

What Is a Quality Preschool Program?

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Increased numbers of working mothers of 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds have created a need for preschools for today's young children and are concerned about the quality of these preschools. As a result, parents are searching for guidelines for selecting a good program for their children, who may require care for 8 or more hours a day. Questions often raised by parents are:

How Do I, as a Parent, Select a Preschool Program?

First of all, trust your intuitions. If you feel a specific program is not right for your preschooler, it may not be. However, here are some basic program components to look for when you visit a school or day care center:

- Teachers are questioning individual children, encouraging them to expand their thinking and problem-solving skills.
- Children are intellectually engaged, eager, and happy; children are not bored, tense, or unhappy. Look at their faces.
- Children are working on individual or collaborative projects; children are not all doing the same project in the same way.
- Children have physical space to experiment and play, and time to be alone; they are not crowded into a confined or restrictive area for long periods of time.
- Children are creating their own writing or dictating their own stories to the teacher; children are not copying or completing a worksheet out of a book.

Should I Send My Child to an Academic Preschool?

Many early childhood programs in the last decade have reflected a concentration on basic academic skills—or the proverbial three R's. The major reason for this academic thrust has been the perceived need to prepare 3- and 4-year-olds for the future demands of kindergarten and first grade. Early childhood literature has characterized this phenomenon as the “push-down effect.”

However, preschool programs are in fact changing. In the last 2 to 3 years (1988-1991), there have been signs of a movement away from the academic, push-down effect to more play-oriented programs. This shift from a strong academic focus to more child-initiated activities has the endorsement of professionals in the early childhood education field, who advocate holistic programs for young children.

What Has Caused This Shift in Preschool Programs?

The early childhood profession is speaking out and being heard. Since the issuance of two professional statements—one by the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) in a 1988 publication, *Right From the Start*, and the other by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), in the 1987 *Developmentally Appropriate Practices in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age Eight*—there has been a renewed interest in and emphasis on the development of the whole child. Activities initiated by children themselves are central to these program goals.

What Are Child-Initiated Activities?

Child-initiated activities offer a wide range of opportunities for children to directly experience and manipulate new ideas and objects. The following are examples of child-initiated goals:

- **Choice making**—The curriculum offers children the opportunity to choose from a variety of activities throughout the day.
- **Creating**—Activities encourage children to create their own ideas for art projects, block constructions, or dance improvisations.
- **Interacting**—Talking with other children and adults fosters a child's sense of self and self-esteem. Through conversation, children learn new words and learn to cooperate. Thus, language skills and a positive self-image are encouraged through conversation.
- **Playing**—Creative play materials encourage children to question, experiment, and pretend. A housekeeping area, block area, or pretend grocery store provide children "real experiences" to develop vocabulary and gain an understanding of the world around them.
- **Discovering**—Real experiences provide children with opportunities to exercise their curiosity and discuss events that are relevant to their everyday lives. Visiting grocery stores, farms, and hospitals; preparing snacks; and talking to police officers, firefighters, and janitors contribute to a child's understanding of the real world. The world can also be discovered through good books. Reading books daily to children is an essential part of a quality program.

What Is the Role of the Preschool Teacher?

Studies have consistently found that it is the teacher who makes a difference in whether children profit from preschool activities. It is the teacher who plans

the activities, listens and talks to children, and encourages growth in the child's intellectual and social development. Thus, the lead teacher in a preschool program should have training in early childhood education or child development.

An effective preschool program reflects a variety of activities: free-choice activities and small group times; quiet periods and active times; short activities and a few longer ones to increase the child's attention span (e.g., listening to an interesting story); and careful planning to develop the child socially, emotionally, physically, and intellectually.

Sources

Most of the following references—those identified with an ED or EJ number—have been abstracted and are in the ERIC database. The journal articles should be available at most research libraries. For a list of ERIC collections in your area, contact ACCESS ERIC at 1-800-LET-ERIC.

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This publication was prepared by ACCESS ERIC with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract No. RI890120. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Department of Education.

Source of This Document

Swanson, Beverly B. (1998). *What Is a Quality Preschool Program?* Available: <http://npin.org/library/1998/n00027/n00027.html>