

# Why Preschool?

By Tonia Jurbin

A typical preschool program is for children from three to five years old, for two hours in the morning, two to three times a week. Most public preschools are relatively affordable, at about \$45 for 10 sessions, whereas private preschools could cost up to \$265/month. In addition, you may have to register for the full year up front and may be required to provide post-dated checks.

Preschool environments help children learn to socialize by providing a 'play-based' program. Most will have many different areas for a child to play in—housekeeping, art, blocks, reading, science, etc. Preschool is not a "free-for-all," as some structure is provided through a storytime, circle time or a play that the children act out. Children are not forced to participate, but most of the time choose to. "If they are not participating you can be sure they are observing," says Colleen Herbert, an Early Childhood Educator with Burnaby Parks and Recreation. According to Herbert, observing is another way of participating. Herbert's typical preschool session will include about an hour of freeplay, 10 minutes of group time, and about 5–10 minutes each of clean-up, washing hands and snacking, all ending in a big group time.

"Preschool is not meant to be a place where children learn the alphabet or how to count, or even attempt to prepare them for school. They will have lots of time to learn those skills when they enter the school system," explains Herbert. She adds, "They do learn about letters and numbers through songs, games and reading. We try to provide the opportunities of as many experiences as we can. Take finger painting for example—very few kids probably do that at home." The children learn through play—after all, play is learning—so learning is fun!

If you are concerned about a shy child, discuss the possibility of "gradual entry" with your child's preschool teacher on the first day. Stay with your child the whole session but try to limit, and eventually stop, interaction with your child. The next step is to leave the room for 10 minutes and return, but leave something in the room that your child knows you value, such as your jacket or your keys. After that's acceptable to your youngster, remain outside the room for the whole session. The final and most rewarding step is

when you get to run your errands! Try to remember, the separation anxiety might be worse for you.

If your child is truly distressed, take your time; it may take the whole ten sessions before your child is comfortable. Herbert assures parents, "Be patient, you want your child to want to come back, not to be afraid of preschool."

For some kids, learning to get along with other children may be the challenge. Teachers can spot aggressive children right away. It is possible that the aggression is the symptom of a medical problem, so it's important to be upfront about any medical conditions your child might have (including mild to severe allergies). Sometimes the problem might not actually be aggression but the result of a toddler's inability to understand or express their feelings. The solution could be as simple as explaining that you can't just walk up to a child who has taken your toy and whack them; you have to tell the other child that you weren't finished playing yet. "That's why it is so important to work on your child's language skills," comments Herbert.

"We like to empower the children by providing the art supplies but not instructing them to all do the same project," says Herbert. The Eastburn Community Centre takes pride in their open-ended art program. "It really gives the children confidence."

If you're considering placing your child in a preschool program, ask the following questions: Is the room clean and stocked with toys? Are the children engaged in play or running wild? Is the teacher okay with unannounced visits? Are the teachers open and happy to answer questions?

For more information on choosing a preschool or daycare, contact the appropriate department of your municipality (check the Blue Pages of your phone book).

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