



How to Select the Best Preschool for Your Child *Inside Tips from a Preschool Teacher*

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- How do I find the best preschool for my child?
- Are there any tips for picking a preschool?
- What is the best preschool in the area?

You are a concerned parent. Your decision to select the best preschool for your child's unique needs is a difficult one. Should you check online? ... With a friend? ... With community educators? The answer is all! All of your resources are valid checkpoints to help find the best environment for your child.

In fact, as someone who has worked with young children since 1994, I too receive many inquiries regarding Preschool selection. My name is Cullen, and I'm a proud and passionate preschool teacher. I fell in love with preschoolers when I first started working as a Day Care instructor and soon I transitioned to preschool, teaching three and four year olds. Over the years, I have even been a preschool director. But my true love and passion is teaching preschoolers and that is what I concentrate on now.

This article, based on my experience, offers guidelines, suggestions, insights and a simple grading system to help you select the best preschool for your child. Read through these tips, and give your child (and you) a great first experience with school!

Here's what we will discuss:

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The People Priority: Teachers

In life, business, and education “people” are the key to happiness and success. When selecting a preschool for your child, make the “people” factor your most important consideration. The most important influencers on your child’s development in preschool are the teachers. For this single reason, teachers should be your primary consideration in selecting a preschool. The teacher is the one who will be spending the most time with your child and helping him or her develop socially, emotionally, physically, and intellectually.

Be careful not to make secondary factors – popularity, type of program, staff, facility, location – your primary objective.

Be Cautious: The Lure of Preschool Popularity

Popularity is a strong factor for many parents in selecting a preschool. Many areas have preschools that are considered the “best” and have long waiting lists. Please remember, you are looking for the best preschool for your individual child. Always keep your search focused on what is best for *your* child. Who knows, this mindset may even lead you to a different preschool than one your other children attended. Please do not allow popularity to cloud your feelings for what is best for your individual child.

Be Open to All Programs

Many times, parents make the type of preschool program their primary consideration, when it should actually be secondary. Many people have preconceived ideas about the type of preschool program they want for their children, only touring facilities with specific types of programs. (Common preschool programs include: Developmental, Academic, Play-based, and Montessori.) If you are fixed on a specific program, you are limiting your opportunities to find the best teacher for your child. If you accept that you are looking for the perfect teacher, rather than a preschool program, you will create more opportunities to find that teacher.

Be Comfortable with Staff, Facility, Location

You should also feel comfortable with support staff (teacher aides and administration). Teacher aides are crucial because they have significant interaction with your child.

It is also important to be happy with the actual preschool facility and the classroom environment. The classroom space must be large enough, used effectively, and be well maintained. If you notice or sense any safety or security issues with the preschool you should remove it from your list immediately.

Location is another factor that parents often use as their primary consideration. This will also limit your opportunities to find the best teacher. Of course location is an important factor, but just don’t make it the prime factor

How to Find Preschools

- Learn from “word of mouth”
- Search the Internet
- Read local parenting newspapers
- Contact a local Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS) group
- Check the yellow pages

Tip: Google Maps now have a “Find business” option. Go to maps.google.com and type in your city name and the word “preschool” for business ... a listing of all the preschools in your city will appear!

Selection Process

Preschools set up tour appointments during the school year. (Open registration can start as early as the January before the next Fall term.) Some preschools have waiting lists, so it's never too early to start touring. Call at least five preschools and set appointments for tours. Make sure your selected preschools include a mix of programs (Developmental, Academic, Play-based, and Montessori.)

Most preschools also have open houses. They are a convenient way to visit preschools and talk with the teachers to get an idea if they would be a good fit for your child. Please do not rely only on open house visits to make your preschool selection. Touring the preschool and seeing the teacher in action with the children is the best way to develop a feeling if they would be a good fit for your child

The First Visit: Roles and Expectations

During the first visit, you should observe all aspects of the preschool, including the teacher(s), staff, program, and facility. Use my Preschool Grading Form (found at the end of this article) to help you compare preschools.

