



# THE ABC'S OF PRE-K

## A PARENT'S GUIDE TO EARLY LEARNING



Choosing a Pre-K program is not just about selecting a school; it's about setting the foundation for a lifetime of learning and growth. We understand that this is a significant decision, and that's why we're here to help you every step of the way. With the right information, you can ensure that your child's first educational experiences are not only enjoyable but also nurturing and enriching.

So, let's embark on this journey together, exploring what you need to know to make the best choice for your child's future. Your child's education begins here, and we're here to guide you in making it the best it can be.



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## Introduction

Every family wants the best possible start for their child's educational journey. The early years are a critical time in a child's development, and selecting the right program for ages 3-5 (Pre-Kindergarten, or Pre-K) can significantly impact their future success. As you embark on the exciting and important journey of choosing a Pre-K program for your little one, it's natural to have questions, concerns, and a desire to make the most informed decision.

This guide has been created to provide you with valuable insights, tips, and advice to help you navigate the process of selecting the perfect Pre-K program that aligns with your child's unique needs and your family's values.

In the pages that follow, we will explore the essential aspects of a Pre-K education, shedding light on what you should consider when making this significant decision. From understanding the benefits of a quality Pre-K program to evaluating the various options available to you, we aim to empower you with the knowledge necessary to make a well-informed choice for your child's early education.





## 4 Building Blocks of a Quality Pre-Kindergarten Program

A good preschool will build an essential foundation for future learning by:

- 1. Building your child's social skills:** The school has a plan for how to interact with children their age and how to behave in a school setting. The school should cultivate communities of friendship and joy, and help children feel a sense of belonging and dignity.
- 2. Teaching good habits:** How to use materials, complete a task, and receive feedback are all critical skills a child should develop early. The school staff should model care, order, and the cultivation of beauty, and celebrate continual learning and growth.
- 3. Providing space for children to move freely and be joyful:** Whether through rhythm, dance, play, pencil grips, playgrounds, or napping, children's bodies should be free to move and grow with carefully prepared opportunities for large- and fine-motor skill development, and access (as appropriate) to good food, drink, and rest, so they can grow and thrive.
- 4. Establishing a strong academic foundation:** From numbers, letters, and stories to ideas about history, science, and where we are in time and space, children in a good preschool are laying the building blocks for future learning. The language used in the school should be precise, positive, and content-rich so children can grow their vocabulary and sense of wonder about the world.

### Visiting a Potential Pre-K: What to Look For

Check out our full parents guide to Pre-K for specific questions you should ask when visiting a potential Pre-K.

**Staff** should cultivate children's **sense of self** by providing an environment that **feels secure, inclusive, and promotes children's independence**.

Look for:

- Interactions between the adult and child should be positive and nurturing.
- Adults should be engaged and interested when communicating with children.
- Adults should be spending most of the time talking and engaging with students, not other adults or looking at a device.
- Adults should respond promptly and warmly to students' questions or other interactions.
- Depending on the age of the children (the younger, the fewer), there should typically be not more than 15-20 children per adult.
- Teachers should be showing children positive examples of how to interact and play with each other.
- Adults are addressing unacceptable behavior, such as hitting or biting in a calm, controlled, and even tempered way.

All staff should consciously provide emotionally-responsive and sensitive care, ensuring warm, stable, and reliable environments and relationships. This should be done through consistently responding to cues and verbalizations, implementing routines like a morning message, and following predictable schedules.

**Physical Environments** should be **welcoming, clean, orderly, and accessible to young children**.

Look for:

- A safe, clean, and clutter free environment
- Secure exits and entry ways
- Child-sized furniture and equipment
- Examples of children's artwork and writing displayed on the walls
- Learning materials (that are in good shape) within the child's reach, and children can access them independently
- A library area for looking at books
- A range of attractive materials for learning including picture, story, and information books, writing materials, art supplies, pretend play materials, blocks, puzzles and simple board games, small manipulatives such as construction toys, Legos, lacing strings, etc.
- Access to outdoor play materials such as balls, slides, climbing equipment, etc.

There should be enough educational materials and toys for the number of children in the classroom, but it should not be cluttered and there should be a place for everything. Overall, the space should feel more like a well-ordered home than an institution, and children should see things that attract their interest and make them want to engage.

**Students** should be **concentrating**, moving about and **working independently, collaborating** with others in communities of learning and play, and building their knowledge of themselves and the things around them.

Look for children who look...

