

10 Signs of a Great Preschool

Is your child learning or just playing? Here's what makes for an excellent early education.

By Irene Daria-Wiener

What an adventure awaits your little one as he heads off to preschool — new friends, new experiences, and new kinds of fun. Though you certainly want your child to enjoy himself, he'll also be practicing important skills that will prepare 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, Ph.D., deputy executive director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), in Washington, D.C. “However,” she says, “the overarching goal of any preschool should be to help a child feel good about himself as a learner and to feel comfortable in a school-like setting.”

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

1. The Right Student-Teacher Ratio

There should be one teacher for every seven to ten students and no more than 20 children per classroom, according to the NAEYC. 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 longer rectangular blocks — a fundamental principle of geometry. Boys tend to gravitate to the block corner more than girls do. To help interest girls, some teachers have found it helpful to place dollhouse furniture in the block corner, because girls like to play house with the buildings that 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 and a 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 Lilian Katz, Ph.D., codirector 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 apparatus, tricycles, or other riding toys) and space

for the kids to play actively indoors. “Three- and 4-year-olds are still developing their coordination, and need a chance to practice their basic physical skills,” Dr. Katz says.

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 says. 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,” says Dr. Katz, “and to know that there’s something they can come back to and explore the next day.”