The majority of your interaction will be with the person giving you the tour; most likely a secretary, the preschool director, or the principal. This person will give you the tour, describe the preschool program, and answer any questions you may have. Expect to be taken on a tour of the classrooms, the play area, and other points of interest of the preschool.

While you will most likely get a chance to meet the teacher, do not expect the teacher to discuss any questions in any depth. The teacher's role is to engage with the children in the class. If the teacher turns out to be one of your favorites, you can ask to contact the teacher (live meeting, by phone, or email) and request another visit during "free play time" to closely observe the teacher.

If you can, visit the first group of preschools without your child. You can then take your child to your favorites when you visit them a second time. If you do bring your child, hold his or her hand and watch his or her reactions when observing a classroom. Only allow your child to interact if invited by the teacher.

A Simple Grading System

Visiting a list of preschools can be overwhelming. It's often difficult to remember what you liked. So, use a simple and consistent grading system to help you determine your favorites.

I recommend an easy A, B, C, D, and F grading system:

A = Very Good Feeling

B = Good Feeling

C = Ok Feeling

D = Bad Feeling

F = Very Bad Feeling

Tour Questions and Comments

Below is a list of helpful questions to use when touring a preschool. Following the questions are comments to give you some insight and knowledge on why you should ask these particular questions. At the end of this article is my "Preschool Grading Form," formatted so you can easily print it out and take it with you when you tour a preschool for the first time.

Before the tour begins, be proactive and ask these important questions **to the person giving you the tour**. You are about to enter preschool land, and things can get funny, wild, and crazy fast. So ask these questions at the beginning, before leaving the preschool office. The answers will allow you to make better observations once the tour starts.

What is your role at the preschool?

Ask the person giving the tour what his/her role is at the school: secretary, director, or principal? It is always good to know the role of the person giving you the tour before the tour begins. The director should have the most knowledge and understanding of the preschool program, but at many preschools the secretary may be a good resource too.

What are the teachers' names, and in what order are we going to see them?

Write the teachers' names down on your Preschool Grading Form in the "Grade Your Feelings About the Teacher" section. Now you will be prepared to easily record your first impression of each teacher.

How long has each of the teachers been teaching at this preschool?

If all the teachers have only been at the preschool a short period of time, it may indicate some issues with the program. If they have been there for some time, it indicates they are valued by those who run the program. If a teacher has been there a very long time, make sure that he or she still has the passion to teach preschoolers. Ideally, the teachers should be happy and love working with preschoolers.

How long have they been teaching 3 or 4 year olds?

It is completely different teaching 3's versus 4's, so make sure the teacher teaching your child's age group has experience with that age.

What is considered a "qualified teacher" in your program?

What are the academic qualifications? Are teachers certified in first aide and CPR? How many Early Childhood Education units (12 is the minimum required to teach at a preschool)? Have they been fingerprinted?

How are the teachers instructed to greet me on this tour?

Some preschools may not allow the teacher to greet you. It is nice to know this, so you do not think the teacher is being rude. What the teacher is doing when you visit may determine the type of greeting you get. At a minimum, you should get acknowledgement and a nice smile.

Are the teachers allowed to talk to me during the tour?

Some programs allow teachers to chat with you quickly, while others do not. A teacher should not spend a lot of time with you; the teacher's priority should be with the children.

What is my role during the tour?

Are you allowed to ask the teacher a quick question?

If your child is with you: What is my child's role during the tour?

Is your child allowed to interact with the teacher or class?

What is the teacher-to-student ratio?

Anything over 1 teacher to 12 students is too high. During the tour, check to see if the teachers are within their stated teacher-to-student ratio.

Grade Your “Feelings” About the Teacher

Make sure your tour guide gives you enough time to observe each teacher in order to grade him or her on the following questions. Remember, these questions are designed to help you develop an overall feeling about the teacher and the preschool to determine the best choice for your child. Make sure you do not feel that you are being rushed through the tour.

