

THE HUNT IS ON

HOW TO FIND THE RIGHT PRESCHOOL AND WHAT KIDS ACTUALLY LEARN THERE.

It's not college—it's only preschool. But for many parents, deciding where to send your child is the first big education decision. For starters, preschool may be your child's first real time away from you, so you want to get it right. And then come the questions: Should I send her at age 2, or wait until she is 3, or 4? What kind of program? And what do kids need to learn in preschool, anyway?

Talking to other parents is a great way to get started on your search. But as with almost everything regarding kids, expect to hear lots of different opinions about preschool. For some balanced answers to parents' most-asked questions, read on to see what the early-childhood experts have to say.

Will my 2-year-old get anything out of a toddler program? When I observed one class, the toddlers didn't seem to be interacting much.

Actually, that's just what you should see, because toddlers mostly engage in solo or parallel play, says Janis Strasser, PhD,

classroom, finding things that interest them. Toddlers should also have lots of opportunities to engage their senses, with water, sand, Play-Doh, and paint. And you should see the teacher interacting with the kids, but look for more lap time—one teacher reading to two or three kids—and less circle time. Each child should also get some one-on-one attention from a teacher, so look for a low teacher-child ratio (1 to 5 is good).

BY SARAH CROW / PHOTOGRAPHY BY KATRINE NALIED

associate professor of early childhood education at William Paterson University in Wayne, New Jersey. "Even though children may not be playing with other children, they are watching, listening, and modeling what they see and hear. We call this 'scaffolding.' For instance, a child may watch another child rock a baby doll in the dramatic play area, and the next day that child may pick up a doll and try pretend play herself." So there's more going on than what you may see on the surface.

Expect to see some kids playing by themselves, or wandering around the



We are applying to preschools for next fall. My 2 1/2-year-old is still pretty clingy, and she isn't potty trained yet. How can I know if she'll be ready six months from now?

In a nutshell, you can't know for sure. But you can expect your daughter to make some big developmental gains over the next six months. It's true that a child who regularly uses the potty, shows signs of independence, and states her needs with words is more ready for school than a child who can't do any of these things, but most 3-year-olds fall somewhere in the middle of the "readiness" spectrum. And don't forget that a good preschool program is designed for 3-year-olds, with all their quirks, Strasser says. You may want to focus more on finding the right program for her, rather than worrying about her

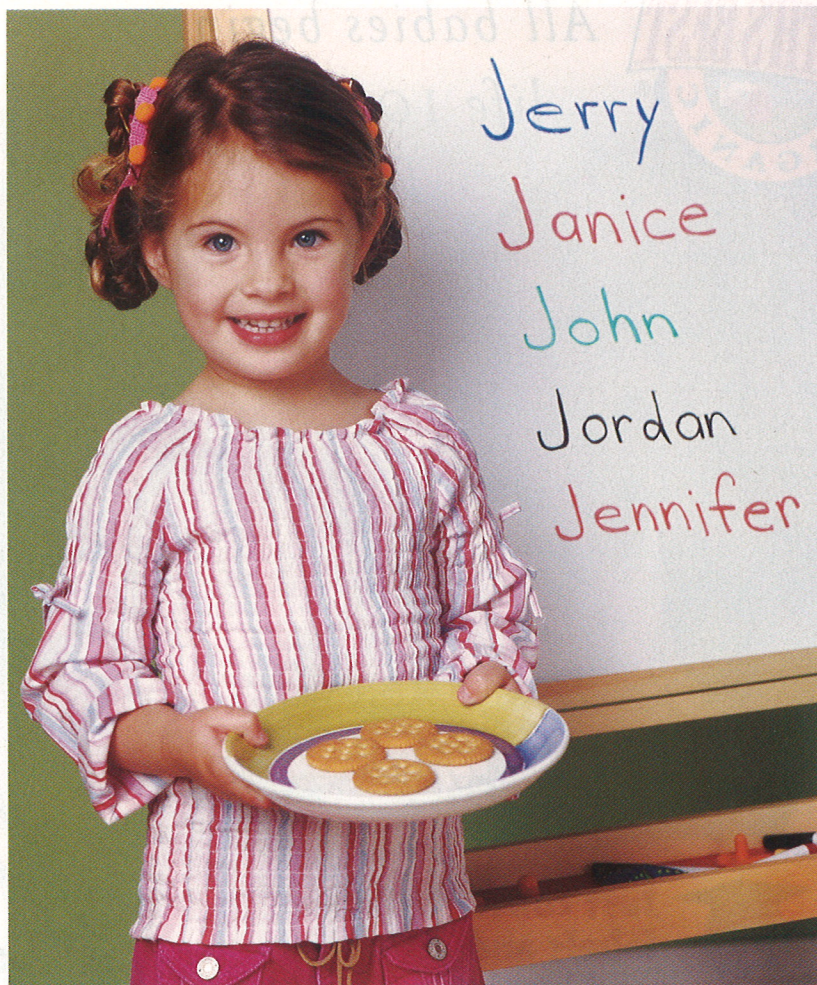
readiness. In the meantime, consider these additional factors:

