

# Choosing a Preschool, a School, Summer Camp or other Activities

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We are blessed with a wide array of fabulous educational and recreational activities for our kids. How do you begin to choose which to attend? The questions here apply to preschool or school, to camps and to extra-curriculars like dance class, piano lessons, soccer, and so on.

## Step 1 - What do you want? What are your goals for enrolling your child in a program?

What do you hope your child will get out of the program? What do *you* hope to get out of it?

Will they learn new skills that you can't teach them at home? Will they build relationships with other kids and adults? Is your child interested in / excited about this opportunity? Is your child ready for this or would it be better to wait till they're a little older?

Breadth vs. depth. Is there one particular skill you want your child to focus, or do you prefer to expose them to a broad variety of opportunities to build diverse skills?

There's no "right answer". Your answers reflect your family's unique values and priorities.

## Step 2 – What do you need? Think about your concrete needs / basic logistics

*Before* you start looking at options, think about your "can do" and "can't do" list. Start here, because otherwise you might fall in love with a program *then* discover that you can't make the logistics work.

- Location: How far are you willing to drive? How far is your child willing to be driven? What will you do while your child is at the activity, and how well will that work? Is the location convenient for other family members if they need to pick up?
- Schedule: How many days a week? Do you have specific days of the week you can or can't do? How many hours per session would work best for you and your child?
- What time does the program begin and end? Does that really work with your schedule? If your child is a late sleeper, be realistic about morning classes. If they need a nap or downtime in the afternoon, think seriously about what they can handle after lunch. If the only way to make it from one activity to the next is to eat in the car and hope there's no traffic, maybe reconsider whether it's worth the stress.
- Cost: What's manageable? Cost ranges hugely. Programs that are the easiest to find out about have spent the most on marketing, and are pricey. Ask around to find other options – many are just as good as the advertised options at a lower price.
- Parent Involvement: Do you want to participate in the class? Observe? Drop off and go? Would you like to occasionally volunteer? Would you like to make connections with other parents? Choose a program that's open to what you want / need.

## Step 3 – What are your options? Learn about what programs are available

Get familiar with available options: look at parenting magazines. Do web searches. Go to preschool fairs and camp fairs. Ask friends, families, co-workers and other parents for recommendations. If they say they LOVE a program, ask why! It could be that you'd love it for the same reason, or it could turn out that something they love would totally turn you off.

Once you've got a list of options, do more research. Read the programs' websites in detail. Call to ask specific questions. Go to open houses or ask to observe a class, if possible.

## Step 4 – Which one will you choose? Questions to Research

**What do they teach?** What would your child learn there?

**What is the daily schedule?** How is time divided between activities? Play time? Quiet time? Outdoors? Snack? Young children have short attention spans for structured activity, so it's best in short doses, with plenty of unstructured time in between to explore and discover, and quiet time to process what they've learned.

**How do they teach it?**

A *teacher-led curriculum* means the teacher always prepares the lessons in advance (and may use a standardized curriculum) and sticks to them. A *child-led curriculum* (a.k.a. emergent or constructivist) follows the children's interests and adapts to them. A *structured* class may use group time, drills, worksheets, and formal instruction to teach particular skills. A *play-based* class typically has multiple stations set up and allows children to move between things when they choose. The teacher moves around the room, making suggestions and observations, and asking questions to further the learning.

**Who are the students?**

- How many students? How many teachers?
- What is the age range? Some programs have all children very close in age and developmental. Others are multi-age, where the oldest children lead and mentor, and the younger ones have the benefit of an older role model.
- What are the cut-off dates for age? Your child may do best in a program where they are in the middle of the age range rather than youngest or oldest. Many parents push their child ahead to the next program as soon as they reach the minimum age... but if your child is always the youngest one in the room, they may also feel like the smallest, slowest, least coordinated one.

**Who are the teachers?**

- Training and experience: Where and how did they learn the content that they are teaching? Where did they learn about how to teach? Do they do continuing education?
- Longevity / turnover. As a general rule, the longer the teachers have been there the better. (Unless you get the sense that they're burned out...)
- Do they enjoy kids? Do they sit on the floor with the kids, smile, and engage with them? Or do they stand on the edges talking to adults, occasionally calling out instructions to a child?
- How do they handle discipline? What are their rules and how do they reinforce them?

**What is the learning environment like?**

- Is the environment clean? Safe?
- Is there a wide range of materials and supplies? Are materials in good condition?
- Vibe: The most important thing you're "looking" for is something you can't see. How does it *feel*? Is it warm, nurturing, full of exciting learning experiences, and full of happy children and teachers? Or is it cold, institutional, uninvolved? We know from the science of brain development that children learn best when they feel safe and are happy, so look for a place where they will be happy and engaged. Look for a place where you would feel great every time you drop them off to spend time there.