As a parent of two young intellectually precocious girls, I struggled with where to send my children for school. How do I navigate the many options and assess whether a program is a “good fit” for my child? What happens if the program isn’t a good fit? The key, I found, is to learn about your options, prioritize what you want a school to provide, and talk to staff.

Navigating the Options

The array of choices for early education can be overwhelming. Learning about the more prevalent approaches and their unique philosophies can help in selecting a program that works for your child.

Childcare/Daycare. Child care centers (also called nursery schools, learning centers, or child development centers) generally operate under similar guidelines as preschools and can be of very high quality. They tend to be relatively large and open long hours. They can be just as focused on learning and development as preschool programs, and many daycare providers have received training in early care and education and are state-licensed. Family child care, which is typically run...
preschool programs

Questions to Ask When Evaluating an Early Childhood Program

1. What is your program’s educational philosophy?
2. Are you accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)? If not, how do you address similar criteria?
3. Do you focus solely on academic goals?
4. My child excels at ______ (reading, working with numbers, etc.). How will you support his/her growth in this area?
5. My child is interested in _____ (Egypt, solar system, etc.). Does the curriculum ever emerge out of children’s interests?
6. Do children get to make choices?
7. What kinds of play do children engage in?
8. What opportunities will my child have for creative and critical thinking?
9. What happens if my child has already learned something or masters it quickly?
10. How do you document, assess, and share children’s learning and development?
11. What kinds of literacy, technology, and hands-on resources do you provide?
12. Will my child interact with others from diverse backgrounds? How do you celebrate diversity?
13. Do you incorporate [nature, the arts, or diversity] in your program? If not, are you willing to if you have help with ideas, activities, or organizing events?
14. How do you communicate with and involve families?
15. How do you promote health, nutrition, and safety?
16. What training and background does your staff have? Are any trained or experienced with the needs of children who are gifted and talented?
17. After starting the program, what do we do if we encounter difficulties?

out of a provider’s home, may also be of very high quality.

Early Entrance. Parents may have the option to enroll a child in kindergarten before the recommended age. This process typically requires an evaluation of the child’s readiness for kindergarten through a combination of individual testing and discussion. This often is done by a team including teachers, gifted staff, and the parent who considers the child’s cognitive, gross and fine motor, communication, social-emotional development, and other factors that point to the likelihood of success. If the child is recommended for early entrance, a trial period may occur first, after which the placement becomes permanent.

Head Start. Head Start is a federally-funded, free program for children ages birth to 5 who are considered at-risk or are from low-income households. As a comprehensive program, Head Start is designed to meet each child’s individual needs, while also supporting the family by providing health, nutrition, and community resources. Preschool classrooms use mixed-age groups, with children ranging from 3 to 5 years old. The curriculum promotes kindergarten readiness and children’s physical, social, and emotional development. Head Start recognizes the role parents (and families) play in being the child’s first, most important teacher, and emphasizes parent education and involvement. Teachers and staff are trained to be responsive to each community’s unique cultural characteristics, including providing services in a child’s native language.

Montessori. Montessori preschools, which can be public or private, allow children to learn at their own pace using hands-on materials and real-world experiences.1 Any school can legally use the name “Montessori,” and each may have different variations on the original philosophy. Classroom spaces are designed to be calm, uncluttered, and neatly organized to minimize distractions. Classrooms are multi-age, with teachers
who serve as educational guides, giving children freedom to experiment with specially designed Montessori materials individually and in small groups. The curriculum includes five main areas: sensorial (using the senses), practical life, language arts, mathematics, and cultural studies (includes music, geography, and science).

Reggio Emilia. It is said children have “a hundred languages” or ways of learning and of expressing their ideas: They draw, paint, sculpt, use music, and act out stories. Reggio-inspired schools follow a child-centered approach based on viewing children as curious, capable learners full of knowledge who interact with each other and the world in creative ways. The curriculum is not preplanned but rather emerges out of children’s own questions and interests, with teachers encouraging hands-on, in-depth investigation and discovery via projects that last from several weeks to several months. Art, music, and movement are highly valued and are incorporated into project work. The Reggio approach is also known for careful documentation of a child’s learning via transcripts, photographs, video, drawings, sculpture, and more.