- A program that accepts almost threes (for instance, children must be 3 by December 31) may be more attuned to the needs of young threes, such as separation anxiety and toilet training, than a program that requires children to be 3 by the time school starts in September.
- A school that's not licensed to care for kids in diapers will naturally be stricter about toilet training, while a school that is licensed (such as one with a toddler program) may be more flexible about a child who's still working on potty training. And remember, preschool teachers expect that kids will have an occasional accident—that's just what 3-year-olds do.
- A mixed-age classroom, in which kids stay with the same teachers and classmates for two to three years, may suit a child who has a tough time with transitions, although such classes are often bigger than single-age classes.
- When you visit preschools, share as much information about your daughter as you can—the teacher's responses will help you determine whether the program is a good fit.

In our town, there are two popular preschools. One is more academic than the other. If I send my daughter to the academic one, will she have an edge when she's older?

Earlier isn't necessarily better when it comes to academics. That's because mastering phonics or learning to subtract at age 3 or 4 doesn't translate into later school success, says Lilian Katz, PhD, professor emerita of early childhood education at the University of Illinois. In fact, "too much early experience in work sheets, drills, or flash cards may backfire later," she says.

Researchers think that gaining social



Counting "J" names or crackers helps kids learn numbers and ABCs.

competence—learning how to cooperate, solve problems, and think about other people—is what really makes a difference later on. Playing and working together on projects with other kids is the best way to build these crucial social skills. Any "academic" learning in the classroom should be integrated into the daily routine ("let's count four crackers for a snack") or have some personal connection ("there are five 'J' names in our class"). Adds Strasser: "Parents should be worrying about whether their kids are doing enough creative play at preschool, not whether they're doing daily work sheets."

What if we decide not to send our child to preschool at all, and keep her at home until she's 5? Will she be at a huge disadvantage when she attends kindergarten?

Surprise—early-childhood experts say that preschool isn't absolutely necessary, and any disadvantage your daughter encounters would probably be short-lived. For instance, she'd probably need help in adjusting to daily school routines; she might also need more time than others to get used to being in a group and taking turns with materials. "But even without preschool, many children can master the fundamentals of

STYLIST, KAREN CUNNINGHAM; HAIR AND MAKEUP, ERIN GALLAGHER



WHEN TO DO WHAT

- **FALL:** Call for information and brochures; observe schools in which you're interested.
- **WINTER/EARLY SPRING:** Apply to preschool(s); the school may ask your child to spend a morning there.
- **LATE SPRING:** Decide which school your child should attend; if needed, plan another visit.
- **SUMMER:** If possible, point out the preschool to your child, and play at the playground.



A good preschool will allow your child to pursue her own interests.

kindergarten life in a short period of time,” Katz says, as long as they’re supported by teachers and parents. Of course, this assumes that during the preschool years you read and play with your child every day; that she plays regularly with other children; and that she occasionally spends time away from you with a sitter or relative. Play dates at other kids’ houses would also be helpful.

Still, although your child won’t suffer if she doesn’t go, there are definite benefits to attending preschool. A child gains important social and emotional

skills, says Wendy Masi, PhD, dean of the Mailman Segal Institute at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale: She’ll learn to feel safe and comfortable away from home. She’ll learn to be part of a group; to take turns and follow routines; and to make friends and work out conflicts. A good preschool will also encourage your child to pursue her own interests, whether it’s writing her name or learning more about the natural world. By the time your child starts kindergarten, she’ll have all those skills under her belt.

How are Montessori programs different from other preschools?

The main difference is that in a Montessori classroom, your child is part of a group of 3- to 6-year-olds, and stays with the same teachers for two or three years. The aim is to form family-like communities, in which children choose activities at their own pace, and older kids gain confidence by helping teach younger ones, says Mimi Basso, director of school consultation and accreditation at the American Montessori Society (AMS). Classes tend to be on the large side, often with two teachers and 20 children. Like many other preschools, Montessori classes have circle time, but kids spend more time working independently or in small groups.

A Montessori classroom also looks a little different: It’s divided into distinct sections that reflect the Montessori curriculum. One area emphasizes practical skills, like pouring water or threading laces. The sensory learning area features objects like graduated blocks, bells, and spheres; as kids play with them, they pick up concepts like big and small, loud and soft, and so on. Other sections of the room may be devoted to art, language, math, and music, all with hands-on materials for kids to explore. Montessori preschoolers often learn to read, write, and do simple math, but since children only choose activities they’re interested in, a child who’s not ready for reading or math isn’t forced to try it.

However, keep in mind that Montessori schools—and there are more than 3,000 in the U.S.—are as different from one another as they are similar, so it’s important for you to visit and get a feel for the individual school, just as you would with any other preschool. When you visit, ask about

WHEN YOU OBSERVE...WHAT DO YOU NOT WANT TO SEE?



