

By Melissa Taylor

Pick a Preschool

A Parent's Guide to Preschool Philosophies

Choosing a high-quality preschool requires dedication and intention – and, yes, preschool choice matters. According to the U.S. Department of Education, “children in high-quality preschools display better language, cognitive and social skills than children who attend low-quality programs.” The National Institute for

Early Education Research (www.nieer.org) adds that “the majority of preschool programs in the United States are not judged as good, with many rated far below that.”

No pressure.

So, how do you choose a preschool? And what are the different philosophies?

Play-based Preschools

Purposeful dramatic play, developmentally appropriate, social, individualized

Play-based preschools use “intentional make-believe play with role-play scenarios where children interact with each other,” says psychologist Elena Bodrova of Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL.) “There are multiple benefits of this type of supported play – improved language and imagination as well as self-regulation.”

Play-based preschools fall into three categories, according to Bodrova, “(1)A free for all, (2)actual academic activities made into drills, or the recommended, (3)intentional make-believe play where children interact with each other.” Bodrova elaborates, “If you see a kitchen [set-up] in September and it’s still a kitchen in May, you aren’t going to get intentional, make believe play. You want to see a rocket ship one month and a castle the next.” By changing the theme and props, the preschool chooses purposeful play for learning.

Best for:

Play-based learning is “best for all children,” according to McREL researcher Cynthia Bjork. “Research shows that a lack of play is detrimental. Learning through play is most natural for children.”

Montessori Preschools

Individual learning, multi-age classrooms, work activities

Montessori schools developed from the theories of educator, Maria Montessori, a 1900s Italian educator who used open-ended learning opportunities based on children’s interests. Carrie Olesen, executive director of Hope Montessori Academies in Colorado Springs elaborates, “Montessori educates the whole child in their social, emotional and cognitive development. It’s hands-on learning. Children are able to learn at their own level, at their own pace, as opposed to being teacher-directed. Children are able to use their senses in their learning, that’s how kids learn.” In the classroom, kids have a lot of responsibility. Walk into a Montessori classroom and you’ll find it quiet and controlled. Most likely, kids will be seated at tables, independently doing “work” they’ve selected.

Best for:

Montessori is best for independent learners. Olesen says, “We really believe that Montessori preschools are good for all children because they’re able to learn at their own pace.”

Reggio Emilia Preschools

Project based, student directed, group learning, less structured

Reggio Emilia developed in an Italian town in the 1940s. Robin Henzler, director of Children’s Garden of Learning in Vail explains that, “the Reggio Emilia approach is based on child-centered learning, creativity, collaboration, documentation and working in partnership with parents. The learning opportunities help the children to develop strong thinking skills through many different kinds of expressive, communicative and cognitive experiences.” Like Montessori, students choose their learning activities but differ as teachers work with students to plan long-term projects. Projects might include topics such as classroom pets, the study of bones or water.

Best for:

“Our environment for the child is more open ended,” says Henzler, “if a parent feels that their child would benefit from a more structured environment, then the Reggio approach may not be the best choice.”



Waldorf Preschools

Group oriented, culturally rich, structured, natural materials

In a Waldorf preschool, children work in groups and learn through imitation, repetition, and creative play with non-plastic materials. Leigh Rhysling, of the Denver Waldorf School explains, "We call it 'doing life'. We incorporate a strong rhythm through the day so children know what comes next. Waldorf is a warm nurturing environment with everything at a developmentally appropriate level. We tell incredibly rich folk and fairy tales which develop children's capacity for memorization and language." Academic subjects like reading, writing and math are purposefully delayed in favor of the arts, music and make-believe.

Best for:

Waldorf is best for children who enjoy group work and prefer a creative, natural environment. Rhysling says, "Waldorf meets the needs of the vast majority of children out there."

Co-op Preschools

Less expensive, heavy parent involvement, close community

According to Dena Ballagh, president of First United Methodist Church Co-Op Preschool in Fort Collins, "a cooperative preschool is one where parents and teachers share the responsibilities. Teachers are responsible for the educational program and professional standing of the school, while parents interact with the children in the classroom as parent helpers." She adds, "The school is managed by a parent-run Board of Directors." The cooperative preschool can subscribe to any of the before mentioned preschool philosophies such as Play-based, Montessori, and so forth.

Best for:

A co-op preschool works best "for a family that wants to be involved in their child's education," says Ballagh. And, families on a budget.

British Primary Preschools

Independent learning, choices, experiential, play focused

Paddington Station, a British Primary preschool, bases their program on the work of "Frederick Froebel and Jean Piaget, internationally renowned education philosophers." A small group of children, may work on an activity with a teacher while other children work around the room at other activities in pairs or alone. British Primary emphasizes learning through play and experiences in multi-aged classrooms. Ann Solomon, director of Paddington Station, says, "We teach children to make good and appropriate choices and to develop a lifelong love of learning."

Best for:

British Primary works for children who like to make choices, learn from experiences and work independently.

Helpful Online Resources:

- **National Institute for Early Education Research** <http://nieer.org/>
- **Colorado Parent Information and Resource Center** <http://www.cpirc.org/>
- **The National Association for Education of Young Children** <http://www.naeyc.org/>
- **The Colorado Association for the Education of Young Children** <http://www.coloradoaeyc.org/>

**Preschool enrollment typically begins in the winter. Do your research early.*





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Early Learning

Interviewing Potential Preschools

It's challenging to decide which preschool is right for your child. With a little research you can narrow down the choices. Here are some questions and suggestions to help out in evaluating the preschools you are considering.

Name of Preschool: _____

Philosophy / Method: _____

Interview Questions

1. Are you NAEYC accredited? (National Association for the Education of Young Children) www.naeyc.org
2. What credentials and training do your teachers have?
3. What is the average length of time a teacher works at this preschool?
4. What is the teacher/child ratio?
5. What are the schedule options?
6. What is the price?
7. How are the students grouped? (age, multi-age)
8. How do you handle discipline?
9. How are children rewarded? (Do you use candy?)
10. If you provide food, what?
11. How do you handle food allergies?
12. What is your sick child policy and how do you enforce it?
13. Do children need to be potty trained?
14. How often are toys cleaned?
15. Do you offer extra activities like music or gymnastics?
16. Are parents welcome to visit?

Observation Checklist

The best way to select a preschool is to see it for yourself. Here are some things to look for.

- What is the real teacher/child ratio? (Is the second adult really with the children?)
- Do the teachers treat children with kindness and respect?
- Do teachers speak to children at their eye level?
- Are the toys clean and age appropriate?
- Are the activities engaging and age appropriate?
- Are the rooms clean and appealing?
- Are bathrooms clean and easy to access?
- Is the art mostly teacher-created or student-created?
- Do the children seem happy, cared for and engaged?
- How does your child react to the preschool? Does she or he seem happy or distressed?

Preschool matters. No matter what preschool program you choose, you'll want one that fits your child and is of high quality. Do your homework, know your child, and trust your intuition. Don't worry, you know more than you think.

Melissa Taylor has an M.A. in Global Education, over ten years of teaching experience and literacy training. She freelance writes, enjoys parenting her two children and loves living in Colorado. www.melissatayloronline.com.



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