- **Busy:** Students should be engaged and busy. There should be a happy hum of calm conversation.
- **Happy:** Students should seem content and that they trust the adults and surroundings.
- **Clean:** Students should practice regular hand-washing and have opportunities to independently meet their needs for bathrooming, blowing their nose, getting water, etc.
- **Independent:** Children should be able to move about freely when appropriate and know where things are that they need for learning and self care (i.e., have a space of their own such as a cubby and be allowed to take out and restore materials at appropriate times).

**Academic Programming** should be a **defined and consistent plan** for learning. Pre-K learning is critical and should be done intentionally. Look for:

- Posted schedule of activities with a predictable routine each day, including set times daily for varied modes of learning including large group instruction with the whole class, small group instruction (4-6 children at a time), free play time, and rest time.
- Check that books are read aloud to children daily, and that there is a written curriculum identifying what children are expected to learn.
- Teachers should prepare by planning for the different group instructional activities each day, and families should be able to see these posted in the classroom or ask to see them.
- There should be a weekly or monthly calendar of events posted by the school and available to families.
- A "balanced instructional diet" for the early learner should include a variety of activities to develop: movement and coordination, literacy, math, science, art, music, and introductory knowledge of history and current community (holidays, calendar, seasons).

**How to use this:** Here is a general checklist of the basic knowledge and skills that help give all young children a strong start in Kindergarten and elementary school.<sup>1</sup>