Waldorf. Waldorf schools aim to create a better world through inspiring thoughtful, creative, and humane individuals. Although not associated with any particular religion, they aim to educate the whole child, nurturing the body, mind, and spirit simultaneously. Children ages 1 to 7 may share the same classroom, and cooperation is emphasized. A Waldorf classroom creates a home-like setting using natural light, soft colors, and simple design; children interact with wooden toys, handmade playthings, and natural materials such as beeswax crayons. Toys are diverse with open-ended possibilities for creativity and social interaction. Early learning focuses on imaginative play and creativity rather than academics, and fantasy, music, drama, art, and outdoor play are woven throughout the curriculum.

Selecting a “Good Fit”

What do the experts say?
The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has set 10 standards for early childhood programs that can serve as guidelines to families in selecting a high-quality child care center, preschool, or kindergarten. Although a program does not have to be NAEYC accredited to be a high-quality program, NAEYC’s guidelines are an excellent starting point for evaluating programs, especially when considering health and safety, physical environment, and management/staffing concerns.

But what other considerations are there for the precocious preschooler? What should parents look for in an early learning program if they suspect giftedness? The National Association for Gifted Children’s (NAGC) position on early childhood outlines several core elements:

- **Recognition of children** as unique individuals who have different experiences, interests, strengths, and weaknesses.
- **Flexible pacing** that allows for acceleration to prevent repetition for some and additional time for others to explore topics in-depth.
- **Challenging curriculum** that provides opportunity for critical and creative thinking in all academic disciplines.
- **Learning opportunities** based on interest that promote investigation, exploration, and problem-solving.
- **Engagement** in a variety of experiences that stimulate learning and development, including imaginative play.
- **Access to a variety** of printed materials, technology, and hands-on resources.
- **Interaction and collaboration** with diverse peers, reflecting both like and different interests, abilities, and experiences.

Prioritizing What Matters To You

Consider your own values. In addition to understanding what early childhood and gifted advocates suggest, it’s also important to consider your own
priorities. What matters to you and your family? Location and cost are common considerations. Whether a program offers part-time, full-time, or extended care may be considerations for parents who work. Does having your child in a home-like setting appeal to you? Would you prefer smaller class sizes with a lower teacher-student ratio and possibly more one-on-one time with each child? Do you think interactions with mixed- or same-age peers would benefit your child?

Beyond the basics, other priorities might include programs with a faith-based or spiritual curriculum, a connection to nature, integration of the arts, emphasis on play, or exposure to others from diverse backgrounds. If you don’t see or hear about something you prioritize, ask. Just because they don’t have it doesn’t mean they aren’t willing to consider it.

Tour. Once you have determined your priorities, plan to tour the facilities that seem to fit best and speak with staff. Observe the formal classroom and informal playground or lunch spaces. Ask if you can sit in on a class or attend a family event. Talk with other families and gather information about their experiences.

Ask questions. I recommend parents ask several questions of any potential early childhood setting (see sidebar on page 16). Questions range from the program’s educational philosophy to how teachers will support areas of strength and/or special interests.

When the Fit Isn’t Good

If it isn’t going well, don’t panic! You still have choices: communicate, get involved, or try a different program if you think it will better meet your child’s needs.

Communicate. Don’t be afraid to start a dialogue with the staff about your observations or feelings about your child’s situation. Doing so can be enlightening for both parents and teachers, and may reveal a simple misunderstanding. Ultimately, educators and families must work together to create school environments that respond to the needs of young gifted learners. If you feel that your child’s needs aren’t being met, advocacy is a great option. Connect with a local, state-level, or national gifted advocacy group for resources to help staff better understand and plan for the needs of young children with gifts and talents.

Get involved. Does something feel missing from your child’s program? Parents of young gifted children have helped with cluster groups, learning centers, and independent studies.6

Make a change. If your child is already in a setting that she likes, consider working with the staff to make minor changes to solve a problem. If your child needs more of a challenge, help her pursue an area of interest. Taking time to study or investigate a topic in depth can be a rewarding experience. Switching from a half-day to full-day program, if available, might also provide additional learning opportunities.

Sometimes more major changes need to occur, like changing programs. Although changing programs is not an ideal situation, you shouldn’t feel without options. Not all gifted children have the same needs or will respond well to all settings, so knowing your child is important. Most early entrance policies will have a trial or transition period before becoming permanent. If considering

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