



PROMOTING CHOICE AND PRESERVING INDEPENDENCE SINCE 1970

What Parents Should Know about Selecting a Preschool

We now know that learning is a seamless process, from the moment of birth to the final moment of life. So the learning community of Hawaii includes preschools and day care centers, elementary, secondary, and post-secondary schools that form a seamless continuum. As a link between these schools, the Hawaii Association of Independent Schools supports quality and accessible early childhood programs.

How do parents go about selecting a preschool/early learning program that is right for their child, one that gives their child the right start? The article, "How Parents Can Identify a High Quality Preschool Program," by Lilian G. Katz, suggests parents should consider four factors:

Characteristics of Your Child:

Some children may be comfortable in large groups, while others need smaller settings. Some children may react positively to situations where multiple activities are going on within one area, while other children may not feel safe in this type of environment and may need more structured activities. Since children have different temperaments and different needs, parents must try to match their child's characteristics with a particular preschool/daycare center's programs.

Characteristics of the Program:

Most preschool directors encourage parents looking for a preschool to come visit. Are the staff and children friendly? Are children absorbed in their work and play? Does the school have a written statement of its philosophy and goals? Does the preschool offer a balance of individual, small-group, and large-group activities as well as spontaneous play and teacher-guided activities? Does the school provide nutritious snacks and meals? Does the staff encourage and respond to children's natural interests in reading, writing, and counting?

Characteristics of the Staff:

Are the teachers trained in early childhood education? Is the staff stable or are there lots of new teachers each year? Are the teachers engaged with the children most of the time? Do the teachers welcome parents, communicate regularly with them, and respect parents' knowledge of their own children?

Characteristics of the Physical Environment:

Is there sufficient space for children to find quiet places in the classrooms? Is there an attractive, spacious outdoor area for safe, vigorous activities? Are children always supervised when outdoors? Is the playground equipment safe, sufficient, and well maintained?

Quality preschools, those that prepare children for a lifetime of learning and successful social interaction with others, accomplish these positive results by providing the following:

- ✓ Qualified teachers/caregivers with specialized training in early childhood education
- ✓ Warm and caring relationships between teachers/caregivers and children
- ✓ A low child to teacher/caregiver ratio
- ✓ Teachers/caregivers who are well prepared and remain with the program over time
- ✓ A program that encourages parent involvement and is linked to comprehensive health and nutritional services

Characteristics of the Staff

Questions to ask about the program staff include:

- ✓ Are the teachers trained in early childhood education?
- ✓ Does the director have experience as a teacher?
- ✓ Does the ratio of adults to children comply with state requirements? (Check with the local branch of the state agency that regulates preschool programs.)
- ✓ Have the staff been stable over the years?
- ✓ Do the staff welcome parents as visitors and participants, communicate regularly with them, and respect their preferences and ideas?
- ✓ In their work with children, do the teachers express warmth, interest, and respect for each child?
- ✓ Are the teachers engaged with the children most of the time?

Characteristics of the Physical Environment

Questions to ask about the physical setting:

- ✓ Is there an attractive, spacious outdoor area for safe, vigorous activities?
- ✓ Is there a sufficient supply of equipment?
- ✓ Are children always supervised when outdoors?
- ✓ Can children find small, quiet places in the classroom if they want to?

Conclusion

Most preschool programs must conform to state regulations and satisfy minimum standards of health and safety. Even so, it is a good idea to ask the staff whether the program is up-to-date with its state license and is accredited. Studies suggest that preschools are more likely to offer high-quality programs when the number of children is small enough to allow the staff to get to know all the children and their families. Whenever possible, it is helpful to speak to other parents who have children in the program about their experiences and recommendations.