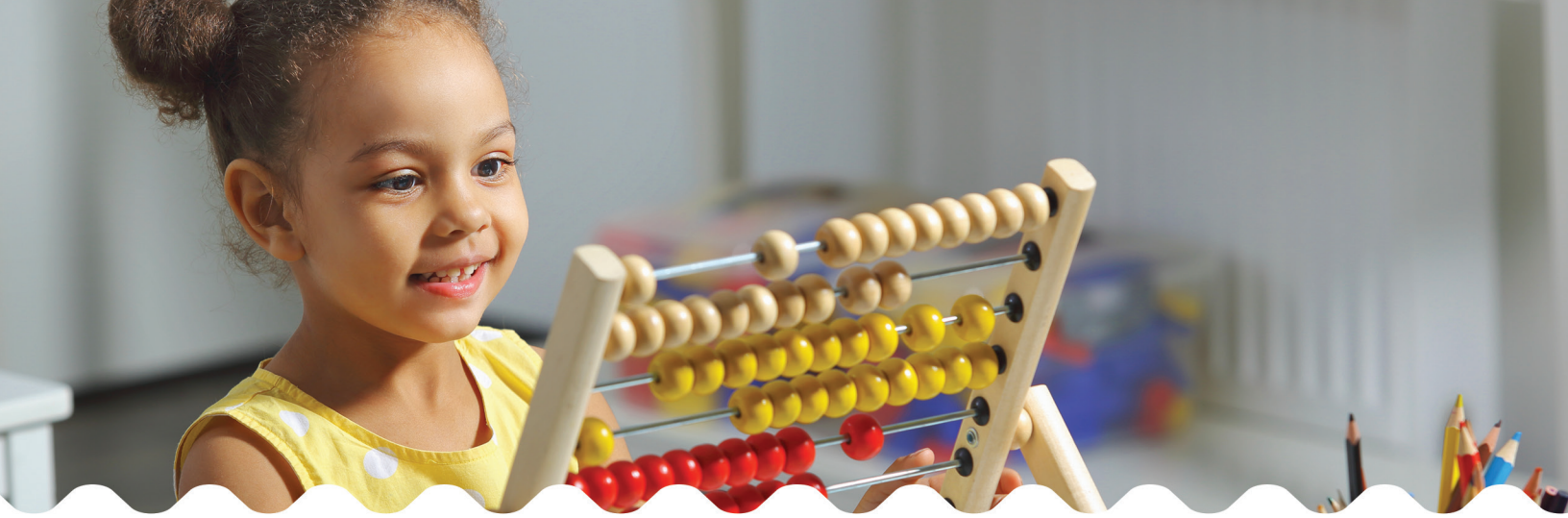
## Kindergarten-Ready Checklist

- Health and Body Wellness**
  - Go up and down steps, hop, run, jump, and climb
  - Play catch
  - Ride a tricycle
  - Keep momentum on a swing by pumping arms and legs
- Work Habits**
  - Listen attentively to a book being read aloud for at least 10 minutes when in a group and 15-20 minutes when sitting with an adult one-on-one
  - Play with a toy/do an age-appropriate activity and concentrate independently for at least 15 minutes
  - Follow multi-step directions, such as, "Bring your shoes and your socks and then sit down on the bench."
- Social and Emotional Development**
  - Care for personal needs, such as using the bathroom independently, dressing oneself, using appropriate table manners, etc.
  - Recognize and greet familiar people by name
  - Use verbal forms of politeness, such as "please," "thank you," "you're welcome," etc.
  - Follow rules established for specific settings (e.g., public places like a library or bus)
  - Follow the rules of simple games
  - Play cooperatively with other children, taking turns, and sharing toys as necessary
- Language**
  - Give and respond to full name
  - Clearly communicate needs, desires, and feelings using words
  - Speak in sentences that are mostly grammatically correct
  - Carry on a simple conversation with an adult, taking turns, staying on topic, contributing to the conversation by answering and asking questions, etc.
  - Sequentially describe a personal experience
  - Ask and answer questions
- Math**
  - Identify whether objects are the same or different
  - Complete puzzles with 8-15 pieces
  - Rote count from 1 to 10
  - Count up to 6 objects correctly
  - Compare groups of objects
  - Compare the size of objects
  - Categorize objects by size, color, shape, etc.
  - Identify some numerals
- Literacy**
  - Recite familiar nursery rhymes from memory
  - Identify rhyming words in familiar nursery rhymes
  - Give the beginning sound heard in a spoken word
  - Answer questions about what is happening in a book that is being read aloud
  - Retell a familiar story in their own words
  - Pretend to read a book
  - Name the letters and give the sounds of letters in their own first name
  - Draw and copy simple lines and marks
  - Write first name, even if some mistakes are present
  - Cut straight lines with scissors
  - Dictate thoughts and ideas to an adult
- General Knowledge**
  - Recognize and name: parts of the body, colors and shapes, household objects, food and clothing, animals and their habitats (such as farm, ocean, jungle, desert)
  - Identify and explain the use of the five senses and their associated body parts
  - Identify the parts of a plant, its needs, and its life cycle
  - Talk about some properties of water, light, and air

## Things you can do to support at home:

- Talk with your child**
  - Word knowledge is one of the most important parts of being able to read, so expose your child to lots of words to describe the living and material world, ideas, and feelings.
  - Nurture emotional recognition by talking about feelings frequently, both by talking about your own and helping children label theirs. "It looks like you are frustrated." "That smile tells me you're happy."
  - Help children think through scenarios before they occur (such as, wanting to be the first to do something), and use cues and subtle reminders to help children recall agreed-upon behavior expectations.
  - Develop your child's sense of self: Provide emotionally-responsive and sensitive care, ensuring warm, stable, and reliable environments and relationships. This should be done through consistently responding to cues and verbalizations, implementing routines like a nightly bedtime and book, and following predictable schedules.
- Read aloud daily:** This should be fun and educational at the same time. A child ready to go to Kindergarten will be able to listen to picture books for up to 30 minutes. With your child, choose a picture book with a good story and pictures. Read through the book with a clear voice and expression, and stop as needed to answer questions or offer information. When you're finished, review and discuss. Then, let your child share some thoughts. Ask questions like, "Have you ever... (done what one of the characters did?)" "Why... (did something in the story happen?)"
- Sing:** Children grow their knowledge of words and sense of the melody of language by hearing songs, and the ability to keep a rhythm and move in dance is important for their understanding and control of movement.
- Play:** Much of the body wellness that ensures children will be able to maintain attention in Kindergarten comes from healthy physical activity, outdoors when possible, and from the sense of fun that comes from moving freely and with others.

If you would like to dive in deeper to what your child should know, consider reviewing the book *What Your Preschooler Needs to Know* or this comprehensive guide to the *Preschool Core Knowledge Sequence*.



## An In-Depth Look at Pre-K

### 1. Understanding the Importance of Pre-K Education

What if there were a special food or vitamin you could give your child that could more than double their chances of being successful in Kindergarten and beyond? Would you give it to them?

In a way, you can. For decades, scientists have been converging on an important finding: giving children high-quality learning experiences in their early years has major impacts on their development. This is because the most unique window of human development is the first five years of a child's life, and it lays the foundation for their healthy growth and maturation. A child's brain grows astonishingly quickly in the first five years of life; in fact, 90% of a child's brain development occurs between 0-5.<sup>1</sup> During this time, essential skills like how to interact with others, regulate moods and feelings, and knowledge of numbers, letters, and the world begin to build the foundation for future success in school and life.

