

EDUCATION

Choosing the right preschool for your child

BY JENN IACO / PARTNER STORY



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Research shows that preschool influences critical behavior traits such as motivation, self-esteem and sociability.

Many public schools in New Jersey begin at kindergarten. However, there are several compelling reasons why children should be exposed to a classroom and all its academic and social features before then.

Children who turn age 5 - typically by Oct. 1 or 15 of the coming school year - can enroll in kindergarten; most school districts in New Jersey provide at least half-day kindergarten for five-year-old students. For many parents, this is a late start to schooling. Most young children in northern New Jersey attend at least one year of preschool – and some attend for two or three years. As a result, young students are entering kindergarten academically and socially experienced. Parents should consult with their local school district to see if children are required to enter with certain skills, such as basic knowledge of the alphabet or ability to recognize numbers. Put simply, you don't want your child to start kindergarten behind other children – or have to start learning basic skills later than other students.

The co-directors of the National Institute for Early Childhood Education at Rutgers University say that preschool is the most important schooling for a child, and that preschool influences critical behavior traits such as motivation, self-esteem and sociability. In addition, studies by the institute reveal that children who attend preschool show significant gains in learning and development.

Preschool can also lead to the early detection of learning disabilities and other conditions such as autism, which, in turn, can result in beneficial early intervention.

Given the reasons above, many public school and state-funded programs are extending preschool access to more children. But the preschool landscape is still populated primarily by private programs with decades of experience. Most are non-secular independent schools, but there are also church/temple affiliated schools, culturally affiliated schools and cooperatives where parents are required to volunteer at the school a certain number of hours per month.

With such a wide choice of preschools, choosing the right one for your child can be overwhelming. Here are factors to consider:

Before your tour

How old must my child be to attend? It depends on the school. Preschools and daycare centers can be licensed to take children as young as 6 weeks, but some may choose to take only children age 3 and older, once they are fully toilet trained. If your child is not yet toilet trained, this should be the first question you ask the preschool you are considering.

What's the tuition? Tuitions can be more than \$15,000 a year at some preschools. But there are also other options with significantly lower tuitions. As such, check each school's tuition cost. Most preschools offer full-day and half-day tuitions and can be flexible on the number of days each week the child attends. Financial aid may also be available.

Also, research what the tuition includes and if any additional charges will be imposed during the school year. Some preschools include lunch in the tuition cost. Other schools may charge a fee to provide lunch or require families to provide lunch. Parents Gary and MaryAnn DeStefano appreciate that lunch is included with their preschool tuition at Jenn's Junction in North Haledon. "Making lunch is one less task I have to worry about and we get out the door more quickly in the mornings," MaryAnn says. When they first enrolled in 2013, daughter Gia was already toilet trained, but son, Rocco, was still in diapers. The DeStefanos liked that diapers were included in the cost of tuition.

Many preschools also offer special classes such as music, dance and art. Some charge parents an additional fee since professional instructors are brought in to teach these lessons. A preschool with a lower tuition may - after accounting for additional fees - cost more than a school with a higher tuition.

During your tour

What's the school's curriculum and how does the school measure a child's progress? Most preschools expose children to academics through an early education curriculum specifically designed for little learners to become familiar with the alphabet, colors, numbers and sight words. For Elisa Djecki and her husband, George, curriculum was an important consideration when choosing to send their children to

Jenn's Junction. Their daughter, Nicoletta, learned to recognize and write letters and read from an age-appropriate book. "When Nicki started kindergarten this past September, she was not only academically prepared, but confident and enthusiastic," Elisa says. Their son, Leo, is still in preschool, and the couple is kept posted on his progress with assessment reports sent home three times a year. These reports measure social and emotional development; physical development, such as how well a child holds a pencil, uses a pair of scissors, and follows a daily routine; and academic and creative development.

