

# Who needs preschool?

By Anna Kuchment, *Newsweek*, November 2007

Allegra and Eric Lowitt toured several preschools and child-care centers in 2006 before finding the right match for their daughter, Dana, now almost 3. The Lowitts, who live outside Boston, settled on Needham's Chestnut Children's Center (from \$4,500 per year for part-time preschool to \$22,000 for full-time, year-round care), where the teachers are certified in early-childhood education and toddlers follow themed curricula that introduce such skills as letter recognition through games, field trips and other activities. Each day, Dana's teacher gives the Lowitts a printed summary of their daughter's activities, from what she ate to whom she played with. "It'll say, 'Dana loved making pumpkin muffins, and she held hands with Anna on the playground'," says Allegra. "It's nice to get a feel for what her day is like."

While many young children stay home with a parent or sitter until they start kindergarten at the age of 5, a growing number are entering preschool earlier. Statistics set to be released this week by the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University show that in 2005, 69 percent of 4-year-olds attended preschool, up from 59 percent in 1991; among 3-year-olds, that number has grown to 43 percent and, for 2-year-olds, to 29 percent. "I think it's a combination of public and private demand," says Steven Barnett, director of NIEER. Not only are more states funding public preschools for 3- and 4-year-olds, but the number of private preschools has also increased as higher-income parents look to give even the youngest kids a leg up on learning. So, what is preschool, does your child need it and, if so, how do you find a good one?

**Don't judge a program by its name.** A center doesn't need any special certification to call itself a preschool, as opposed to a day-care center. And an inexpensive full-day program in your neighborhood might offer a more stimulating environment with better-trained teachers than a pricey half-day one. Just make sure it is state-licensed for health and safety.

**Accreditation.** The National Association for the Education of Young Children ([naeyc.org](http://naeyc.org)) is the largest voluntary accreditation system in the country but covers only about 8 percent of schools. So, while the logo is a sign of high quality, its absence doesn't mean the center is of poor quality.

**The school tour.** Watch how teachers interact with children, says Sharon Lynn Kagan, an associate dean and professor of early-childhood and family policy at Columbia University's Teachers College. Do the children seem comfortable? Engaged? Happy? Ideally, teachers should have some formal training in early-childhood education. Teacher-to-student ratios should be at least one teacher to nine kids, ages 2.5 to 3, with no more than 18 toddlers in a group; for 4-year-olds, the group can go as high as 20, with two teachers, says NAEYC (see [nieer.org](http://nieer.org) for more info on what parents should ask).

**When to start.** Parents can find private two- and three-day-a-week programs for children as young as 2. For 2-year-olds, says Ellen Frede, a developmental psychologist and codirector of NIEER, one-day-a-week music or art classes is another good option. Three-year-olds would benefit from a good part-time program, and 4-year-olds are ready to attend school five days a week for at least a half-day.

**What they should learn.** "At this age, it's not about drilling or spouting facts," says Frede. Two-year-olds should be learning how to engage with their teachers and peers and how to be part of a group, says Nancy Schulman, coauthor of "Practical Wisdom for Parents" (\$24.95) and director of New York City's 92nd Street Y Nursery School. As kids grow, programs become more structured and include more group time, like story readings. Teachers should encourage role-playing games, from simply pretending to have a phone conversation to playing "house." That helps children learn narrative, which, in turn, builds preliteracy skills.

But a preschool's most basic attribute lies in helping its kids feel safe and cared-for. "We have to meet those very important needs first," says Lauren Hentschel, owner of Needham's Chestnut Children's Center. "Then, after that, all sorts of wonderful things can happen."

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