All of this essential Pre-K development happens rapidly, but not entirely automatically. While humans have evolved to learn some things through play and exploration, like how to walk and speak, other things humans need to know to thrive in society, like how to read, write, count, and orient in time and space, require effort and explicit instruction to learn effectively.<sup>2</sup>

This means that children benefit from structured learning opportunities between ages 3-5 years. Pre-K programs lay important foundations. A balanced approach to emotional, social, cognitive, and language development will best prepare all children for success in school and later in the workplace and community.<sup>3</sup> Research has shown that quality Pre-K programs have lasting impacts on children's academic, social, and overall well-being through school and into adulthood: children who experience quality Pre-K programs are less likely to be placed in special education, more likely to be on grade level academically, less likely to repeat a grade, more likely to graduate from high school and earn more on average in the workforce.<sup>4</sup>

*A quality Pre-K Program can help your child develop in four critical areas:*

- 1. Understanding and managing their emotions.** Quality Pre-K programs provide children with a safe, nurturing environment to learn and grow, supporting a child to know themselves through opportunities for play and exploration that encourage curiosity, creativity, and social interactions. Pre-K teachers support children in developing key social and emotional skills such as cooperation, empathy, and emotional regulation that have been shown to contribute future learning outcomes.<sup>5</sup>
- 2. Learning how to read.** Your child's literacy skills develop through storytelling, reading, writing, and vocabulary-building activities. Before they enter a Kindergarten program, children should learn to identify letters and their sounds and build their vocabulary. A quality Pre-K curriculum will bring to life new topics, new vocabulary, and new areas to inspire children's sense of curiosity and wonder.
- 3. Learning about math.** Your child will learn to count, recognize numbers, and understand basic math concepts through sorting objects, measuring ingredients, working with shapes, and other hands-on activities. Children have an innate curiosity about patterns, comparisons, and quantities, and a quality Pre-K program will systematically introduce them to the world of mathematical thinking so that they can build their conceptual understanding and love of math.
- 4. Social development and work habits.** Pre-K plays an important role in a child's development because for many children, it is one of their first structured opportunities to learn to interact cooperatively within a group outside of the family, listen attentively to adults and other children in a group, and navigate how to care for their personal needs away from home. Through stable routines and explicit modeling of habits of work, such as how to listen to others, be a line leader, or complete an age-appropriate activity, Pre-K teachers help children become more independent and aware of their contributions to their community.

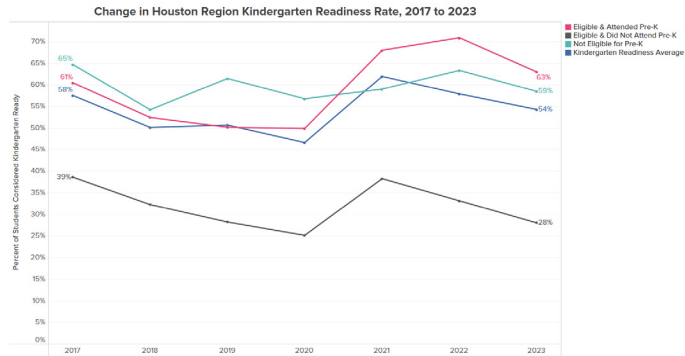


This is all evidenced by decades of national data, and true close to home as well: recent analysis of Kindergarten-readiness measures in greater Houston shows significant benefits of enrolling children in high-quality prekindergarten programs. Within the Houston-region, students who were eligible and attended Pre-K were more than two times as likely to be kindergarten ready than those who were eligible and did not attend Pre-K.

Finally, the call for quality Pre-K is timely; as enrollment rates increase in the Houston region<sup>7</sup>, there will be more options available for families as programs proliferate to meet the need. This is an opportune time for selecting a Pre-K for your child, and for all of us to work together to ensure quality options for Pre-K programming are accessible to our whole community.