- Immediately when you step into the classroom, does it have a warm, inviting, and positive feeling? (Grade A, B, C, D or F)
- Does the teacher have a warm, positive, loving, and inviting feeling? (Grade A, B, C, D or F)
- Is the teacher’s classroom organized and clean? (Grade A, B, C, D or F)
You may come in when the children are playing and the room is messy at a time. This is ok because the children are engaged in activities and each other. Try to envision the classroom with everything in its place. Is it a well thought out organized environment?
- Is the teacher’s classroom environment chaotic or calm? (Grade A, B, C, D or F)
- Look at the children’s faces: Are they engaged and happy, rather than bored, tense, or unhappy? (Grade A, B, C, D or F)
- Does the classroom have many things for the children to choose from to interact and play with? (Grade A, B, C, D or F) Things to look for: Art Center, Block Play, Books, Dramatic Play, Games, Manipulatives, Mathematics, Music, Puzzles, Environmental Box, and Science. These areas help to enhance your child’s developmental experience in preschool.
- Did you observe “free play?” (Yes or No) Play in preschool has been called "free play" to emphasize that children's role-play is partly free from the teachers' planning and involvement.
- If you did observe free play was it child-directed play or teacher-directed play? (Child or Teacher) Child-directed play is when the child gets to choose what they play with, and teacher-directed play is when the teacher chooses what the child does.
- Were there opportunities for discipline? (Yes or No)
- If there were opportunities for discipline, how did the teacher handle it? (Grade A, B, C, D or F)

Grade Your “Feelings” about the Staff and Facility

When meeting the preschool staff, such as the teacher’s aide, school secretary, preschool director, or school principal, are they friendly, smiling, happy people that love working at the preschool? (Grade A, B, C, D or F)

Children are very sensitive to their environment, so you want their classroom (teacher-influenced) and preschool (staff-influenced) environment be a warm, loving, and positive one. This question generates feelings on the preschool environment.

Examine the outside play equipment and the classroom furniture. Is it safe and is there plenty of space? (Grade A, B, C, D or F)

Questions to Ask During the Tour

These questions are designed to generate your feelings about the preschool. The answers are not intended to be graded, because there is no right answer. You can ask these questions while on the tour, and at the end before you leave.

What is the one very best thing about your preschool?

Try to ask this to as many people as possible. Most likely answers will vary, but look for a common thread.

What is the daily schedule for the classroom and how does it benefit learning?

An example schedule: Circle Time, Art with Inside and Outside Play, Clean Up, Bathroom Break, Snack, Books or Puzzles, Clean Up, Outside Play, Sharing, Small Group Time, Prepare to Go Home, Line Up, Sing Goodbye Song. One day each week has a visit to the library or includes physical education.

Will my child receive a snack at preschool?

Most preschools provide snack. Are they prepared by the employees or by your child? Some places are family style where the children sit together and work on their manners, pouring their own juice, and taking turns in conversation. Some preschools have snack prepared, and children come and eat as they please.

How is discipline handled in the classroom?

The best answer should be a list of different steps depending on the situation. Not one solution such as a Time Out or Redirecting is a quality or complete answer.

What type of preschool program are you?

Do not let them just give you a brochure to read, ask them to describe the program in their own words.

Is the preschool program faith-based?

This may or may not be an important question for you, but if it is, make sure you find out what they focus on to instill faith in your child's daily life.

What is the role of the teacher's aide?

The aide's role is to assist the teacher with preparing the classroom for the day ahead and to assist with children throughout their time together.

What is the mission statement of the preschool?

Try to ask this to as many people (secretary, director, principal, and teacher) as possible. Once again do not let them just give you a brochure with the mission statement. Ask each one of them to describe the mission statement to you in their own words. If all answers are consistent it will tell you if there is strong communication within the preschool program.

