

Preschool. It's a word that can strike terror—or excitement—into a parent's heart. What exactly is it? Do all children go to preschool? How can you choose from the dizzying array of options? Well, hold on tight and we'll delve right in to explore the options.

Preschool is available to children aged three to five years old. As the name suggests, these programs provide young children with opportunities to interact and socialize in a supportive and educational environment. Traditionally, play has always been at the heart of preschool. In the past few decades, following a change in educational philosophy, some preschools have shifted their emphasis to preparing children for school, through following instructions and stressing a teacher-led routine.

Iris Berger, of the Institute for Early Childhood Education and Research at the University of British Columbia, and a former preschool teacher, recommends that parents look around, visit different programs and informally interview teachers. Key questions to ask include:

1. What philosophy guides the program?

Apart from the basic requirements, preschools are free to offer a wide variety of programs. And this is where it can be difficult to choose. Every school has its own flavour, depending on the focus, the teacher, the location, and even the community. Different educational philosophies are followed, and each preschool will have its own interpretation. If you have specific interests or concerns, be



Unraveling the Mysteries of Preschool

By Hilary Feldman

Like all childcare facilities, preschools are provincially regulated and differ from daycare in several ways. In B.C., preschool programs can run for a daily maximum of four hours and include up to 20 children. All teachers must have recognized qualifications in Early Childhood Education and first aid. Certain essentials are necessary: adequate inside space, outside play equipment, appropriate bathroom facilities, and so on.

Demand for preschool spaces can be quite high. If you have a two-year-old, you may be shocked to know that now is the time to look around. Many preschools offer registration in January—nine months before the first day of classes. Schools may have open houses to give prospective parents (and sometimes children) a chance to see the classroom and teachers. Other schools might require on-line forms to be filled out, and still others have a system of admission by random draw.

prepared to ask a few questions about the preschool's curriculum and teaching philosophy. And remember that choosing a preschool is about finding a good match for your family, your child, and your expectations.

2. What does a typical day look like?

Regardless of educational philosophy, a preschool's daily program should be balanced, including large group and small group activities along with opportunities to make individual choices. Berger explains, "In a day, there'll be a variety of different activities that address what we call the 'whole child', so that would respect all the different developmental domains, that will include the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical."

Children are encouraged to express themselves through art, music, and play. Various toys are provided, such as blocks, puzzles,

dress-up, and so on. Usually, both indoor and outdoor play are a part of each day.

3. What do you do when a child doesn't react as expected?

A child's personality should be one of the considerations. Some children love a more-structured environment; others may require more freedom to choose. Families have different values: where one parent may want a child to learn that school has certain expectations (e.g. every child must join circle), another may emphasize a child's freedom (e.g. certain options are provided if a child is stressed about joining circle). "It's always, I think, the interaction between the kind of values that you have as a parent, what you want in terms of education for your child's personality, and then there's the school's philosophy and understanding of children," says Berger.

4. What is your view about parent involvement?

How are parents involved in the program?

As with other aspects, preschools vary in their inclusion of families: many include only the children in programs, while others are heavily reliant on parental input. Still others may have parents involved for special occasions such as holiday parties or field trips. Parental availability also varies: parents may be unable to attend, due to work and/or family obligations, or prefer to let preschool provide an opportunity for independence and separation. Other parents would like to play a role in the classroom. Family values and expectations will be important considerations.

On top of all these aspects, cost is also an issue. The number of hours per day and the number of days per week influence the price of preschool. Most schools charge a non-refundable registration fee, from a nominal \$25 to \$200. Monthly fees range from about \$80 up to \$725, with most preschools around the \$100–\$200 mark. Many schools offer two sessions a week for three-year-olds and three sessions a week for four-year-olds, so your child's age will be a factor. In some preschools, there is the option of attending for half days or full days. The specifics of the program are a major determinant of the cost. The provincial government offers subsidies for lower income families—preschool teachers have the application forms—so that preschool is financially accessible to all children.

Berger's final word of advice has to do with looking at prospective preschools: "I would look more toward how children's work is represented. I would like to go to a preschool and be able to see [that] what the children do and how they think and how they learn is valued—I like to be able to see it in the environment." She adds, "If the philosophy talks about respect for the children and you look at the walls and the children's art isn't there, or it's not represented respectfully, then you have to wonder. But on the other hand, you can have the most beautiful environment and newest toys and then no respect would be shown in other ways."

In other words, there is no replacement for doing the legwork and feeling out the choices. In return, your child will have opportunities to meet other children, make friends, play collaboratively, and express him or herself through a wide variety of media. A good fit will let your child blossom and thrive. 

Some Preschool Options

Traditional: Typical preschools are play-based. Children have art and free play time, with a variety of toys, materials, and equipment. Teachers may lead a circle time, often based on a theme such as seasons or holidays. The aim is to stimulate children's social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development.

Montessori: Based on Maria Montessori's theories about child development, these preschools have a "child-centred" curriculum. Children work with particular materials designed to stimulate learning. Structured activities allow children to explore different areas, from practical aspects such as household tasks, to sensory, language, mathematical, and cultural ideas. Montessori schools have multi-age groups to promote social teaching among children. Some Montessori schools incorporate other opportunities, such as French, music, and movement classes.

Reggio Emilia: This Italian educational philosophy started in 1963, focusing on the rights and potentials of children. The Reggio model is based on responding to child input, local environment, and changes over time. If a preschool describes itself as having a responsive or emergent curriculum (meaning that it responds to the child's interests), it is likely to be inspired by the Reggio model. Reggio is about a child reaching her/his own potential, rather than being teacher-led. Families often participate. Art materials are very important.

Parent Participation: Parents act as teaching assistants in the classroom, as well as collaborating in preschool administration. Parents' active involvement promotes the development of a whole community of families. Meetings with guest speakers allow parents to be educated in child development and parenting topics. Parents and teachers work together to provide a child-centred, play-based program.

Immersion Preschools: These schools were established in response to research finding that children learn languages well, either as a second language or to reinforce their cultural heritage. Young children pick up new sounds and language concepts better than adults. Usually they offer traditional programs with an additional language component.

Specialty: Some preschools use traditional preschool activities to investigate certain religious and/or cultural themes. For example, holidays may be explored through art, drama, songs and finger-play. Culture and language are extended through opportunities to socialize and form a group identity with other children. "It's a way of learning about your culture through the lens of early childhood education," describes Berger. Some examples are French, Greek, Chinese, and Japanese-language preschools, as well as Christian, Jewish, and Islamic schools.

Developmental: Certain specialized preschools offer programs for exceptional children, including those who are deaf or have other special needs. Traditional preschool activities such as free play and art are incorporated, along with teaching language or other skills.

Aboriginal Head Start: This is a specialized program designed to support the early childhood development of Aboriginal children before entry into school. Parental involvement is important. The federal government funds these preschools, with no cost to participants.

Academic: Several preschools focus on intellectual stimulation, providing instruction in mathematics, literacy, drama, science, art, music, yoga and more.