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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

### **How Should We Choose A Preschool?**

The following is a question from a parent who wanted our advice about choosing a preschool for her 3-year-old son who did not have prior school experience. We believe that our advice would have some applicability and relevance for other situations that are somewhat different, such as if the child was a different age or had different prior experiences, or if parents were considering a program with longer hours.

**Q.** We would like to enroll our 3-year-old son Charlie in a part-day preschool this year. He hasn't been in school before. Do you have any guidance about how to choose a preschool?

**A.** There are some core child-development principles that a program can implement to help it achieve excellence. In this article, we'll focus on these principles rather than on more obvious and commonly discussed factors, such as teacher-child ratios, teacher qualifications and classroom experience, available materials, cleanliness of environment and administrative responsiveness. Although we refer primarily to part-day programs, the issues we raise also pertain to full-day programs.

Childhood is about growing — intellectually, emotionally and socially. Growth occurs when children are asked to rise to a level from which they can manage and learn. If there are insufficient challenges, children are deprived of the opportunity to develop confidence and abilities. If there is too much challenge, children might find ways to manage, but they are less likely to develop confidence and truly effective skills. We need to find the middle ground.

**Separation:** Your son Charlie is beginning a new adventure, but this is an

extraordinarily big step for him. He will not have you with him. In all likelihood, he's had other caregivers besides you and his father, but there's a world of difference between being with a babysitter who's focusing on him in his home or with another parent who's shepherding him and a friend through a play date, and being in a classroom environment. In a classroom, he will be with other children he does not know well. It can be frustrating to be bound by rules and regulations that limit him well beyond the usual constraints at home, and supervised by teachers who are friendly but with whom he has no history or significant relationship.

Being away from you in such a situation is a huge step, but it is also an opportunity for growth. Therefore, we recommend that you look for a school that will allow him to grow in separation at the right pace: his pace. It won't necessarily be the program's pace. He will need time for you to be in the classroom at drop off and to have a gradual goodbye so that he can be confronted gently with the sadness of saying goodbye. Look for a program that will allow a separation that he can grow from, not just bear up under.

**Mastery:** This is your child's first school experience, and it is the most important school experience that he will ever have. Like the foundation of a tall building, this first experience will invisibly provide the grounding for his entire school career. He will need to experience his classroom as a place where he is successful in learning. At this point, it's not about exams and spelling and arithmetic. To Charlie, learning means learning to use scissors, balance blocks into a tall tower, tell his teacher when he needs to use the bathroom, clean up when asked even when he'd rather continue his project, sit more or less still at circle and wait for his turn. There are so many social and emotional tasks to master, and the mastery of each one will leave him feeling more confident and successful — and a bit more eager to be in that place called a classroom where he can grow. For this reason, look for a school in which children are helped to grow in all areas. You would be wise to choose a school in which children are supported to follow their own interests, because they will derive the best feeling from growth in those areas that matter to them.

**Guidance from teachers:** Successful students understand that a teacher is someone who is there to guide them and to help them learn. Preschool is a time when a child begins the process of learning to differentiate a teacher

from other caring adults, coming to recognize that a teacher does not supply basic nurturance and is not an authority against whom to struggle. Learning interferences often result from children who express, in their relationship with teachers, emotional needs or conflicted feelings that should stay within the confines of family relationships.

Look for a school that appreciates Charlie's need to develop a concept of a teacher as a teacher and one that understands the middle ground necessary to achieve this growth. A 3-year-old requires a bridge from parent to teacher. Charlie's teacher should provide enough warmth and nurturance to sustain this bridge, particularly in the beginning, and have the flexibility to gradually become a more distanced teacher, thereby supporting Charlie's growing independent functioning and learning.

**Social and emotional sensitivity:** There is abundant research demonstrating that success in school and in future relationships follows successful emotional and social development in the preschool years. For this reason, it's crucial to find a preschool that is sensitive to children's emotional lives, supporting them in their daily struggles, celebrating accomplishments by helping them to feel pride in their own abilities, assisting them in using words to recognize and express feelings, and, most of all, adapting their approaches to the unique qualities of each child.

Children's developmental needs aren't objective matters that can be easily quantified. Nor are preschool staff members' philosophies and attitudes. However, we are all experts in assessing these human qualities when we know what to look for. So visit programs and talk with friends, pay attention to what you know about your child, especially trust your reactions and instincts. You will make a fine choice.