How are parents incorporated into the classroom and the preschool program?

Most programs extend invitations to parents to help in the classroom with specific activities. Also, parent clubs, school boards, and fund raising activities are common ways for parents to get involved with the preschool.

Are there specific activities for parents to meet other parents?

You may desire opportunities to meet other parents or not.

What is your program's curriculum?

The curriculum is the subjects taught in schools, or the elements taught in a particular subject. This question will give you insight into the priorities of the preschool program. It may be more focused on social development compared to academic development. Remember, the most important factor to your child's development in any area is the teacher.

What percent of your preschool program is focused on social versus academic development?

Many people have preconceived ideas about social or emotional vs. academic development, but the teacher leading your child's development is the most important factor.

Do you have a process of testing or screening children going from preschool to kindergarten?

This is good information for you to know up front. Many parents are surprised to find out testing or screening is done on children going from preschool to kindergarten.

During the school year can I communicate with my child's teacher via email?

The answer to this question tells you a few things. First, when you are dropping off or picking up your child at preschool, it is not a good time for the teacher to answer your important questions.

Email is a fast and effective way for you to send a question; this allows the teacher to digest it and reply back or set up a time to talk. Second, if teachers are using email, it is a good sign since they are probably utilizing the great wealth of information on the Internet to get ideas for their classroom and enhance their teaching skills.

How are teachers evaluated and how often?

This question may stump them. We all get graded in some way, so it is only fair to understand how the preschool teachers are graded.

Observations After The Tour

Did anyone encourage you to visit other programs, and instruct you to ask anything specific about other programs? (Yes or No)

The questions they tell you to ask other preschools are an indication of what they feel are the strengths of their preschool.

How do you feel about the tour guide's knowledge of the teachers and understanding of the program?

If they rushed you through the classroom, or if they did not answer your questions completely, they just may not have complete knowledge of the preschool program. If the person giving the preschool tour does not have a good understanding of the preschool, it is likely that every one at the preschool may not be on the same page. In addition, if they have problems communicating verbally, there may be problems with communication in general.

Grading After the Tour

How do you feel the teachers at the preschool fit with your child? (Grade A, B, C, D or F)
This is the most important question.

Do you feel this preschool program is the best environment for your child and you? (Grade A, B, C, D or F)

Note: If you sense a safety or security issue with the preschool you should remove that preschool from your list immediately.

Using the Grading System to Select your Favorite Preschools

If you ask the suggested questions and grade the questions you will most likely quickly develop a feeling for your favorite preschools. In case you do not, review your grades to help you determine your favorite preschools. Remember this grading system is just a guide to help you determine your top preschools to visit a second time. There are intentionally more questions about the teachers because the teachers are the most important factor in your decision. Once you have visited numerous types of preschool programs you will develop a feeling for which preschools, regardless of program type, have the best teacher(s) for your child. These are the preschools you should visit a second time.

The Second Visit Assessment

After completing all your initial tours, visit your favorite preschools a second time. During the second visit, your focus should be on the teacher(s), making sure they are a good fit for your child.

Try to arrange the second visit during "free play time." Free play is a great time to observe teachers, because you can see the teacher's skills at work and many dynamics of the class. During this second visit, you should be able to make an assessment regarding the teacher in less than 20 minutes. Once you have made all your second visits, you will most likely be ready to make a decision.

If you feel you need additional visits, feel free to schedule them. In the end, you must trust your instincts regarding which teacher is best for your child. Remember that teachers are the key to a positive and successful preschool experience for your child.

Many Thanks!

Thank you for caring so much about the education and development of your child. I hope you will find this article helpful when selecting the best preschool for your child. By following my tips and using the questions, grading system, and its related print-out form, you will make the best decision for your child...I am sure of it!