<sup>7</sup>The Science of Pre-K Development. Bipartisan Policy Organization, 2021. • <sup>8</sup>Geary, D. C. (2012). Evolutionary educational psychology. In K. R. Harris, S. Graham, T. Urdan, C. B. McCormick, G. M. Sinatra, & J. Sweller (Eds.), APA educational psychology handbook, Vol. 1. Theories, constructs, and critical issues (pp. 597–621). American Psychological Association. • <sup>9</sup>InBrief: The Science of Pre-K Development. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard. • <sup>10</sup>Learning Policy Institute. "What Does the Research Really Say About Preschool Effectiveness?" Strong evidence shows high-quality preschool works; now it's time to focus on creating more high-quality programs." • <sup>11</sup>How to help kids understand and manage their emotions: Parents, teachers, and other caregivers have an important role in teaching children self-regulation. • <sup>12</sup>KinderReadiness2022-23 • <sup>13</sup>After a significant decrease in Pre-K enrollment during the pandemic, there has been a slight increase in Houston-region enrollment of eligible three- and four-year-olds, at an average of 39%, however, Pre-K enrollment is still below pre-pandemic levels.

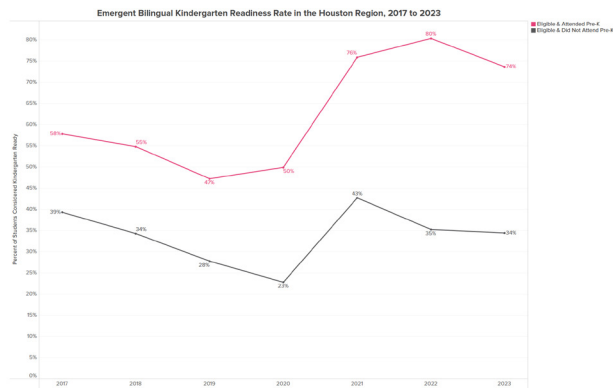
**In the Houston region, students who were eligible and attended pre-K were more than 2x more likely to be kindergarten ready compared to students who were eligible for pre-K and did not attend.**



Note: Due to changes in the TX-KEA Kindergarten Readiness scoring methodology for the 2022-23 school year, kindergarten readiness scores may not be directly comparable to prior years.

GOOD REASON HOUSTON

**3-in-4 Emergent Bilingual (EB) students who attended pre-K were kindergarten ready, compared to 3-in-10 EB students who did not attend.**



Note: Due to changes in the TX-KEA Kindergarten Readiness scoring methodology for the 2022-23 school year, kindergarten readiness scores may not be directly comparable to prior years.

GOOD REASON HOUSTON

**Economically Disadvantaged students who attended pre-K were kindergarten ready at about 2.5 times the rate of their Economically Disadvantaged peers who did not attend pre-K.**



Note: Due to changes in the TX-KEA Kindergarten Readiness scoring methodology for the 2022-23 school year, kindergarten readiness scores may not be directly comparable to prior years.

GOOD REASON HOUSTON







## 2. Assessing Your Child's Needs

Understanding your family's needs and your child's learning preferences, interests, and strengths is the first step toward selecting a best-fit Pre-K program. See our one-pager on Choosing a Pre-kindergarten for your child for more guidance on visiting and vetting your options.

**Note:** If you're concerned that your child may be learning, playing or interacting differently from others, you can ask about support for exceptional learners through the state of Texas with Child Find, which is a free referral service for families of children with suspected learning differences.

Once you've clarified what you and your child are seeking in a Pre-K, identify the type of academic and school culture you want for your child.

You might consider:

- Daily schedule
- Class size and teacher/student ratio
- Approach to instruction
- Goals of the program
- Teacher training
- Approach to discipline
- Indoor and outdoor spaces



## 3. Evaluating Pre-K Options

There is a range of types of Pre-K programs in both public and private settings. Unlike the K–12 system, in the United States schooling for children in the 2-3 years before Kindergarten has no common governance structure, and administrative oversight rests with different levels of government. Children can attend a private, tuition-based preschool; a public preschool funded by the federal government (i.e. Head Start), or the state government (state preschool); a program funded by local resources (e.g., local taxes or philanthropy); or a preschool that involves funding from several sources.<sup>8</sup> It's also important to note a distinction between "child care" and "preschool/Pre-K". Given that children are learning something all day, whether that is intentional or not, the distinction between childcare and preschool is blurry on a practical level.<sup>9</sup> But the distinction has important implications for children's readiness for school in Kindergarten and above, and this section will address programs (or those parts of programs) that intentionally focus on promoting children's learning and development, not solely on caretaking.

With so many different Pre-K settings, it's important to understand the differences between settings to know all of your options. There are some free programs available, and other programs that are tuition-based.

