ready to share and make friends. They are ready to work together in groups with other children. They are self-motivated and their attention span is longer. This does not mean that they are ready for kindergarten or first grade. They are not ready to sit at a desk, memorize addition or write in workbooks. They are ready for new experiences and new challenges, such as the opportunity to experiment with different materials, to draw and build, and to engage in imaginative play.

Easing the Separation

One of the reasons very young children have difficulty separating from their parents is because they believe that when they leave the room, their parents are gone forever. But by age three, most children are able to understand that their parents will return, and in their absence, are able to retain a mental picture of them. Separation is easiest for children who have experienced trust in their family environment. Consistency and support are key factors in building trust. Children with multiple caregivers and constantly changing schedules tend to have more difficulty.

No matter how well you plan or have prepared your child, or think you know their personality, they may react in a totally unexpected and uncharacteristic way when it comes time to separate. The child who is very social and talks to everyone might become tearful and refuse to go into the class, while the quiet, reserved child may stroll right in saying a quick “bye-bye” to her parent.

Helpful Hints for Dealing with Separation

1. Help your child become accustomed to other caregivers by leaving him with someone other than you (baby-sitter, friend, grandparent) before starting school.
2. Don’t talk about all the exciting things you will do while he is gone.
3. Engage your child in a discussion of what she will wear the first day. Ask her if she wants to bring a favorite toy or stuffed animal.
4. Talk to your child enthusiastically about the friends he will make, the fun activities he will do and his new teacher.
5. Never sneak out of the room. Always say goodbye. If you don’t, your child will never trust you the next time and won’t let you out of her sight.
6. When it’s time to leave, say goodbye and leave quickly. Don’t linger, as it will only make things worse.
7. Arrive promptly at pick up time. Children become anxious when their friends are picked up and they are still waiting.

Finally, parental attitudes have a significant impact on child adjustment. If parents believe school will be an exciting experience and that their children will be safe and happy, it is likely that their child will feel the same way. Parents who are uneasy, ambivalent or worried about their child’s experience convey these feelings to their child who in turn will be anxious and uneasy about the separation.

Lori Rappaport, Ph.D. is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist specializing in child and family issues.

Dr. Rappaport has over 30 years of experience working with children and families experiencing chronic and life threatening illness.

Dr. Rappaport has a private practice in Del Mar, CA.
(858) 481-2188.

www.lorirappaportphd.com