

Getting the Most for Your Preschooler

No parent says, “Oh, mediocre is okay for my child. Please do things halfway; it doesn’t matter.” Parents want the best for their children. This is not a matter of spending the most money on education or buying the latest great educational toy. It is a matter of spending time with your child and expending effort to maximize what he or she is being provided by the school, by the community, and at home.

Getting the Most from Your Preschool

You wouldn’t think twice about getting the most bang for your buck from a hotel, your gym, or a restaurant, and you shouldn’t think twice about getting the most from your child’s preschool.

Public Preschools

“What?” you say? Public preschools? Yes, it’s a new day, and there are public preschools and established preschool learning goals for sixteen states and counting. If your state has public preschools, then you are in luck—financially and educationally. In these states, preschools fall under the leadership of your State Department of Education. (You

can find a complete list of states with public preschools at www.knowledgeessentials.com.) This means they are subject to the same regulations and standards that your public schools are and that your area's preschools are poised to prepare your child for kindergarten.

To further your child's educational experience, you will have the opportunity to meet and work with:

- School personnel: your child's teacher, teacher's aides, specialists, the school counselor, the administrator or principal, and others
- Parents of children from your child's class, school volunteers, and parent-teacher organizations

Your participation in your child's education is paramount to his or her success. Active participation doesn't mean that you have to spend hours at the school as a volunteer, but it does include reading all the communications your school sends either to you directly or home with your child. Also, read the school handbook and drop by your child's school on a regular basis if possible. If you can't stop by, check out the school or class Web site to see what units are being covered, any upcoming events, and so on. Participation means attending school events when you can, going to class parties when possible, and going to parent-teacher conferences. If they are scheduled at a time when you are not available, request a different time. The school administrator or principal usually requires that teachers try to accommodate your schedule.

The single most important thing you can do to get the most out of your local school system is to talk to your child's teacher. Find out what curricula your child will be covering and how you can help facilitate learning. Does the teacher see specific strengths and weaknesses that you can help enhance or bring up to speed? The teacher can help you identify your child's learning style, social skills, problem-solving abilities, and coping mechanisms.

Teachers play a role that extends outside the classroom. Your child's teacher is the perfect person to recommend systemwide and community resources. Teachers know how to find local playgroups, good summer programs, and community resources. You've heard of Spanish immersion classes for preschoolers but don't know where to find them? Ask your child's preschool teacher. Art classes for the very young? Same thing. Teachers are truly partners in your child's upbringing.

No matter what, active participation and communication with your child's school is essential. It empowers you to:

- Accurately monitor your child's progress
- Determine which optional activities would enrich your child's learning experience
- Prepare your child for upcoming events, curricula, and skill introduction
- Participate in and add to the school learning environment
- Create a complementary learning environment in your home
- Spend time with your child

And just a word about the school secretary: this person knows more about what is going on in that building than anyone else. When I was a teacher, the school secretary always added to my success and that of my students. The secretary is a taskmaster, nurse, mom or dad, and generally just a comforting figure in what can sometimes be a really big building. The school secretary always knows what forms to fill out, which teacher is where, what students are absent and why, when the next school event is, and how much candy money you owe for the latest fund-raiser. He or she is a source of lunch money, milk money, extra pencils, and access to the copy machine. Get to know and love your school secretary.

Private Preschools

The first thing you need to do is be a smart consumer: choose your child's preschool with the same care you would use in making any major purchase. Here are some tips:

- Start early! It may take longer than you think. You wouldn't want to end up putting your child in a preschool that is just okay, or with plans to move your child to another facility when you "find a better one." Your child will make friends, bond with the teacher, and generally settle into his new routine. Don't diminish his progress by moving him from preschool to preschool.
- Research! Start finding out as much as you can about the preschools in your area as soon as possible.
- Talk to other parents to see what preschool their children attend and if they are happy with the service and education their children receive.
- Visit a handful of preschools on your short list and compare their environments.

What to Look For in a Preschool

One of the best things you can do when choosing a preschool is to make on-site visits. You can observe firsthand how the children interact with their teachers and classmates while seeing what the setup is inside the classroom. Ask questions and find out all the information you can about the preschool. Even if it seems like the perfect school, you may discover something that could change your mind. For example, maybe there are too many children in each classroom, or maybe your preschooler has to be 100 percent potty trained. Also keep in mind that preschool tuition can vary drastically. This information could quickly change your options. The best thing to do is to make an initial visit to the school without your child and have a list of questions

you plan to ask. If you like the preschool and believe it will meet your family's needs, take your child for a visit. Make sure to watch your child and note her reaction to the school. Her reaction may be just as big of a deciding factor as class size or tuition. Before you come to a final decision, make sure you have spoken with both the teachers and the director of the school and that all your questions have been adequately answered.

Here is a list of questions you may want to ask:

What is the tuition?

What about the curriculum? How is it taught? Is the school accredited? Is there a religious affiliation?

How long have the teachers taught at the school? What is their education level? What is the turnover rate? (You don't want your child to have three different preschool teachers in one year.)

Does the building have security? How old is the building, and what kind of shape is it in?

Is there a playground outside? Is there a play area inside?

Will your child only have one teacher? Will he be in one classroom for the entire school day, or is there more than one class?

What is the student–teacher ratio?

How many children will be in one class?

Does each teacher have a teacher's aide?

Is there a school policy manual you can view?

What is the “sick child” policy?

What does the school do about discipline?

Is the program a half day or full day?

Are you responsible for providing your child's lunch and snacks?

What are the toilet training policies?

Are the classrooms child-friendly and well kept?

Are there toys and books for the children?

Will there be any music or art programs?

Will there be any field trips, and if so, what safety policies are in place?

