

Choosing a Preschool, a School, Summer Camp or other Activities

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We are blessed with a wide array of fabulous educational and recreational activities for our kids. How do you begin to choose which ones to attend? The questions here are primarily geared toward drop-off programs that provide a combination of child care and education (like preschool, school, or summer camps) but some also apply when choosing extra-curriculars like dance class, piano lessons, soccer teams, and so on.

Step 1 – What do you need? Think about your concrete needs / basic logistics

Before you start looking at options, think about your “must haves”. Start with these, because otherwise you might fall in love with a program and *then* discover that you can’t make the logistics work. (Or, you might enroll in a great program, then decide the commute is intolerable.)

- Location: How far are you willing to drive? How far is your child willing to be driven? What will you be doing while your child is at the activity, and would it be convenient to get back and forth in the time your child is there? Is the location convenient for other family members if they need to pick up?
- Child care or enrichment: Do you need your child to be cared for several hours a week while you work? If so, you need something that offers this sort of drop-off program, at a rate you can afford. If you are primarily a stay at home parent, you may only need a few hours of child-free time a week, and may be looking for a very part-time program for enrichment. (Coop preschools, parent-child classes, or programs offered by parks departments are often a good match for these needs.)
- Schedule: What do you need/ want?
 - How many days a week? Do you have specific days of the week you can or can’t do?
 - Number of hours per day? Extended care? What time is the earliest you could be there?
- Cost: What’s manageable? Cost ranges hugely. The programs that are the easiest to find out about have spent the most on marketing, and are pricey. Ask around to learn about other cheaper options.
- Parent Involvement: Do you want to volunteer in the classroom? Would you want to visit your child during the class day? Do you want communication from the program about your child’s day?

Step 2 – What do you want? What are your goals for enrolling your child in a program?

Before you start asking for recommendations or before you start looking at programs just because someone else said they were great, spend time thinking about your goals. What do you hope your child will get out of the experience? In what areas does your child most need to grow? What are the things you feel least confident providing at home? What do you think will engage your child the most?

What do *you* want to get out of it? Do you want to meet other parents? Choose a co-op. Want to learn more about parenting? Choose a program with a parent ed component. Want a few hours when you’re not responsible for your child so you can relax? Choose a drop-off program that has activities you enjoy nearby.

Step 3 – What are your options? Learn about what programs are available

Get familiar with available options: look at parenting magazines or newspapers. Do web searches. Go to preschool fairs and camp fairs. Ask friends, families, co-workers and other parents for recommendations. If they say they LOVE a program, ask why! It could be that something they love would totally turn you off.

Once you’ve got a list of options, do more research. Read the programs’ websites in detail. Call to ask specific questions. Go to open houses or to observe a class, if possible.

Step 4 – Which one will you choose? Questions to Research

What do they teach? What would your child learn there?

What is the daily schedule? How is time divided between activities? Play time? Quiet time? Outdoors? Snack? Young children have short attention spans for structured activity, so it's best in short doses, with plenty of unstructured time in between to explore and discover.

How do they teach it?

A couple big picture ideas: A *teacher-led curriculum* means the teacher always prepares the lessons in advance (and may use a standardized curriculum) and sticks to them. A *child-led curriculum* (a.k.a. emergent or constructivist) follows the children's interests and adapts to what the children want to do.

A *structured* class might use group time, worksheets, and formal instruction to teach particular skills. Students may be drilled in the basics, or asked to practice things over and over. A *play-based* class typically has multiple stations set up and allows children to move between things when they choose. The teacher moves around the room, making suggestions and observations to further the learning.

Who are the students?

- How many students? The number of kids matters as much as student to teacher ratio. A 12 student school with 2 teachers (6:1 ratio) feels very different from a 24 student school with 4 teachers (6:1).
- What is the age range of the class? Some parents prefer that all the kids be as close as possible in age, but many schools tout the benefits of multi-age classrooms. The oldest kids have a chance to lead and mentor, and the younger ones benefit by the presence of an older role model.
- What are the cut-off dates for age? Your child may do best if you choose a program where they are right in the middle of the age range rather than youngest or oldest.

Who are the teachers?

- Training. Do the teachers have degrees in early childhood education? Do they attend continuing education opportunities? Do they read books about child development in their off hours?
- Teachers should have CPR and first aid training. There should be emergency plans for the facility.
- Longevity / turnover. As a general rule, the longer the teachers have been there the better.
- Do they enjoy kids? Do they sit on the floor with the kids, smile, and engage with them? Or are they standing on the edges talking to other adults, occasionally calling out instructions to a child?
- How do they handle discipline? What are their rules and how do they reinforce them?

What is the learning environment like?

- Is the environment clean? Safe?
- Is there a wide range of toys and supplies? Are materials in good condition?
- Outdoors space: Do they have a place to play outdoors? How often do they use it?
- Vibe: The most important thing you're "looking" for is something you can't see. How does it *feel*? Is it warm, nurturing, full of exciting learning experiences, and full of happy children and teachers? Or is it cold, institutional, uninvolved? We know from the science of brain development that children learn best when they feel safe and are happy, so look for a place where they will be happy and engaged. Look for a place where you would feel great every time you drop them off to spend time there.