

Preschool

From birth to age 5, children experience tremendous growth, developing the basic knowledge, understanding, and interests essential to becoming successful learners, writers, and readers in the future, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Preschool is an opportunity to educate and inspire the youngest students.

Top 5 Tips for Preschool, from Pediatrician Dr. Cara Natterson

- 1. There is no perfect preschool.**

If there is one thing new parents need to know, it is that there is no preschool that is going to guarantee your child entry into college. There is no preschool that will be so formative that the rest of your child's life will be happier or more productive if your child attends. Preschools are wonderful places for early learning. The socialization that occurs in preschool is the most important piece of this early "education." Whether your child goes for 2 hours a day, or 8 hours a day, whether she is at a developmental school or an academic school or a Reggio school or a Montessori, the purpose of preschool is to learn how to play nicely with others and how to be a good citizen.
- 2. Don't drive an hour to preschool.**

Because there is no ultimate place for the first step in education, preschool should be geographically desirable. This means that you should pick a place that is close to your home or to your work. There is no preschool worth a long commute.
- 3. You are choosing a peer group for yourself as well as for your child.**

When you look around at preschools, take a look at the other parents. It is important to recognize whether or not you fit in. Especially if this is your first child, the parents at preschool often become your new peer group -- or at the very least, you will probably make one or two close friends among the other parents. Preschool is much more enjoyable for everyone if the setting (including the other families) is comfortable for you.
- 4. Afternoon preschool is fine.**

There are many preschools around the country -- particularly in big cities like Los Angeles, where I live -- that have morning groups and afternoon groups. This allows the school to accommodate more children by offering 3-hour-per-day programs to two groups of children. Parents who are offered afternoon spots often panic that their children won't be able to handle it because they nap in the afternoon. In most cases, by the time preschool begins, a child has given up his nap or he is able to skip it several times a week. Parents need to be attentive to the fact that their children will be tired earlier (and need to go to bed earlier), but the kids tend to do great in afternoon school. Some schools offer a nap, but if the program is only 3 hours long and your child is napping through 2 hours of it, there is really limited benefit in being there.
- 5. Yes, your child will get sick at preschool.**

There are two exceptions to this: children who have already been in daycare for several months or even years (these kids have already had their fair share of illnesses and they tend to be immune to them by preschool), and younger siblings whose older brothers and sisters attended preschool and brought home any number of infections (making the little ones at home sick). Our immune system is designed to be exposed to illness and then develop antibodies against that illness - - you have to get sick in order to build your immune system. So don't be dismayed when your firstborn child starts preschool and within weeks has her first cold. Keep in mind, too, that the average preschool-aged child gets sick 6-8 times per year, and those tend to cluster between October and April.

Successful preschool classrooms make children feel cared for, safe, and valued as individuals, says the U.S. Department of Education. They are places where kids can be aided in building a foundation for academic success.

What Moms Can Do about Common Preschool Dilemmas

No child's preschool experience is perfect, but there are steps moms can take to help their kids achieve success at this age.

Sometimes problems in the classroom are caused by the parents. Competitive moms and dads of preschoolers may encourage their kids to compete to be the best -- creating a stressful class environment.

Rosanne Tobey, LPC, a New Jersey-based therapist who specializes in individual, couples, and family therapy, says, "Competition in life is inevitable, but a competitive environment is not ideal in a preschool. It's supposed to be a positive experience! Talk to the teacher and find out if she encourages competition in the classroom. If you don't like the answer you get, look for a new school for your child -- one in which the philosophy is closer to your own, and where you'll be more liable to find like-minded parents."

If it isn't possible to enroll your child in a different school, Rosanne Tobey suggests that moms:

- Give extra support to your child to help him or her thrive in this potentially negative environment.
- Use the fact that you feel differently from other moms as an opportunity to teach your child lessons about patience, acceptance, and inclusion.
- Get your child to share his or her school-day experiences with you. During playtime, talk to him about how his day was. Ask what they do at school and how they do it. If he expresses any concerns, explain to him that different people have different approaches to life -- not better, just different. Says Tobey, "With a bit of effort, you can use this experience to help your child develop valuable coping skills that will serve him well throughout his life."

Moms may also feel concern if it seems like other children read before your kid. Tobey says not to fret, because the main purposes of preschool are to teach kids to socialize and to get them ready for kindergarten. Children do not generally read until they are 6 or 7 years old. Pushing a child to read who does not currently have the ability is setting him up for failure, which could negatively affect his learning experience for years.

Tobey says not to pressure children to read, but offers these tips to gently encourage interest:

- Read to your child each day.
- Leave books your child might enjoy around his or her room.
- Support your child and build his confidence by praising him for the gifts he does have.

After addressing preschool dilemmas, moms may decide to change preschools -- even if kids are perfectly happy in class.

For moms conflicted about making a switch, Tobey advises, "It really depends on what you're unhappy about and how much time your daughter has left at her school. If she's unsafe or the school is in any way inappropriate, you should change immediately -- even if she's obviously happy. However, if she's in her last year and she's safe and well cared for, then I would let her finish out the year without change. That said, if your daughter's at the beginning of her preschool career and you can find a school that both meets your expectations and provides for your daughter's needs, I would definitely suggest changing -- even if it's just for one year. A school that you approve of and appreciate will positively impact your attitude, which in turn will enhance your daughter's experience. (She'll notice how much more supportive, upbeat, and involved you are.) The bottom line is, she could be happy anywhere. If you're happy as well, you'll both enjoy the preschool experience more."

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