

## **Choosing Preschool: Play-Based vs Academic**

### **Choosing by Philosophy**

When you enter the preschool search, you will want to consider what you value in your child's early education. Do you want a lot of free play or more structured activities? Do you want the teacher to direct the day or for your child to choose activities based on her interests? Are you interested in language immersion or a focus on music or the arts? Or maybe you want a little of everything? There may be a school that fits your child exactly, but you might have to pick and choose among your priorities. "Choosing what's right for your child really is not as prescriptive as it could be," cautions Dr. Robert Pianta, dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. "There's some sense that for a more rambunctious child, Montessori could be harder, but on the other hand there are plenty of examples of kids who do better because it's quiet and they settle down more easily."

In general, a preschool will describe itself as either play-based or academic. Within those philosophies are several more specific approaches, such as Montessori and Cooperative. Understanding the different terms will help you find the program that suits your child's needs, since many of the approaches tend to overlap.

### **Play-Based**

In a play-based program, children choose activities based on their current interests. The term "play-based" is often interchanged with "child-centered," which could be used to describe the majority of available preschool programs. The play-based classroom is broken up into sections, such as a home or kitchen, science area, water table, reading nook, space with blocks and other toys, or other areas. Teachers encourage the kids to play, facilitating social skills along the way. "Even though it seems like they are just playing, they are learning valuable skills, including important social skills and cooperation with others, learning about signs (as most items are labeled), and early math," says Jenifer Wana, author of "How to Choose the Best Preschool for Your Child."

### **Academic**

Alternatively, there are academic programs, considered didactic, "teacher-directed," "teacher-managed." In these classrooms, teachers lead the children in a more structured way, planning the activities, then guiding the children in doing them. This design is aimed at preparing kids for the kindergarten setting. For the most part, classroom time is devoted to learning letters and sounds, distinguishing shapes and colors, telling time, and other skills.

Although parents may take comfort in knowing their child is in a more academic setting, some say this only makes a difference in the short term. “A lot of people put children in Montessori, for example, because they want them to learn academics early. Research shows that’s true only up to a certain point,” Wana says. “Preschool is time to learn social and emotional skills so you are ready to learn those academic skills later on.”

If you worry that a play-based classroom is too chaotic and your child would not thrive in it, you can easily find a more structured setting. The important thing to remember is that preschool should not look like elementary school. “It should be organized so there is a plan and routine for the day. But at the same time, it should not be regimented in the sense that kids are spending five minutes at this, ten minutes at this, with no exception,” Pianta says. “It shouldn’t look like a fourth-grade classroom.”

Whether you opt for a play-based or more academic setting, you are choosing to prepare your child for kindergarten and later schooling. While play-based approaches may work for most types of children, any quality preschool program can set the foundation for the transition to kindergarten and beyond. What matters is that your child is learning from adults who engage and stimulate intellectual curiosity while imparting social skills. “Most kindergarten teachers will tell you what they really value is the opportunity to teach kids when they show up at school prepared and ready to learn. It’s not so much that teachers value that the kindergartner can read or write. They value that the children enjoy learning, have a set of experiences that got them used to a classroom setting, and know how to engage adults and kids in another setting,” Pianta says. Do some research, and you can feel confident that you are choosing a preschool that works for your child.