What is the age range of the children in the school? Will your child ever be around older children?

This is just a sampling of the questions you may have about preschools. Remember, not all preschools will be accredited, and not all will have teachers who have a formal education. The importance of these issues is something you will need to decide for yourself and your child. Sometimes a school's reputation may outweigh its credentials, or vice versa. Just because a school has been highly recommended to you or is where your child's friends are going does not mean that the school is right for your child. Because this is your child's first experience with school, it is important that you feel comfortable with your choice and know that your child will be well cared for. You should never choose a preschool based on someone else's opinion—always check it out for yourself!

On a micro level, participating in your child's education if he attends a private school isn't much different from participating if he attends a public school. Private schools have access to the same community resources. If you have a child with special needs, the private school should work with the local education agencies to see that your child gets the appropriate services.

Through active communication and participation, you will derive the same benefits as parents whose children attend public school.

On a macro level, private schools are different from public schools. Private schools are governed not by a school board but by an internal system. This can be both easier and harder to navigate. Dealing with private schools is easier because the schools realize that you are paying

tuition every month, and they want to please their customers. Dealing with private schools is harder because they aren't accountable to the community for their actions, nor are they governed by the same due processes as the public school system. Check out the school's administration hierarchy to see how decisions are made and what roles have been created for parent governance. Also, get to know the school's secretary.

For you to really be on top of things, it's a good idea to print a copy of your state's learning standards (see chapter 4) and familiarize yourself with the topics and skills that your state thinks preschoolers should learn. You can find a copy at www.knowledgeessentials.com. Compare the standards to those of your private school's preschool curriculum. If the curriculum is drastically different from the required state learning standards, your child will have difficulty passing the required state assessments. If your child's curriculum meets and exceeds the standards, your child will be well served by that school.

Private schools have the flexibility to incorporate religious elements or varied teaching philosophies that public schools can't provide. They are not subject to requirements regarding the separation of church and state. Private schools operate without depending on community support (such as bond proposals); so as long as their tuition-paying constituency approves of their methods and the students who graduate from the programs demonstrate success, private schools can implement teaching methods at will that fall out of the mainstream.

Getting the Most from Your Homeschool Curriculum

You are homeschooling your child because you want more control over what and how your child learns and the environment in which she learns it. That is admirable, but don't be fooled. To a large extent, your child's natural ability to learn certain things at certain times will

dictate the way you should approach any homeschool curriculum (chapters 2 and 3 explain this more fully). The best thing you can do when starting to homeschool your child is to look at books on child development. Start with these:

- *Children's Strategies: Contemporary Views of Cognitive Development*, edited by David F. Bjorklund. Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum Associates, 1990.
- *Piaget's Theory: Prospects and Possibilities*, edited by Harry Beilin. Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum Associates, 1992.
- *Instructional Theories in Action: Lessons Illustrating Selected Theories and Models*, edited by Charles M. Reigeluth. Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum Associates, 1987.
- *All Our Children Learning*, Benjamin S. Bloom. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981.

You don't have to homeschool your child all by yourself or by limiting yourself to the materials of a particular homeschool organization. Each state has some form of regional education system with centers open to the public. At your public school system's curriculum resource center, you can check out curriculum materials and supplemental materials. Most of these centers have a workroom with things like a die press that cuts out letters and various shapes, from squares to animals to holiday items. Regional education centers often provide continuing education for teachers, so they usually have some training materials on hand. Look for information about your regional center on the Web site of your State Department of Education. You can find a link to your State Department of Education at www.knowledgeessentials.com.

You can purchase homeschool curriculum kits designed to provide your child with a lion's share of the materials needed to complete a grade level—even for preschool. You can also buy curricula that are subject area specific. It is important to ask the company that sells the curricula to correlate the materials with your state's learning standards

so that you can see which standards you need to reinforce with additional activities. You can find the companies that sell these kits at www.knowledgeessentials.com.

Using Supplemental Materials

You cannot expect any single curriculum in any public school, private school, or homeschool to meet all the learning standards for the grade level and subject area in your state. Many will meet 90 percent of the standards, and some will meet 75 percent, which is why there are supplemental materials. Schools use them, and so should you. They are simply extra materials that help your child learn more. Examples of these materials include:

- *Trade books.* These are just books that are not textbooks or workbooks—in other words, they’re the kinds of books, fiction and nonfiction, that you would check out at the library or that your child would choose at a bookstore. Trade books don’t have to tell about many things in a limited number of pages, so they can tell a lot more about a single topic than a textbook can. They give your child a chance to practice skills that he or she is learning. If you choose wisely, you can find books that enhance reading readiness skills, such as retelling based on pictures, repetitive text, and rhyming. Sometimes these skills will be set in the context of newly learned social studies or science topics, such as real or make-believe animals; snowy, rainy, or sunny days; or families. Many companies provide these types of books for sale, but the most recognizable one may be Scholastic, Inc. Appendix A lists some books that are really good for preschoolers.
- *Software and the Internet.* Schools choose electronic activities and content, such as educational software and Internet sites, and electronic components, such as Leapfrog’s LeapMat, allowing your child to expand his content knowledge while implementing skills

just learned. Supplementing what your child is learning at school with these resources helps him gain technology skills within a familiar context. If you choose wisely, such as by starting with the software choices listed in appendix B of this book, you can sometimes enhance pre-reading skills and/or supplement a social studies or science topic while your child learns to operate a computer—talk about bang for your buck.

- *Other materials.* Videos, photographs, audio recordings—just about anything you can find that helps expand what your child is learning is a supplemental resource. Loosely defined, supplemental resources can include a wide array of materials; your newly trained eye is limited only to what you know is appropriate for your child.

Now you know what we need to cover, so let's get to it.