



Education Options for Preschool-Aged Children

By Judy Arnall

By the time a child reaches the preschool age of three to five, they have changed in so many ways. Many children are ready to expand their world outside of home and interact more with peers, teachers and other parents.

Physically, preschoolers are capable of many tasks. Emotionally, many can control their anger and uncomfortable emotions much better. Socially, they are curious about other children. The element of other people to play with adds fun, creativity, and learning (and sometimes needed conflict resolution) with other children.

The cognitive development of preschoolers puts them squarely in the magical/fantasy element of brain development. Their whole world is constructed of “make-believe” which further enhances play with others. They also have enough brain-power and self control to understand a few safety limits and to listen to adults a wee bit more than toddlers.

Many parents wonder what type of education is best for this age. The answer really depends on the child. Factors that affect this are: gender, temperament, personality, and learning style more than age alone.

Gender Differences

In terms of gender, preschool boys are still quite active and find it hard to sit, concentrate and participate in circle time. They tend to fidget more when compelled to listen to music, storybook reading or teachers talking. Programs to look for should be active and fun with a high physical component. Preschools with lots of circle time and quiet play should not be the first choice. Girls, tend to love role-playing with toys and make believe play and often can sit longer to listen to stories.

Temperament and Personality

Temperament is another consideration. For spirited children a small group is less sensory stimulating than a large group. An unstructured type of play environment such as Waldorf, Montessori, or PACT play program would be more suitable. Children decide where and when they would like to explore in these programs, instead of having definite centre times. An easygoing child would adapt more to structured settings such as conventional preschools that have set times for snack, music, and creative play.

Introverted children who prefer the company of a parent, home and his own toys may not benefit from structured learning environments. Research shows that some types of preschool help disadvantaged children catch up to what they need to know for grade one. However, for children with a stimulating home environment (homes that have books and toys), early schooling doesn't make any difference in grade three test scores. If your child is an extravert and his boisterousness is wearing you thin, the excitement of preschool may be what your child is craving.

Learning Styles

Learning styles also play a key factor. Your child's learning style emerges by the preschool years. A good preschool should mix up their program delivery to accommodate learning styles. If your child is auditory, then circle time, oral instruction and story listening are their preferred ways to take in information. If your child is visual, then videos, picture books, and painting/ art should be high on their list. If your child is kinesthetic, then again, a high physical game content is needed with lots of building materials, art supplies, board games etc. as well as a good chunk of playground time.

It's important for parents to keep in mind the developmental tasks of preschoolers. Their job is to explore with all their senses. Touch, hear, see, taste, smell and move! Worksheets have no place in preschool or Kindergarten. Those are the times for learning how to play, get along and have fun.

What to Consider

New options include all day preschool. If your child tolerates daycare well, then they should be happy to ease into all day preschool. There is not much difference in the level of activities offered to children, but to be funded as a preschool, there may be pressure to add more "academic" looking activities. Parents should be warned though that grade one entrance has no expectations that children should know more than to write their name and use the bathroom independently.

Kindergarten is still optional and voluntary in Alberta. It is assumed that in grade one, children are coming with no academic advantage. The grade one curriculum starts at knowledge level zero. Many children who have spent three years in an "academic" preschool may be bored in grade one if they already have covered colours, letters and numbers and have attended all the typical field trips already. In addition, children that have not attended preschool or Kindergarten catch up pretty quickly on the social rules of learning to take turns, line-up and raise their hand to speak.

Look for preschools with lots of unstructured toys that are open-ended play value. Sand tables, paint, playdough, blocks, people, houses, cars, trains, building toys, dress-up, puppets, art supplies, are very good toys in addition to a playground. So many families have computers, video consoles and hand held gaming systems at home, that children have ample opportunity to use them at home. Preschools away from home should have more physically interactive toys. At this age, it's better to paint on paper and build with Lego than to do it on a computer screen. Children need the tactile experience.

As always, parents who try out a preschool program should watch their child for signs of discontent. Anxiety, sleeplessness, increased temper tantrums and sibling fighting, moodiness,

and eating jags are signs of stress. Give a program two weeks and if signs do not subside, it may not be the right time for a formal play environment for your child.

Judy Arnall is a professional international award-winning *Parenting Speaker*, and Trainer, Mom of five children, and author of the best-selling, “***Discipline Without Distress: 135 tools for raising caring, responsible children without time-out, spanking, punishment or bribery***” and a new DVD called “***Plugged-In Parenting: Connecting with the Digital Generation for Health, Safety and Love.***”

www.professionalparenting.ca (403) 714-6766 jarnall@shaw.ca

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