

Choosing A Preschool Program

Listed below are several articles that describe some of the considerations involved in choosing a preschool program that will best meet the needs of your child and your family. These articles are provided for informational purposes only and do not imply the support of the Beacon City School District for any position, opinion, or philosophy stated within the article.

Base preschool choice on what your child needs

By DIANA BELLETTIERI - THE JOURNAL NEWS - (Original publication: May 9, 2005)

As preschool directors tout their various teaching philosophies, selecting a program for your precious tyke may seem as overwhelming as applying to college.

While some local districts have eased the stress by introducing universal preschool programs, many families must still make the choice on their own.

Today, we look at four preschool programs that cater to diverse needs. Last week, we explored three big-name philosophies: Waldorf, Montessori and Bank Street.

Neighborhood day care

Preschools licensed to provide day care are attractive to many working families. Whereas unlicensed preschools cannot keep children for more than three hours, day-care preschools will watch children for more than 10 hours.

The Kiwi School in Mahopac is a preschool and kindergarten program with the option of extended day care. Parents can drop their children off at 7:30 a.m. and pick them up at 6 p.m., if necessary. Most children, however, attend either a three-hour or a seven-hour session.

On a rainy afternoon at The Kiwi School, a class of 4-year-olds took turns cradling baby chicks, playing with puzzles and eating doughnut holes.

At 4 p.m., Maureen Toohey arrived to pick up her 4-year-old daughter, Julia. Despite having been dropped off at 9 a.m., Julia didn't want to go home. She was too busy tending to the flower she had planted.

"It takes me a half-hour to get her out of here," said Toohey, 39, a single mother from Mahopac who works as a hairstylist. "It's great to know that while I'm at work, she wants to be here, she's safe and she's happy."

Tuition ranges from about \$2,580 to \$6,000 per school year.

Cooperative preschool

Cooperative preschool programs are based on the idea that a parent is the most important teacher in a child's life. In a cooperative program, parents actively participate in the classroom under the daily guidance of a head teacher.

Ramapo Community Nursery School in New City was one of the first cooperative programs in Rockland County. Founded in 1956, the program has expanded to include 2-, 3- and 4-year-old classes.

Jill Halpern, whose 5-year-old son, Eric, attends RCNS, praised the program for preparing him for kindergarten, boosting her confidence as a parent and uniting the school community.

"You're immersing yourself in preschoolers and the joy they're getting from being together, learning and growing," said Halpern, 38, a stay-at-home mother from New City. "I think it makes the child value their education more because the parent wants to be so closely connected."

Tuition is \$129 to \$205 a month, and there is a \$20 application fee.

Special education

The best preschool program for a developmentally disabled child is often determined by the severity of the disability. Based upon the findings of their local school district, parents may enroll their child in assisted classes and seek additional services in their home.

At the Children's School for Early Development in Hawthorne, eight autistic children sat in a semicircle with their personal aides. One by one, each child went to the center of the circle, ran his fingers over the letters of his name and rejoiced at the accomplishment.

"It may not be a big deal to some, but it is to us," said Kim Johnson, 37, an administrative assistant from Peekskill whose son Kyler is in the class. "When you have a child, you hope they'll be an average child. ... But Kyler has a lot of needs."

The Children's School works to satisfy each child's needs through a combination of individualized and group instruction. Teachers are trained in applied behavior analysis and verbal behavior, which focus on small, measurable units of instruction such as pairing and complying with verbal directions. Data pertaining to each child's goals are collected and analyzed daily.

For children who qualify for special education but whose needs are less severe, The Children's School has developed classes in which developmentally disabled children learn and play alongside typically developing children. In these classes, the disabled children continue to receive their special services.

The Children's School for Early Development is funded through the New York state Department of Education and the County Department of Health. There is no charge to families.

Religion-based preschool

Regardless of the religion, parents and educators said religious preschool offered all the traditional learning and playing opportunities plus lessons of respect, love and faith that are essential to a strong moral grounding.

At St. Catharine of Alexandria School in Blauvelt, prayers are said in the morning and then again at lunch. Teacher Barbara Feeney said the prayers are very simply stated, yet nevertheless set the foundation for an appreciation of God's presence.

"It's really important today to have that kind of a foundation and to know that God is always with them," Feeney said. "I think that gives them a real sense of security."

Nancy Quirk, whose 5-year-old twins attend St. Catharine, said Feeney's ways of introducing God to the children is "ingenious."

"It gives them the beginnings of religious beliefs in a way that's hard for us, as parents, to bring it down to that level," said Quirk, 42, an IBM project manager from Blauvelt. "It's not the school's responsibility to teach religion, but it gives a good introduction."

Tuition ranges from \$2,025 to \$4,600 per school year and there is a \$75 registration fee.