### Understanding eligibility

All Texas public schools provide free public Pre-K to eligible 4-year-old students. That means if your child qualifies under one of the following eligibility criteria, your child is guaranteed a seat in your school district's Pre-K program:

- Your family is eligible for a national free or reduced-price lunch program (e.g.: for a family of 4, an annual income of less than \$55,500)<sup>10</sup>
- Your child doesn't speak or understand English
- Your family doesn't currently have a home or is looking for a permanent home
- One parent or guardian is on active duty in the armed forces
- Your child is currently or was previously in foster care
- One parent or guardian is eligible for the Star of Texas Award

Two districts in the Houston area, Spring ISD and Sheldon ISD, offer universal Pre-K for all students, whether they are eligible or not. Priority in public school districts will always be given to eligible 4-year-old students. In addition, some public school districts also offer free public Pre-K to eligible 3-year-old students, and for students that do not qualify for free Pre-K, some districts offer a tuition option for families.





### **Traditional public Pre-K**

#### **Programs within Elementary Schools**

Many public Pre-K programs are offered at elementary schools. Many parents like this option when they have another child at the elementary school and the program-within-a-school allows them to begin to build relationships at the school that will last through their child's elementary school years. Due to the fact that elementary schools are not solely focused on Pre-K education, be sure to ask questions about both the school culture and the school's approach to the unique needs of Pre-K children (such as the size of playground equipment, bathrooms, and common spaces like lunch areas), and how the program trains and supports its Pre-K teachers.

#### **Pre-K Centers**

Some public school districts also offer Pre-K in Pre-K Centers that were created to serve Pre-K and sometimes kindergarten students. These centers are designed to serve the districts' youngest students and school leaders and teachers are focused on Pre-K education, which can cultivate a very special Pre-K experience for children and their families. It will be helpful to talk to your Pre-K center about what the transition looks like into kindergarten or 1st grade and what supports they have to facilitate that transition into elementary school.

#### **Magnet Programs**

Some districts offer magnet Pre-K programs, such as Montessori and Dual Language. Magnet programs are special programs within the district that families apply to that are not necessarily your zoned school. Details about specific magnet programs are discussed more below. If you are interested in this option, it is important to be aware of application or lottery timelines to apply, since there may be more families applying than schools are able to serve.

#### **Head Start Partnership**

Many local school districts have entered into partnerships with one of the local Head Start providers to provide the National Head Start programs within their schools. There are many benefits to participating in a Head Start classroom, including family engagement, the teacher-student ratio and small class size, and the holistic approach to Pre-K education that addresses a child's development across multiple domains. Eligibility requirements for Head Start programs differ from public school Pre-K eligibility, so if you are interested in a Head Start program at your traditional school district, you should call to check qualification requirements and locations within the district.

#### **Public Charter Schools**

Many local charter schools offer Pre-K programs within their elementary schools or in a Pre-K center. Charter schools are also public schools that offer free Pre-K for qualifying students, but they are not zoned schools like your traditional public school district. Each has their own approach to Pre-K and can offer a variety of options to families.

#### **Standalone Head Start Centers**

In addition to working with school districts, Head Start providers have their own centers that provide Pre-K and adhere to the National Head Start program guidelines. Many of these centers also serve younger children as well through their Early Head Start programs. There are currently four different Head Start providers in Harris County: AVANCE, BakerRipley, Harris County Department of Education, and Gulf Coast Community Service Center. They each have their own enrollment process.

### **Private childcare centers (Scholarships & Aid available)**

There are many private childcare centers that offer Pre-K programs, and families that qualify can apply for financial assistance through Workforce Solutions. Information about applying for financial aid can be found here. There is also an initiative in Harris County called Early Reach that offers 1,000 scholarships to qualifying families.

#### **Location and convenience**

Many families look for a Pre-K program that is close to their home or work because location and convenience are important, especially in the lives of busy parents. Be sure to consider transportation. Who will take your child to and from school? Does the program offer transportation for Pre-K students? Some districts offer transportation for their Pre-K 4 year-olds, but not all districts do. Be sure to consider this when choosing the best Pre-K program for you and your family. The Pre-K program you choose needs to be a good fit for your child and your family for the academic and social reasons we've discussed, as well as be logistically accessible.

