

# A Parent's Guide to Finding the Perfect Preschool: Why Play-Based Learning and Outdoor Learning Matter

Apr 5, 2024



Did you know that I got the idea to open my own early childhood center while touring a local daycare? I was 5 months pregnant with my first child and wasn't on a single wait list! I really had no clue about the childcare landscape. I was working as a teacher and had just started to think about what care I wanted (and could afford) when I needed to return to work.

So, I did what most first time mums do, I toured the center closest to my work. Luckily, it was a national chain, well known and had a great reputation. And on the whole, it looked great! They had good systems in place, it was secure and well stocked with toys. But as I moved through each room, I had a growing sense of unease and by the end I left the building in tears. It was high quality, but I knew I couldn't leave my child there. I didn't see one room where it was clear that the child was placed at the center of the environment. The toddler room had 15 children aged 15-24 months all sitting quietly at tables, all coloring in. Toddlers! Sitting in silence! Children need to move. They need to explore and take risks. And that movement creates mess and noise. This did not look like a safe space for young children to do that.

As a parent, choosing the right preschool for your child can feel like a daunting task. With so many options available, it's essential to consider what values and principles resonate most with your family's beliefs and your child's needs. At [Stepping Stones Nursery School](#), we believe in the power of play-based, child-led, and outdoor learning experiences to foster holistic development in young children. As a mum of three boys and an early childhood teacher, these were the principles that were important to me.

In this guide, we'll explore why these elements are crucial and provide tips on how to find a preschool that aligns with these principles.

When searching for a preschool that aligns with your values, take the time to visit different facilities and observe their programs in action. Pay attention to the learning environment, interactions between educators and children, and the overall atmosphere of the preschool. Ask questions about their philosophy, curriculum, and approach to play, child-led learning, and outdoor experiences.

## Understanding Play-Based Learning:

[Play is the cornerstone of early childhood education.](#) It is through play that children explore, learn, and make sense of the world around them. Play-based learning environments prioritize hands-on, experiential activities that promote creativity, problem-solving skills, and social-emotional development. Look for preschools that incorporate

ample opportunities for open-ended play, imaginative activities, and sensory experiences into their curriculum.

**What to look for:** this doesn't look neat and tidy! Don't be put off by a classroom that is a little messy. If there is paint and mud on the walls, it means the children feel safe to explore in this space! There should be a variety of open-ended materials (not toys that have a single purpose) and evidence that the children are moving freely from center to center. For more on what a high quality preschool environment looks like, read our blog on [curating classroom environments](#).



## Questions to ask:

- How do they define play-based learning?
- How much time is dedicated to play-based learning? The answer should be all the time. If they point to a 20-30 minute period on the schedule, this is not a play-based learning environment.

## The Importance of Child-Led Approaches:

Every child is unique, with their own interests, strengths, and pace of development. Child-led learning recognizes and respects each child's individuality by allowing them to take the lead in their learning journey. [In a child-led environment, educators act as facilitators, supporting children's interests and inquiries while providing guidance and scaffolding when needed.](#)

Seek out preschools that embrace a child-led approach, where children are encouraged to explore their passions and make choices about their learning experiences.

**What to look for:** children who are actively engaged in play and caregivers who are either actively observing (holding back, not trying to direct the play but watching for areas where they can facilitate) or who are playing with the children without taking over. It should be rare to see teacher led activities in a preschool classroom! Young children do not need to be sitting while a teacher gives instruction. This is not developmentally appropriate for this age group.

Also look at the layout of the room and walls. Are materials kept down low so that children can access them independently? Are displays low down where children can see them or

only up high (for the benefit of the grown ups). Does the space look like a safe space for a child to explore, take risks and learn new things or is the teacher in complete control of the room and all the materials?

## Questions to ask:

- What curriculum do they follow? (if they stick too rigidly to a single curriculum, they may not be centering the child at the heart of their provision).
- How much planning are the teachers expected to do? (If teachers are planning far ahead, the content won't be relevant to the children and their particular needs that day). Planning should be adaptable and flexible.

## Embracing Outdoor Play Everyday:



Nature offers a wealth of opportunities for learning and discovery. Outdoor play provides children with fresh air, physical activity, and a connection to the natural world. [Look for preschools that prioritize outdoor play as an integral part of their daily routine, providing access to natural environments, such as gardens, playgrounds, and nearby parks.](#)

**What to look for:** Evidence that the children do go outside every day! There will be muddy boots and rain suits in cubbies. If the school has its own playground, is it being used? At the time of your tour, are all the classrooms filled with children or are some of them

empty because the class is outside playing in a local park or taking a neighborhood walk. Follow the school's [accounts to see if they have really committed to outdoor play every day!](#)

## Questions to ask:

- How often do they take children outside and how long do they stay outside for?
- What safety measures do they have in place for proper supervision of children while outside? This should include teachers who are trained in properly supervising and counting children during their outdoor adventures.

## Building Partnerships with Educators:

**Strong partnerships between parents and educators are essential for supporting children's learning and development.** Seek out preschools that value open communication and collaboration with families. Look for opportunities to participate in parent-teacher conferences, workshops, and events that promote family involvement. Share your observations, concerns, and goals for your child, and work together with educators to create a supportive and enriching environment both at home and in the preschool setting.

**What to look for:** It can be difficult to tell if a grown up in a room is a teacher or a parent during a school tour so you may need to do some detective work here. Look through the website, social media, handbooks and policies for evidence that they have an open door policy for parents and that there are regular community events.

## Questions to ask:

- How does the school communicate with families day to day?
- How do teachers communicate with parents about their child's needs and progress?
- Do teachers have time set aside for communication with parents?
- When was their last community event? How did it go?

## Continuing the Learning Journey:

Preschool is just the beginning of your child's educational journey. Look for programs that prepare children for a smooth transition to kindergarten and beyond. **Ask about their approach to school readiness and how they support children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development in preparation for 'big' school.**

**What to look for:** children who are engaged, active and playing in a collaborative way. Children who are able to approach the teachers when they need something, and can move from place to place independently.

## Questions to ask:

- What is their approach to "kindergarten readiness"? This should not be focused on academic learning but rather a child's physical, social and emotional skills.
- How do they summarize a child's progress? For example, at Stepping Stones each child leaves with a portfolio that the Kindergarten teacher can use to learn more about your child.

In conclusion, finding the perfect preschool for your child involves careful consideration of their unique needs, values, and learning style. Look for programs that prioritize play-based, child-led, and outdoor learning experiences, as these elements are essential for fostering holistic development in young children. By partnering with educators and seeking

out environments that align with your family's beliefs, you can ensure that your child receives the best possible start to their educational journey.

Good luck with your preschool search!

<input type="text"/>	Search
----------------------	--------

## Recent Posts

November at Stepping Stones Nursery School

A Parent's Guide to Finding the Perfect Preschool: Why Play-Based Learning and Outdoor Learning Matter

Embracing the Wonder of the Holiday Season Through Child-Led Learning

Empowering Young Children: Confronting Fears with Confidence

Rough & Tumble Superhero Play: An exploration of preschool play urges



© 2025 Stepping Stones Nursery School. All Rights Reserved.