

How to be a Preschool Detective

Discover how to find a preschool that fits you and your child's needs, and at the same time, feels like home

Written by Ella Hearrean



At The Learning Experience, children participate in both academics and active play time



It is important to keep in mind the temperament and personality of your child when choosing a preschool

When the time comes to choose the right preschool, a little detective work will go a long way in selecting the preschool that best fits your child. Katy parents and teachers share some tips for getting your child's academic career headed in the right direction.

Marcie Payne knows what it's like to regret choosing a certain preschool. "I was too hasty," she says about her first decision, "and I learned that my children get out what I put into the process." After moving to Katy, she decided to investigate schools before enrolling her children, Ben and Caitlyn, into Crosspoint Christian School. "Become active in a moms group, church, sports team, or subdivision," Payne suggests. Other parents are the best resources for information."

Snoop Online

An easy check online can reveal citations and reports regarding a specific school. If there are red flags, it's important to discuss these with the director of the school and provide them the opportunity to clarify. "Every parent should check out parent reviews and the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (TDFPS) website," advises Steve Sandweiss, owner of Tiger Land and A Child's Reflection. "The TDFPS reports any deficiencies found during unannounced visits."

Scout Schools

To find out if a school is as good as it seems on paper, parents are encouraged to tour at least four schools and compare



environments. Debbie Anders, marketing director of Primrose of West Cinco Ranch, begins with a smell test. “A school should smell clean, like home,” she says. In addition, parents should pay attention to the way teachers interact with their students, the kind of work hanging in the hallways, and the layout of the classrooms and playground. “First impressions make or break a parent’s decision,” she adds.

Priority Planning

Whether you are looking for a faith-based school or one focused more on physical activity, the values of the school can determine whether it’s where your child belongs. “Find out if its policies match your expectations,” Sandweiss advises. Factors that may impact the family include cost, duration of the school day, proximity of the school to work or home, methods of communication, parent involvement, and the enrollment process. “We start the day off right, and build friendships with other families,” explains Payne. Stephanie Leal, director of Kids ‘R’ Kids Katy, says that safety is often another factor. “Some parents want extra reassurance that their child is okay,” she says. “In addition to keeping our front doors locked, we provide online viewing of their child’s classroom.”

Enrolling Students

Inquire about what you will need in order to enroll and gather those resources well in advance of enrollment. Talk to administration ahead of time to find out how the school handles enrollment and what you need to do. Some parents even go to the extent of waiting in line overnight to make sure that their children are accepted into the preschool of their choice. You will also want to make sure if the school’s enrollment timing is suitable for you and your child’s schedule.

Finding a Fit

Various preschools are available that cater to specific developmental needs. When Shylo Ulcak enrolled her daughter Karli in Katy’s Early Childhood Enrichment Center (Katy’s ECEC) at the suggestion of a therapist, she was impressed with the staff’s willingness to make accommodations. “Karli has Down syndrome, and the teachers worked with her and her therapies,” Ulcak recalls. Seven years later, she attributes her daughter’s well-being to the school. “There’s no way she’d be doing this well without their support.”



A Child's Reflection encourages group learning and activity centers



“Tour at least four schools to compare environments”

- Debbie Anders, Primrose

Questioning Curriculum

It is important to compare schools' philosophies since every school varies in their approach to learning. Be prepared to ask specific questions about curriculum, activities, and learning stations. "We balance our curriculum between loud and quiet, outdoor and indoor, and teacher-led and child-led activities," explains Cheryl Sage, owner of British Private Prep School,

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At Primrose School students participate in a variety of activities that foster creativity and individual learning

“because that’s what engages the child.” Additionally, Lynn Castro, mother of 4-year-old Leila, points out the importance of enrichment programs. “Leila gets to explore different things such as yoga, theater arts, and science, as part of her curriculum at The Learning Experience. She gets to figure out what she likes,” says Castro.

Observe Teachers

You can gauge the quality of a school by its teachers. Requirements of a preschool teacher’s training differ from school to school, so be sure to ask about the teacher’s credentials. Nicole Istre, owner of Katy’s ECEC, reminds parents that the quality of learning hinges on the quality of teaching. “A curriculum,” she says, “is only as good as its teachers, so look at how they relate to each other and to the students.” Sandweiss emphasizes that teacher continuity is a key indicator of the quality of a business and the happiness of the staff. “One of our teachers, Ms. Pam, has been at Tiger Land for over 20 years, and many teachers and families are former students.” Keep in mind the temperament of your child and whether or not they would interact well with the teachers you have met.

Student Interaction

When visiting, take notice of how the kids are interacting with one another. Pay attention to how certain behaviors and interactions between the children are handled by the staff. Ask yourself if the preschool’s values and discipline style align with yours. Picture your child or children in the environment, interacting with the other kids there. Determine if your child would easily fit into the current student environment.

First Instinct

Part of your evaluation will be based on comparisons, facts, and referrals and part of your selection will be based on intuition. Karen Goertz researched many schools before finally choosing A Child's Reflection for her children, Ben and Addison. "This school felt different, more cozy and welcoming. It just felt right." The director of The Learning Experience, Wanda Flores explains that "parents are 90 percent of the equation. They set the tone for their children." Goertz adds that her instincts proved to be accurate. "The teachers were creative and amazing. Kindergarten was a breeze." Let yourself be guided by your own values and the needs of your child, take your time and you'll find the perfect preschool for your family. **KM**

ELLA HEARREAN is a Katy freelance writer and mother of two boys who loves her sons' preschool.

Preschool Detective Clues

What is the school's educational philosophy?

What are the school's disciplinary measures?

Do I like the environment; will my child be safe here?

What is the level of parental involvement required?

What is the student to teacher ratio?

Does the preschool match my value system?



Jackson Peltier's favorite subject is math

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