

“How to choose a preschool that fits your child”
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by Lana Button

Laurie Sheehan of Burnaby, BC didn't think she needed to spend a lot of time researching preschools for her three-year-old son, Simon. “The neighbourhood preschool seemed fine,” she says. But soon it was obvious the boisterous, play-focused program wasn't bringing out the best in her son. “He's not a big fan of crowds or rowdy play. He didn't want to go to school,” Sheehan recalls.

So she started shopping around and eventually found a spot at a preschool with fewer children, a more controlled and structured environment, and a teacher sensitive to Simon's needs. Although getting to and from the new school added time to Sheehan's commute, she says the move was worthwhile: “Simon just bloomed in that environment.”

Different from daycare; which is designed to provide full day and year round care and learning for young children whose parents are at work, preschool (also called nursery school) is often a 'stay-at-home' kid's first taste of structured learning. And depending on where you live, there may be several preschool programs to choose from, each varying in not only in what they teach, but how they teach. Some have large blocks of free-play time, with a very short “circle time” for group learning each day; some have no group learning times at all. Others are more structured, with lengthy “learning circles” where children sit and listen for extended periods of time — stimulating for some, but utter torture for others.

This guide to some of the most popular types of preschools will help you choose one that works with your child's personality and learning style.

Montessori means academic

Preschools that follow the Montessori learning theory are academic and structured. Children work alone or in small groups, at specific “learning areas” focusing on subjects like math or reading. Lessons are reinforced through the children's use of traditional Montessori materials, including sandpaper letters and numbers that children trace (which introduce printing skills); a “dressing frame,” where children practise lacing, buttoning, buckling and snapping fabric together (teaching practical life skills); and the “pink tower,” which is a set of 10 pink blocks that are meant to be put together in one particular way (developing math skills). Many Montessori kids are reading by kindergarten.

May be right for your child if she's independent, has a long attention span, and if she likes structure; especially if academics are high on your list of priorities. Private Montessori elementary and even secondary schools exist in some communities for families who want to continue their children's education in this style.

Learn more about it at montessori.edu.

Imagination is the thing at Waldorf

There are no direct academics in a Waldorf preschool. Instead, Waldorf trained teachers offer lots of opportunities for imaginary play and hands-on learning like baking, building and gardening. You won't find writing tools or even many books here; pre-reading and -writing skills are taught through storytelling and singing.

Your child may thrive at a Waldorf preschool, and you may have the choice of enrolling her in a private Waldorf school up to grade 12, if there's one in your area. But if you plan

for her to attend a public kindergarten, note that she'll be expected to have some traditional skills, such as holding a writing tool and recognizing letters, that she won't have covered at Waldorf.

May be right for your child if he's an imaginative 'free spirit' who learns best when he's physically involved in an activity, and if *you* feel comfortable with a learning theory that doesn't focus on traditional pre-reading and pre-writing skills.

Find out more about it at waldorf.ca.

Getting creative at Reggio Emilia

The Reggio Emilia approach sees every child as a creative child. These schools promote learning, language and social development through creative art experiences where children are given access to lots of art materials such as clay, easels, markers, and small items from the environment (shells, twigs etc.) and are encouraged to work on long term, group art projects, like collages and sculptures. Their learning experiences are documented by a Reggio trained teacher. The Reggio approach is used in some private schools.

May be right for your child if she loves drawing, crafts and colours

Find out more about it at innovativeteacherproject.org/reggio/values

High Scope is about active learning

Many preschools and daycare centres use this popular learning theory, which can be summed up in three words: "Plan, do, review." Children make an independent choice about where they'll play; which may be in the 'house area' where they are involved in imaginary group play, in the 'sand and water area' where they learn science skills, or the 'book area' where they develop pre-reading, -writing skills. At the end of this session the teacher leads up to a 15 minute circle where children discuss what they learned. There are private elementary schools and even some public schools that use the High Scope learning approach.

May be right for your child if he's a real 'planner' and likes having control over his environment. If he can sit through a lengthy circle time you might find High Scope the perfect balance between academic and social learning.

Find out more about it at highscope.org.

Learn through play in play-based programs

Children explore activities around a weekly or monthly theme through plenty of free play time. During "bear week," teachers may set out crafts involving bears and read bear stories aloud. Play-based programs encourage spontaneous play instead of the "plan, do, review" schedule used at High Scope schools. They are typically more laid-back, and might use ideas from a combination of learning approaches; for example, you might find a Montessori pink tower on the shelf and a Waldorf-style garden in the back. These schools don't offer education beyond preschool.

May be right for you child if he's active, enjoys socializing with large groups of children and doesn't mind noisy play, and your preschool focus is primarily social.

Find out more about it in Dr. Dorothy Einon's book, "*How Children Learn Through Play*"

<sidebar> **What to consider in any preschool program**

- Does it fit your family's schedule? Most preschools don't offer full-day childcare. Preschool typically runs 2_ hours, either in the morning or afternoon, and follows the school calendar — meaning they're closed during the traditional summer, Christmas and spring breaks. Another thing to consider: a particular preschool may offer a choice of classes either two or three alternate days per week or the full five days per week. Consider how much school your child can handle.
- What does the tuition fee cover? Some schools charge extra for lunch programs, transportation, specialty classes and regular field trips.
- Is your child ready? Most programs start at age 2_ and many require that children are potty trained. Preschool is offered for three year olds, and sometimes four year olds if you choose to use preschool as an alternative to public junior and even senior kindergarten.
- Are the teachers qualified? Preschools fall under provincial licensing regulations, which ensures only that facilities meet minimum standards. Make sure the teachers have Early Childhood Education (ECE) certification, as well as extra training for particular learning approaches (Waldorf, Montessori etc.)
- What is the school's learning approach? Make sure you agree with it.
- What do you want your child to gain from attending? Are your goals mainly social (you hope he'll learn to share and take turns) or academic (you want him to learn specific reading, printing and math skills before kindergarten)? Or are you most concerned that your child gain independence (you want him to get accustomed to being at school and away from you)? Choose a program that will help you and your child achieve those goals.
- How long are the group learning sessions? Can you see your child sitting that long?
- How many children are in the classroom? Consider whether your child will be comfortable with the potential noise level.
- What are the opportunities for indoor and outdoor play? Make sure they meet your child's need to burn off steam.