



10 Signs of a Great Preschool



What an adventure awaits your little one as s/he heads off to preschool—new friends, new experiences, and new kinds of fun. Though you certainly want your child to enjoy her/himself, s/he'll also be practicing important skills that will prepare her/him for kindergarten and beyond.

“Your 3- or 4-year-old will learn the fundamental building blocks of reading, writing, math, and science, as well as how to interact with teachers and classmates,” says Barbara Willer, PhD, Deputy Executive Director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in Washington, DC. “However,” she says, *“the overarching goal of any preschool should be to help a child feel good about her/himself as a learner and to feel comfortable in a school-like setting.”*

Chances are you are choosing your child's school carefully and can rest assured that s/he's in good hands. However, as you look around the classroom here's what you should see:

1. **The Right Student-Teacher Ratio:** According to the NAEYC, there should be one teacher for every seven to ten students and no more than 20 children per classroom. State laws vary, however, and some permit even higher ratios. Choosing a school that follows the NAEYC guidelines will ensure that your child receives enough attention and that her teachers will get to know her as an individual.
2. **Daily Circle Time:** During this group meeting children practice important social skills such as taking turns, listening to each other, and sitting still. They'll also hone their language skills by listening to stories and singing songs. In fact, singing is very important in preschool. “As kids get older, they can link song words to written words, and that encourages literacy,” Dr. Willer says. Songs also help children recognize rhythms and count beats, which enhances their understanding of math.
3. **A Language-Rich Environment:** Children should be read to every day. The classroom should have plenty of books available, as well as words posted all over the walls: signs labeling objects, weather charts, and posters describing the children's activities. Even preschoolers' artwork can be used to promote literacy; teachers should write the children's dictated descriptions (“Here is my brown dog.”) on the bottom of their pictures.
4. **An Art Center:** This should be stocked with easels, chunky paint-brushes, and other materials such as crayons and clay. While art—and getting messy—is certainly fun, it also allows children to express their thoughts in a way they might not yet be able to in words. In addition, art helps kids develop fine motor control and a basic understanding of science concepts such as seeing what happens when colors are mixed and how different media create varying textures. It also gives children a sense of how things change as time passes: paint dries and clay hardens.
5. **A Block Corner:** Building with large blocks has been shown to help children develop crucial spatial and problem-solving skills. For example, your preschooler will learn that two of the small square blocks equal one of the larger rectangular blocks—a fundamental principle of geometry. Boys tend to gravitate to the block corner more than do girls. To help interest girls, some teachers have found it helpful to place dollhouse furniture in the block corner because girls like to play with the buildings they create.

6. **Rotating Chores:** Besides developing a sense of responsibility and accomplishment, many chores your child will be asked to help out with in preschool foster math basics—for instance, handing out cups, paper plates, or napkins to each child at snack time introduces the key math concept of one-to-one correspondence.
7. **Manipulatives:** These items build the fine motor skills that are necessary for writing. In addition, puzzles strengthen spatial skills; sorting and counting buttons or beads help develop early math skills; and peg-boards and stringing beads require hand-eye coordination, which is also an important part of learning how to write.
8. **A Water Table & Sand Table:** Not only are both of these materials fun, but children can explore so much with them—space, size, weight, force, pressure, and volume, says Lillian Katz, PhD, Co-Director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana—Champaign. “Of course, 3- and 4-year-olds will understand these concepts only on a very rudimentary level, but when they’re older they’ll be able to build on their preschool experience,” Dr. Katz says.
9. **Physical Activity Every Day:** Your child’s class will probably go to the playground when the weather is nice, but the school should also have equipment—mats, climbing apparatuses, tricycles, or other riding toys—and space for the kids to play actively indoors. “Three- and four-year-olds are still developing their coordination and need a chance to practice their basic physical skills,” says Dr. Katz.
10. **New Materials Introduced Frequently:** Some classrooms have an official “discovery table” for displaying items such as autumn leaves or beach glass. “Bringing in new items for the children to explore leads to discussion as well as longer-term projects,” Dr. Katz offers. For example, an assortment of leaves may prompt a discussion of different types of trees and plants and then inspire the class to plant seeds to see how plants grow, as well as gain an appreciation for the living world around them. “Kids need the chance to wrap their mind around a topic in depth,” asserts Dr. Katz, “and to know that there’s something they can come back to and explore the next day.”

Terrific Teachers!

Of course no matter how good a school is, your child’s experience will depend on whether s/he has an engaging and energetic teacher. According to Barbara Willer, PhD, Deputy Executive Director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, teachers should:

- ☺ Have a **bachelor’s degree** or **formal credential** in **early-childhood education**. “The research is very clear that a teacher with a degree makes a big difference in the quality of the program,” Dr. Willer says.
- ☺ Come over and kneel down to **talk to the children at their eye level** and not call to them from across the classroom.
- ☺ **Greet** your child **by name** and **with a smile** each morning.
- ☺ Structure the daily **curriculum** around the **children’s interests** and questions and give kids **freedom to choose** at least some of the activities in which they participate.
- ☺ **Keep parents informed** of the day’s activities and of any issues that their child may be having.