If you enjoyed this article, I encourage you to also log on to visit Cullen's abc's (cullensabcs.com) to find free and easy, creative, ideas that stimulate children's development at home. The ideas are presented in short videos on YouTube, so they are easy to follow and understand. There are a wide array of videos on topics such as books to read, book reviews, art projects, and activities. You'll find many creative ideas that can be prepared and done inexpensively around home. You can even subscribe to Cullen's abc's Idea Update, a free daily email!

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NEXT: THE TWO-PAGE "PRESCHOOL GRADING FORM"
PRINT IT OUT AND TAKE IT WITH YOU ON A FIRST TOUR



Preschool Grading Form

Preschool Name:

Name & Role of Tour Guide:

Date:

Questions to Ask Before Starting the Tour

Be proactive and ask these important questions to the tour guide before the tour of the preschool and classrooms begins. The answers will allow you to make better observations on the tour.

1. What is your role at the preschool?
2. What are the teachers' names? 1st: 2nd 3rd 4th
3. How long have each of them been teaching in this program?
4. How long have they been teaching 3 or 4 year olds?
5. What is a "qualified teacher" in your program?
6. How are the teachers instructed to greet me?
7. Are the teachers allowed to talk to me during the tour?
8. What is my role during the tour?
9. If your child is with you: What is my child's role during the tours?
10. What is the teacher-to-student ratio?

Grade Your "Feelings" About the Teacher (Insert your A, B, C, D or F grade in the boxes for each teacher/classroom you observe.)

Immediately when you step into the classroom, does it have a warm, inviting, and positive feeling?

1st	2nd	3rd	4th
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Does the teacher have a warm, positive, loving, and inviting feeling?

1st	2nd	3rd	4th
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Is the teacher's classroom organized and clean?

1st	2nd	3rd	4th
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Is the teacher's classroom environment chaotic or calm?

1st	2nd	3rd	4th
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Does the classroom have many things for the children to choose from to interact and play with?

1st	2nd	3rd	4th
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Did you observe free play?

YES NO

If you did observe free play was it child-directed play or teacher-directed play?

CHILD TEACHER

Is the teacher engaging in play with the children?

1st	2nd	3rd	4th
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Were there opportunities for discipline?

YES NO

If there were opportunities for discipline, how did the teacher handle it?

1st	2nd	3rd	4th
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



Preschool Grading Form Page 2

Grade Your "Feelings" about the Staff and Facility

When meeting the preschool's staff (the teacher's aide, school secretary, preschool director, and school principal), are they friendly, smiling, happy people that love working at the preschool?

1st 2nd 3rd 4th

Examine the outside play equipment and the classroom furniture. Is it safe and is there plenty of space?

1st 2nd 3rd 4th

Questions to Ask During Tour

- What is the one very best thing about your preschool?
- What is the daily schedule for class and how does it benefit learning?
- Will my child receive a snack at preschool?
- How is discipline handled in the classroom?
- What type of preschool program are you?
- Is the preschool program faith-based?
- What is the role of the teacher's aide?
- What is the mission of the preschool?
- How are parents incorporated into the classroom and the preschool program?

- Are there specific activities for parents to meet other parents?
- What is your program's curriculum?
- What percent of your preschool program is focused on social versus academic development?

Do you have a process of testing or screening children going from preschool to kindergarten?

During the school year can I communicate with my child's teacher via email?

How are teachers evaluated and how often?

Observations After the Tour

Did anyone encourage you to visit other programs, and instruct you to ask anything specific about other programs?

YES NO

How do you feel about the tour guide's knowledge of the teachers and understanding of the program?

Grade A, B, C, D, F

Grading After the Tour

How do you feel the teachers at this preschool fit with your child?

Grade A, B, C, D, F

Do you feel this preschool program is the best environment for your child and you?

Grade A, B, C, D, F

Note: If you sense a safety or security issue with the preschool you should remove that preschool from your list immediately.

This Preschool Grading Form is only intended for first tour of a preschool. It is recommended that no form be used on second tours of favorite preschools.

For details on how to use this form and tips on selecting a preschool please visit cullensabcs.com