What is the daily routine? An established routine provides comfort and reassurance for children. From years of experience, instructors at Jenn's Junction have learned that children separate from their parents more easily at morning drop-off if the children see a familiar toy or activity waiting for them in their classroom. Parents should make sure the school's daily routine is fairly consistent and that children have a wide range of activities during the day. These activities may include circle time, where children hear a story, discuss the weather, and sing a song; an arts and craft project; a special class such as dance or music; an academic component that features writing, math, science, etc.; and free play both inside and outside on a playground. As a licensed preschool, Jenn's Junction students spend 90 minutes a day playing outside, weather permitting.

Is the school licensed as a preschool? To call themselves a preschool, institutions in the state of New Jersey must be licensed. The many requirements for licensure, including student-teacher ratio, staff credentials and physical facility, are to ensure the quality of education and well-being of your child. For example, as part of its licensing requirements, teachers at Jenn's Junction earn at least 20 continuing education credits each year by taking courses on topics such as classroom management, the handling of daily transitions (moving children from one activity to another) quickly and easily, and ways to control tantrums. The courses provide practical lessons these teachers can apply to their specific classroom situations.

What are the teacher's qualifications? In New Jersey, not all preschool teachers, even at licensed schools, must have a college degree in early childhood education. In fact, in some circumstances, the teachers

don't have to have a college degree at all. So, the qualifications for teachers are generally determined by the individual preschool. Ask the school for the qualifications of its teachers.

What feedback will the school provide? Parents want to know how their child is doing. Ask schools how often and what they will communicate to you. At Jenn's Junction, parents receive a daily sheet each time they pick up their children. The sheet details indoor and outdoor activities, what the children ate and how they napped. A monthly calendar given to parents also lists birthdays, when special classes such as Spanish, Zumba and music will take place, and any special events scheduled for the month. Preschools also have accident reports that parents must sign if a child gets hurt, and incident reports that detail if a child misbehaves.

Despite all these communication tools, busy parents sometimes forget to put their children in pajamas for pajama day or forget to send in an item for show and tell - and they are disappointed with themselves for the oversight. Jenn's Junction created an app for its parents that, among other things, will send out timely reminders to help them keep track of their children's schedule.

How do you feel when you walk in the door? Parents seek a warm, caring and safe environment for their preschoolers. Were you able to walk right in or did you have to ring a bell and get through a security system? What other security measures are in place? Is there a mix of teacher-supervised and self-directed activities? Is there an open floor plan with low tables, chairs and shelves? Do children have open access to creative toys? Check to see if tables, floors and bathrooms are clean; if electrical outlets are covered, and paints and cleaning supplies are stored safely.

Meet the faculty and staff. During your visit, meet with the school's director and observe several teachers, especially the ones who may be caring for your child's age group. Are they friendly, articulate and inviting? Ask how long they have been with the preschool and what has prepared them to lead the school or classroom. Julie and Leo Cammarota chose Jenn's Junction based on such meetings, even before their daughter Lia was born. "We walked in, had a few conversations, and we

just knew our baby would be loved,” Julie says. Leo added, “Now Lia is starting to walk and play with the other children, and we have peace of mind knowing she is safe and happy. Julie wouldn’t leave her otherwise.”

After the tour

Can your child try the preschool on for size? If you have narrowed your search down to two or three schools and still can’t decide, ask the preschools if your child can attend one morning for a few hours. But remember that some children need a few days or even weeks to get comfortable and make the transition from home to school. A decision about a preschool does not have to be permanent if you realize after a few weeks that it's not a perfect fit.

Can you peek in on a classroom at any time? For the most part, preschools have an open door policy for parents, meaning you do not have to announce that you will be visiting. You should also be able to peek in on your child’s classroom without the teachers or children knowing you are watching. Parents at Jenn's Junction, for instance, can sit in the office and watch their child’s classroom on a closed circuit security monitor. (Parents cannot watch the school remotely from their smart phone or computer because the school's administrators believe it would compromise children’s safety and the school’s security.)

A wise choice

A preschool is not only an extension of your loving, nurturing home, it is a place to help your child develop a lifelong love for learning. A preschool can put your child on the path to succeed socially, emotionally and academically.

Jenn Iaco is owner and director of Jenn’s Junction, a preschool in North Haledon. For more information, call 973--519-0512 or visit www.jennsjunction.com.