

Parents looking for good early care and education face a formidable challenge. Further below we provide some helpful resources, but ultimately parents have to spend time learning about any program they are considering-- asking questions, observing, and thinking about whether it is the right fit for your individual child. Below are 10 BASIC QUESTIONS that parents can ask and suggestions from NIEER faculty about the answers parents should look for.

1. Can I make an appointment to visit your program and spend time in a classroom?

Almost always the answer is yes; if they don't accommodate visits at all, then cross them off your list.

What to look for: safe spaces where children are comfortable and engaged in interesting activities, not long periods of whole group "instruction" or classrooms where children are wandering aimlessly. Children should seem happy, not distressed, bored or crying. The adults should be caring, sensitive (not harsh), responsive to children's needs and requests, and involved in what the children are doing. There should be time and space for active outdoor play, indoor play and quiet time. Children's cultures and home languages are represented in the classrooms.

2. Is there a curriculum and how well do teachers implement it?

What to look for: a well-defined curriculum model¹ that includes physical well-being and motor development, social/emotional development, developing a love of learning, and rich experiences with play-based language, print, math, and science.

3. What are the qualifications of the teachers?

What to look for: A quality preschool has teachers who are well-qualified as well as caring. Four-year

¹This means a curriculum that has been proven to be strong and developmentally appropriate, and that is aligned with a State's early learning standards, which can be found at each state's Department of Education website.



college degrees with specialized

training in early childhood education and child development can help prepare teachers with what they need to be successful. Your child should be assigned a teacher who is always responsible for your child. Teachers should have regular professional development as well as feedback from a supervisor.

4. Are your teachers paid comparably to similar professionals elsewhere?

What to look for: Ask whether the programs pays salaries comparable to those of private or public schools for Kindergarten or First grade and offer benefits like sick leave and health insurance. Inadequate pay leads to high turnover, stressed teachers who live in near poverty, and inability to hire the best teachers in the first place.

5. What is the turnover rate for your teachers and assistant teachers?

What to look for: low turnover rates, teachers and assistants who have been there for years.

6. What are the qualifications of the assistant teachers?

What to look for: some required training, the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or college course work in a prekindergarten area are good indicators.

7. How large are the classes and what are the staff-child ratios?

What to look for: Classes no larger than 20 and preferably smaller (15-18) with at least two staff, especially if your child is more comfortable and will receive more personal attention in a smaller class.

8. Are children assessed for learning difficulties and other problems (hearing, vision), do teachers know how to work with children who have special problems and are parents involved in the program?

What to look for: formal and informal health, sensory, and cognitive screenings, access to consultants on special learning needs, teachers who keep ongoing records on child progress and develop individual plans for each child, opportunities for parent conferences and family involvement.

9. Does the program provide healthy meals and/or snacks?

What to look for: programs that show a concern about children's nutrition and developing healthy eating habits, and when they provide food, that they provide nutritious food.

10. Does routine monitoring and evaluation of program quality take place?

What to look for: A monitoring system is in place to ensure the quality in every classroom. The program continuously ensures program quality through updating accreditation, conducting staff evaluations, and other program quality assessments.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Parents looking for a detailed guide can buy an entire book on "How to Choose the Best Preschool for Your Child: The Ultimate Guide to Finding, Getting Into, and Preparing for Nursery" by Jenifer Wana, or the upcoming book "Prek Home Companion" by Kaufman, Kaufman, and Nelson.

For parents interested in advocacy, read about the widespread agreement among researchers on the value of investing in quality early childhood education programs at our site www.nieer.org. One advocacy group of, and for, parents is Moms Rising (www.momsrising.org).

In addition, NIEER has concise resources on specific topics you may find of interest including: dual language children, health and early childhood, brain development, and math and science in preschool available online at www.nieer.org/publications/policy-matters-policy-briefs. Find this note online at www.preschoolmatters.org.

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The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) conducts and communicates research to support high-quality, effective early childhood education for all young children. Write us back and let us know if you find these tips useful, to forward advice you would like to share with other parents, write about the successes or difficulties you encounter in finding a great preschool for your children, and let us know what else you think we might do to be helpful other parents like yourself. Write to us at info@nieer.org.