#### **Curriculum and teaching approach**

##### **Play-based vs Academic-based**

Sometimes families will wonder what is better when it comes to Pre-K: a program that is play-based or academic-based? The answer is that it is not one or the other. High quality Pre-K should always involve lots of play, and if facilitated by a well-trained Pre-K teacher, this is one of the best modes of learning.<sup>11</sup> High-quality Pre-K programs should also use high-quality curriculum that drives instruction and infuses lots of play to help students learn key concepts and skills. Students should not be sitting listening to their teacher talk for long periods of the day; quality Pre-K is interactive and interactive learning is a key ingredient for engaging 3- and 4-year-old students. As you look at programs, remember that academic learning and play are not mutually exclusive; they are complementary.

There are several comprehensive models that you may encounter in your research. Reggio Emilia and Montessori are two methods that are more prevalent in private settings and take a more child-centered, constructivist approach, focusing primarily on social skills as well as general cognitive development, including communication and problem-solving.<sup>12</sup> Both the Reggio Emilia and Montessori methods of educating children were developed in Italy in the early 20th century, and both take a self-directed approach to learning guided by the children's interests in a prepared environment with trained adults who facilitate relationships and exploration. While important distinctions exist between how the two methods utilize learning materials, they have many similarities: in both, there is no guaranteed curriculum in which all children will learn the same things, whole-group activities are rare, and the teacher is considered a "collaborator" or "guide" rather than an instructor. If you are seeking an environment that nurtures children's appreciation for beauty, community, and concentration, you might consider these models; however, they are not known for offering families clarity about what children will learn, by when, and if they've mastered it.

Regardless of how child-centered or teacher-directed the model, there are also programs that take a particular focus. For example, some Pre-K programs develop language knowledge through two-way Dual Language and Language Immersion models or focus on exposing children to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM). These can be in more child-directed settings such as Montessori or in more teacher-directed settings such as traditional preschool. Be sure to ask about the learning goals and curriculum, model of the school, and role of the teacher in directing learning so you can evaluate which type of program is best for you and your child.



## 4. Enrolling

### Timeline

The enrollment process for Pre-K can begin as early as a year in advance. Districts like Houston ISD have opened up their Pre-K application process as early as September. Many charter schools start enrollment at the start of the calendar year in January or February. Traditional ISDs vary, but tend to focus on Pre-K enrollment starting in the spring. April 1st is the first date that districts can technically start enrolling students, but many districts do pre-registration prior to the April 1st date. We recommend starting as early as possible to begin to understand what options are available to you.

### September - December (one year before)

Understand the options available to you:

- Check eligibility requirements to see if you qualify for a free Pre-K program and if your child will receive priority in public Pre-K programs
- Research which programs are around you, considering both your child's needs, location, and cost. PreKHouston.org can be a helpful resource for finding public Pre-K options, including traditional public school Pre-K, charter school Pre-K, and Head Start programs.
- Schedule a visit to the programs you are interested in
- Get clear on timelines for application, notification, and enrollment

### December - March

- Continue school visits
- Gather documents to enroll
- Complete and submit application

### March - July

- Receive notifications of acceptance or waitlists
- Complete enrollment process at top choice school
- Participate in new family events at school or campus; look for information about preparing your child for the first day of school

### Required documentation

For public Pre-K, you will need to provide the following documents during the application process. If you have any trouble with gathering the following documents, the school should be able to help.

- Student identification:
  - » Student Birth Certificate (Required)
  - » Student Social Security Card (Optional)
- Parent Identification:
  - » Driver's License, ID, or passport
- Proof of address:
  - » Electricity, Gas, Water utility bill, or lease (must state parent/guardian's name and address)
- Student shot records or medical exemption form



<sup>8</sup>Stipek, D. A path forward for public Pre-K: Doubling down on high-quality programs, defining goals, better supporting staff & navigating the politics of funding." • <sup>9</sup>ibid • <sup>10</sup><https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2023-02-09/pdf/2023-02739.pdf> • <sup>11</sup><https://hechingerreport.org/the-complex-world-of-Pre-K-play/> • <sup>12</sup>Constructivism in education can be a confusing term, as it is used to describe both a theory of learning and of teaching. As a theory of learning, it refers to the relatively uncontroversial idea in cognitive science that humans relate new learning to existing knowledge. But as a theory of teaching, there is more to debate, as constructivism as a way of teaching refers to methods such as Constructivism in education can be a confusing term, as it is used to describe both a theory of learning and of teaching. As a theory of learning, it refers to the relatively uncontroversial idea in cognitive science that humans relate new learning to existing knowledge. But as a theory of teaching, there is more to debate, as constructivism as a way of teaching refers to methods such as discovery or inquiry-based learning that have limited evidence bases and have been criticized for needlessly taxing learners' working memories. See Kirschner, Sweller, Clark, "Why Minimal Guidance During Instruction Does Not Work: An Analysis of the Failure of Constructivist, Discovery, Problem-Based, Experiential, and Inquiry-Based Teaching."



