

Top 10 Pre-K Questions

What parents need to know about high quality preschool.

1. Can I make an appointment to visit your program and spend time in a classroom?

What to look for: safe spaces with children comfortable and engaged in what they are doing, not easily distracted or wandering aimlessly; children seem happy, not distressed, bored or crying; adults are caring, sensitive (not harsh), responsive to children's needs and requests, and involved in what the children are doing by helping children solve problems, accomplish projects and learn; time and space for active outdoor and indoor play as well as quiet time. Children's voices dominate.

2. Is there a curriculum and how well do teachers implement it?

What to look for: a proven curriculum model aligned with early learning standards that cover physical well-being and motor development, social/emotional development, approaches toward learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge. Teachers plan for each day and individualize for each child; play with teachers involved is a big part of the day.

3. What are the qualifications of the teachers?

What to look for: Four-year college degrees with specialized training in early childhood education and child development. Your child should be assigned a teacher with these qualifications who is always responsible for your child. Teachers should have annual in-service training requirements and continuing training in such areas as safety practices, first aid, and emergency preparedness.

4. How much are your teachers paid?

What to look for: Salaries that are comparable to what private or public school teachers earn for teaching Kindergarten or First grade.

5. What is the turnover rate for your teachers and assistant teachers?

What to look for: low turnover rates, teachers and assistants who have been there for years.

6. What are the qualifications of the assistant teachers?

What to look for: some required training, the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or college course work in a prekindergarten area are good indicators.

7. How large are the classes and what are the staff-child ratios?

What to look for: Classes no larger than 20 and preferably smaller (15-18), especially if your child is more comfortable and will receive more personal attention in a smaller class. Classes must have at least one teacher per 10 children.

8. Are children assessed for learning difficulties and other problems (hearing, vision), do teachers know how to work with children who have special problems and are parents involved in the program?

What to look for: formal and informal health, sensory, and cognitive screenings, access to consultants on children's health and other special learning needs, teachers who keep ongoing records on how children are doing and develop individual plans for working with each child, opportunities for parent conferences and family involvement.

9. Does the program provide healthy meals and/or snacks?

What to look for: programs that show a concern about children's nutrition and developing healthy eating habits, and provide nutritious food.

10. Does routine monitoring for program quality take place?

What to look for: Is there a monitoring system in to ensure that quality standards are in place (such as site visits in publicly funded programs)? Is the program accredited by a national early childhood organization such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children? Does the program continuously ensure program quality through updating accreditation, conducting staff evaluation, and other program quality assessments?

- by Ellen Frede, Ph.D.