- Artwork on display that looks too finished or has a cookie-cutter sameness. This could indicate that the finished product is more important than the kids’ creative process.
- A program that has kids in a large group for long periods, or has everyone doing the same thing for too long. Preschoolers need a mix of large-group, small-group, and independent playtime.
- Kids that seem too excited by your presence. This may be a sign that the program isn’t engaging them enough.

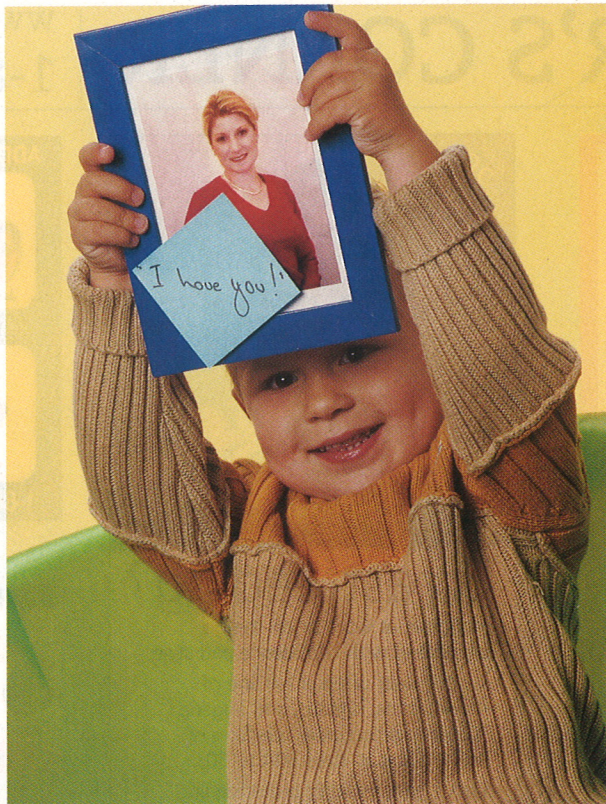
accreditation; three national groups offer it. A school affiliated with AMS, for instance, will have teachers who've completed a 300-hour course of training and a yearlong internship.

I had no idea preschool was so expensive. Any suggestions for making it more affordable?

Preschool tuition can leave you with sticker shock, especially if you're thinking about full-day programs. Consider preschools based in churches, Jewish Community Centers, and YMCAs, which keep costs down by sharing the larger group's space, and may offer sliding-scale fees. There may also be a co-op preschool in your town; such preschools rely on parents to handle all kinds of duties, from assisting teachers to serving on the school's board. If you and your spouse both work, ask your employer about dependent-care spending accounts, which allow you to set aside as much as \$5,000 of pretax income to pay for child care, or look into claiming tuition as part of the federal dependent-care tax credit. You can only choose one; you may want to talk to an accountant about what the best strategy is for your family.

My 3-year-old goes to a home day care while we work, and she's happy there. But I keep wondering whether we should enroll her in a school or a larger center to give her more of a preschool experience.

It really depends on the home-care program, says Amy Flynn, director of the Family Center at Bank Street College of



A child who is having trouble separating may find it easier if you give him a picture to put in his cubby.

Education in New York City: "If your child has a loving provider who's committed to doing age-appropriate activities with the kids, that's probably fine." It's helpful if the program has other preschool-age children there for your daughter to practice taking turns and sharing with. The home should also have the same kinds of simple materials—blocks, costumes, art supplies—you'd see in a preschool classroom.

But as you suspect, sending your daughter to a preschool or day-care center will give her some experience with being part of a larger group, which in turn will help her prepare for kindergarten. As a compromise, if it's practical, you might consider sending your child to a preschool program in the mornings, then back to her home care in the afternoons.

My daughter cried every day at preschool for weeks, and I don't want my son to go through the same thing when he starts. (I don't want to go through it again, either!)

If your child sobs or cries hysterically every time you leave him at school, you're bound to wonder whether you should take him out. "But almost all kids need some help to separate from a parent, and that's a good thing," Katz says. "It's a sign of your child's strong relationship with you."

Usually, separation is tougher for a 2-year-old, who's less articulate and less experienced, than it is for a 3- or 4-year-old. But for most kids, the adjustment to preschool can take a couple of weeks. "Stay at school for a little while, but then say good-bye, and have faith that your child's teacher will comfort him and help him get involved in something," Strasser says. Ask the teacher how long your child's tears last; often, crying stops moments after you leave. And help your child remember that you'll be back by giving him an "I love you" note for his pocket, or a photo of you or your family for his cubby.

If more than a month has passed and your child still seems miserable, you might try shortening his school day or reducing the number of days he goes to school. Conversely, some children adjust more easily when they go to school more frequently—for instance, three or four days instead of two. *

Sarah Crow, a mother of three, lives in Concord, New Hampshire.



HOW MUCH PRESCHOOL IS ENOUGH?

You may worry that your child will fall behind if she doesn't get the "right" amount of preschool. But a few mornings a week is fine, especially for younger preschoolers. Sociable 4-year-olds may enjoy the routine of going to school five mornings a week, but they don't need to go to school every day to thrive in kindergarten.