



# CHOOSING A PRE-KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM FOR YOUR CHILD



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Choosing to entrust your child, “the heart that lives outside of your body,” into another’s care is one of the most important choices a family can make. Whether you are looking for help with child care, to enhance your child’s academic or social development, or a combination of all three, we are here to help. **This document is meant to serve as a guide for families who want to enroll their child in Pre-K and are wondering, “What now?”** We’ve synthesized guidance from leaders in the field of Pre-K development so that you know what to look for when choosing the right preschool for your child and family.



## 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).