The ABCs of choosing a preschool

Educators and local parents say:

- Ask whether the school is licensed.
 - Do your homework. Learn everything you can about the school's philosophy and policies.
 - Check the teacher-child ratio. For 3-year-olds, there should be no more than five children to a teacher; for 4-year-olds, eight children to a teacher; for 5-year-olds, no more than 15 children to a teacher.
 - Ask teachers how they deal with conflicts between children.
 - Consider your child's needs. Does he do best in small or large settings? How does she deal with separation? Is he potty trained? Does she need extra attention?
 - Think about your family's needs. Do you need a half-, full- or extended-day program? Do you want to be involved? How much money are you willing to spend? How far are you willing to travel?
 - Be prepared for a quiz. How would you describe your child during an interview?
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How to choose a preschool

To find a preschool that will work for your child and you, educators and local parents suggest:

- Get recommendations from friends.
- Visit. Go at different times or stay through full sessions.
- Learn about the various school philosophies and decide which is right for your family.
- Decide how much you can afford, and to what extent you want to be involved. Some schools are co-op in style, meaning you can reduce the bill by giving some of your time in the classroom.
- Use your eyes. Is the facility pleasant and comfortable for children? Are the children interacting well with one another and the teachers? What classroom materials are available, and what shape are they in?
- Use your ears. You want to hear children at work or play rather than loud music, loud voices and arguing.
- Use your personal antennae. There should be a feeling of calm and safety.

Big names still a draw for nursery school

By MERYL HYMAN HARRIS - THE JOURNAL NEWS - (Original publication: May 2, 2005)

The selection of a nursery school can be as personal as finding a spouse, requiring of parents and teachers respect, dedication, common goals and an agreement to work together. A little love doesn't hurt, either.

Although universal preschool is being started in some local districts, many families still go the traditional route.

Today and next Monday we'll look at various methods in private nursery schooling. Today we explore three of the big-name approaches: Waldorf, Montessori, and Bank Street.

Waldorf

Based on the work of Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), the Waldorf philosophy is that the work of a young child is to play, and that early learning frequently takes the form of imitation.

Waldorf emphasizes the arts. It is nonreligious but based on the belief that life has a spiritual dimension. To keep the imagination unspoiled and promote independent thinking, families are asked to limit television, movies and computers. A typical day might involve a teacher baking bread while young children pretend to do the same thing, learning about measurement, heat, nutrition and chemistry through experience.

Last week the children at Green Meadow Waldorf School in Chestnut Ridge wanted to make sailboats to float in a nearby stream, and so sawed, drilled, sanded and filed. Another group made crowns for May Day celebration. "Children at play are really trying out the world in all aspects," said teacher Leslie Burchell-Fox.

"What sold us on this school was the parents' commitment, and the teachers' commitment to the students," said parent Bernard Weintraub. "They think about your child so intensely and personally..." Tuition for a full-day school year is about \$9,600.

Montessori

Maria Montessori (1870-1952) approached schooling based on her observation that children learn in their own ways, at different speeds. She developed learning materials made of beads, wood, sandpaper and fabric for "self-correcting" projects requiring minimal input, or interruption, from a teacher. Given 15 wooden rods and a box divided into five numbered sections, for example, a child places one rod in the first section, two in the second and so forth and if left with an extra rod or is short by one or two at the fifth section, can go back and learn where the mistake was made.

The youngest students begin to learn practical skills by tying and buttoning on special boards at child-size tables and chairs. Children may select which projects they want to do each day, move on to more difficult tasks, and frequently help one another.

"The child is never asked to do something he's already mastered, never asked to do something for which he is not ready, and so is never bored and never frustrated," said Werner Hengst, who with his wife, Betty, in 1972 founded Our Montessori School in Yorktown Heights, which has five locations stretching to the sixth grade.

"The net result is the children get an image of themselves of being capable, not afraid to try something new, and that self-confidence becomes part of their personality," he said.

In an Our Montessori class for 3- to 5-year-olds last week, children could be seen writing numbers, sorting and playing with blocks.

The older children take pride in helping the younger ones, and students should of necessity deal with one another with respect, as Liala Sardo discovered when she sent her son Andrew to Our Montessori in Carmel.

"He's a little shy and timid and afraid to leave me, and I was worried about his socialization. I'm so happy he's there. He's solidified friendships."

Sardo plans to send Andrew's little brother to Montessori in the fall, but with another baby on the way and taxes ever increasing, she's not sure she'll reach her goal of sending all her children through Montessori through at least the third grade. A full day of nursery school costs about \$11,600 per school year.

Families interested in Montessori shop around. The name is not a trademark and the schools are not franchises. Different schools practice Montessori-style techniques in different ways, and there is disagreement among practitioners about whose methods are the purest and most effective.

Bank Street

Bank Street College of Education in Manhattan has for 80 years been at the center of what is often termed "child-centered" education. The nearby nursery school most closely identified with the approach is the Early Childhood Center at Sarah Lawrence College in Yonkers, where "we believe that each child is unique, and the programs are developed around their strengths and weaknesses," said Director and Bank Street graduate Lorayne Carbone. "We value deeply the idea of recognizing what is important to each child and family."

Like Montessori, Bank Street advises that all children do not learn in the same way or at the same speed. Although some materials are the same, Bank Street schoolchildren choose how to use them. The school also focuses on dramatic play, in which children have a chance to act out and take on roles.

"I love it," said Barbara Mitchell, an Edgemont speech pathologist whose daughter, Elizabeth, is in the program for 5-year-olds and whose son, Andrew, will start with other 2-year-olds next year. "I know a big focus of the school is to encourage the children to independently problem-solve. It really works," she said. "One time they had a situation where they had these big wooden hollow blocks they were building with, and Elizabeth's building kept falling. The children were frustrated, so the teacher said, 'What can we do to change this?' And they independently came up with plans; then they started drawing plans out like little architects. And some kids said, 'Let's put the bigger ones on the bottom.' It was very dynamic and followed the children's lead. That's what it's all about when you are 4 and 5."

A school year of three-hour, 5-day-a-week preschool is about \$5,000, and tuition assistance is available.