## 5. Visiting and Interviewing Pre-K Programs

### Assessing the environment

One of the best ways to determine what a Pre-K program is like is by observing the interactions between teachers and students. See our one-pager on [Choosing a Preschool Program for Your Child](#) for more. Look for:

- Adult-child interactions:
  - » Positive, caring interactions between teachers and students; teachers are attentive to students needs and do not resort to yelling or punitive actions to control student behavior
  - » Teachers listening to students' ideas and helping them to extend their thinking by asking questions, restating something they said in a different way, or nudging them to take their thinking even further by introducing new vocabulary or a new concept
  - » Teachers helping students resolve conflict; social-emotional and self-regulation skills are some of the most important skills students can learn in Pre-K with their teachers' support and guidance
- Learning activities and student engagement: Look for:
  - » How students are engaged – are they curious, interested, excited to learn?
  - » Interactive and engaging activities that encourage students to be active in their own learning
  - » A classroom filled with student work
  - » Classrooms set up with a variety of centers and spaces for different play and activities

### Questions to ask during school visits

Meet with teachers and staff. The adults at the center should recognize that you, as parents, are your child's first teachers, and encourage the establishment of a partnership between home and school as your child embarks on this important journey of growth and development. You might make a list of questions to ask, such as the following. Things to listen for are in italics.

1. What is your school's approach to Pre-K education? What does that look like throughout the day? *Listen for... Exploratory, joyful, nurturing, developing concentration and independence, close relationships with teachers and families, building community, growing children's knowledge of the world and their sense of wonder and curiosity...*
2. What is your curriculum? *Curriculum means what children learn, when, and how they learn it. This is the written plan for what children should know and be able to do by certain developmental milestones...*
3. What type of training or support do teachers receive? What qualifications do they have? *Texas Rising Star is a quality rating program for Pre-K programs, and our program is rated.... our teachers all have XYZ training...*
4. Do you have limits on class size? What is the adult-child ratio in each classroom? Depending on the age of the children (the younger, the fewer), there should be typically not more than 15-20 children per adult
5. How do you communicate with families and how often? How do you include or involve families in the learning in and out of the classroom? *We communicate daily about what children have learned, eaten, when they've napped, and for how long, as well as weekly about school events and celebrations. We welcome your participation in learning celebrations such as \_\_\_\_\_. We use XX platform (show example) and this is feedback we've gotten from families...*
6. What is your approach to discipline or behavior management? How do you handle a defiant student or one having a meltdown? *This is our written behavior management plan that we share with families for their agreement before joining us.*
7. What does a typical daily schedule look like? *This is our written schedule with regular times for the whole group to read books aloud, explorations, lessons, play, rest, etc...*
8. Are meals provided?
9. How will your program prepare my child to be ready for kindergarten? *We expect all children to be able to write their name, rhyme words, know most letter names of the alphabet, and be able to count to 10 before they leave us. See Getting My Child ready for Kindergarten for more examples of specific skills and knowledge for which you might seek clarification.*
10. How long have the current staff members been teaching at this school? *We keep our teachers, and in our co-teaching model, children have two adults in the classroom at all times...*
11. Did any staff members leave during the past year? What happens when a teacher is absent? *100% of our teachers have stayed with us since last year. The average number of years is \_\_\_\_\_. We strive to keep children with a known adult at all times, and if a teacher is absent will place them with the co-teacher and another known staff member so the children feel secure.*





## 6. Deciding

It can be humbling to consider: the year between 4-5 years old is 20% of a child's lived experiences to date. Whether children are in a program or not, they are learning; the question is, what? Whatever you decide to do in this critical year, it will be significant. You, as parents, have the most information about your child and the greatest investment in their success. Let this be a source of strength and inspiration as you seek the best course of action for your child and family in this stage of high potential and development. And know that you are not alone; today's children are tomorrow's leaders, and we all share in the benefits when they grow to flourish.

Visit [PreKHouston.org](https://PreKHouston.org) to learn more about enrolling your child in Pre-K today.

