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What to look for in a pre-school

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By Kitty Ricafort for Yahoo! Southeast Asia

When I first started looking for a pre-school for my then 2-year-old, it was more out of convenience rather than an inner desire to get her started early on her doctorate degree. Nowadays, with waiting lists and intimidating-sounding preschool philosophies, you'd think she was applying at an exclusive Ivy League university.

I was simple with what I was looking for before and only had two criteria: it should

be near my in-laws (so they could drop her off and pick her up easily as well as be on call just in case of an emergency) and stimulating for a precocious toddler (a wide variety of toys and ample space to play in). All I wanted was to make sure that when my eldest would eventually have to stay over occasionally at the in-laws (due to the pending arrival of baby #2), she would be busy and socialising with other kids.

Thankfully, we found a nice little "Montessori" preschool in my in-laws' village that seemed to fit the bill and was open to letting my toddler "join in" once a week.

Now, thanks to some parents' and pre-school teachers' advice as well as independent research, we came up with a list that will hopefully make your hunt for the right preschool a little bit more purposeful and informed.

1. Location, location, location

Come on, let's get real here. As much as I'd like to drive my little toddler an hour away just so she can attend a highly-recommended, highly-rated pre-school, she would most likely have more absences than appearances at such an inconvenient place.

Best to search for pre-schools near your husband's or your place of work, your home or your secondary caregiver's (in my case my in-law's) home and narrow your choices from there.

With the amount of pre-schools all over, there's bound to be one that will suit your preferences as well as your child's.

Ask your neighbors, colleagues, relatives, playgroup mums for feedback about nearby schools they like and don't like and ask about their experience (good and bad) with each one.

Good word-of-mouth is a great starting point to finding out about a school's reputation, parent/teacher interactions, specific incidents and standard responses by school officials (sick child policies, emergency situations, security measures, etc).

2. Research on the different pre-school programs

Apparently there are a lot of teaching styles aka "philosophies" out there that focus on different aspects of a child's learning. Aside from the basics of teaching letters, numbers, shapes and object recognition as well as other acquired "skills" (math, pre-

writing, pre-reading), different types of philosophies take it a step further each in its own specialised way.

It's easy to go online and read up on the top five pre-school philosophies: Montessori, Waldorf, High/Scope, Bank Street, and Progressive. Find out which one you think will suit your child's personality and more or less aligns with your values and lifestyle choices.

"Every parent wants what is best for his or her child. It is all about finding the right school that fits or matches your child's learning style. Some kids thrive in a big classroom in a traditional setting while others are able to perform well in a class with smaller student/teacher ratio. The approach of the school is something that parents should really look into." - *Pam, pre-school teacher with 9 years experience*

3. Visit, observe, compare

If you have no idea where to begin, visit as many of the pre-schools in your narrowed list and sit in during their classes. Most pre-schools have free trial classes. Bring your child and observe how he/she responds to the teaching methods, as well as take notes of the overall environment (Is it conducive to learning? How do the teachers interact with the children? Is it clean, well-kept, safe? Do the teachers have a good rapport with the kids —smiling, engaging, knowledgeable? Are there good quality educational toys/activities available?).

Take notes so you can compare later on and figure out which school lines up the most with your priorities.

"The other places had tons of brochures and programs such as Spanish and "nights out for the parents", but this place (Montessori) was all about the kids and their learning progress. I just felt they were most reflective of the kind of environment I'd want for Lily and Griffin. I also liked how they had different aged kids interacting together throughout the day. Again, I felt it was most natural - versus the 2 year old class, 3 year old class, etc." - *Maria, mother of Lily (4) and Griffin (1)*

4. Ask Questions

a. If you really don't have a clue, don't be afraid to ask the most basic questions. I asked the school director what "Montessori" meant when she tried to describe the school to me the first time I visited. She was very accommodating and understanding and walked me through the program: showing me their materials/activities and gave me the schedule of their next class so I could see for myself. Her openness, patience and the way she talked about her school and the kids gave me a glimpse of what kind of authority figure my daughter would be exposed to. I liked it (and her) immediately.

b. How long are the classes and do they offer a regular, stimulating and challenging curriculum? Look through their line-up of scheduled activities and see if these would seem appealing to your toddler as well as taking into account the length of time for the whole class: 2-3 hours was our toddler's max, energy and attention-wise.

c. Ask how many students there are per teacher. The less students assigned to one teacher usually means more attention per student, which is always a good thing. The National Association of Family Child Care suggests 1 teacher per 5 kids is suitable for 2-3 year olds, 1:7 is ideal for 3-4 year olds and 1:15 is adequate for 5-year-olds. Also ask about the teachers' educational backgrounds and experience.

d. Ask about how they would keep your child safe and secure. Are toys, furniture, safety gates, electrical outlets, etc up to standard safety laws? What's their policy about security — how entrances/exits are secured, pick-up procedures etc?

5. Last but not least: Know your child

Are the classes scheduled around your child's nap time? Will she be too grumpy or sleepy for school? Does she like big social settings or is she more the kind of child who flourishes in intimate groups?

Your priority is to make sure that your child enjoys his time with other children as well as cultivates a love and curiosity about learning. Pre-school should be what it sounds like: "preparing" kids for school. So make this first school experience a positive and enjoyable one for your child. Formal education will come soon enough.

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