



# **The Park Slope Parents Guide to Finding and Securing a Preschool**

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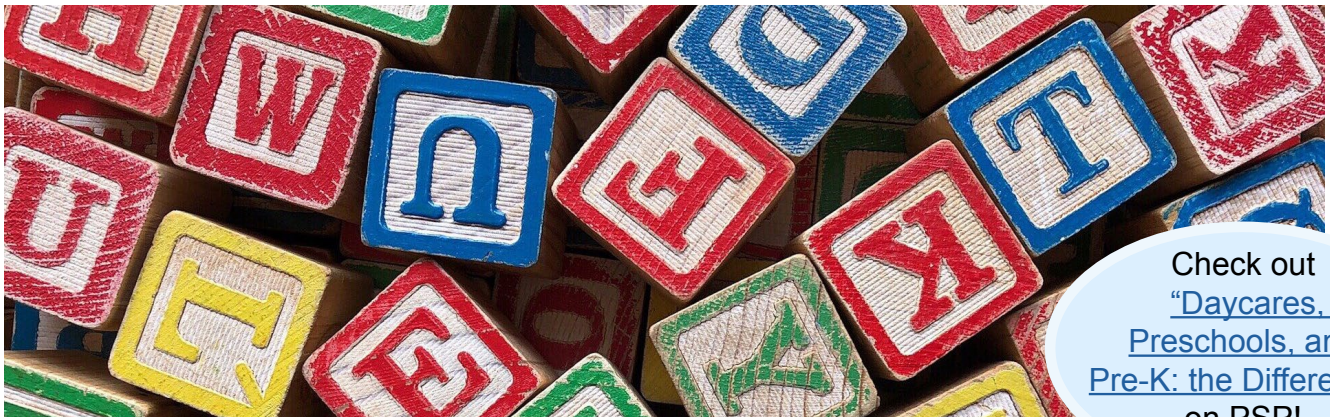
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## Finding and Securing a Preschool

Park Slope Parents is here for you as you reach this new stage of your child's life: preschool! This is a guide to help you navigate the system and find a good preschool fit for your child. The preschool landscape has undergone a dramatic change over the last decade in the Park Slope and surrounding areas—for the better! Preschool options for parents have nearly tripled in the past 10 years. Plus, with the roll-out of Universal Pre-K programs (and soon to be 3K for All), the free options for families continue to grow.

If you're wondering whether to put your child in preschool at age two or later, check out this Park Slope Parents article on [When to Start Preschool?](#) Starting too young can be confusing for some kids, while other kids thrive.



Check out  
[“Daycares,  
 Preschools, and  
 Pre-K: the Difference”](#)  
 on PSP!

### What's in a name?

There are many different names, labels, and categories given to pre-school programs: nursery school, preschool, cooperative, and more. This guide centers around licensed preschools that typically focus on kids 2–4 and have an emphasis on child development and socialization (more so than daycares). Also, preschools most often mirror K–12 hours (e.g., 8:30 am–3:00 pm) rather than the fuller days that daycares provide. *[NOTE: Most preschools also have after-school hours that you can pay for.]* Furthermore, most preschools also typically have half days (8:30 am–12:30 pm) for twos and threes programs, while Pre-K programs have very few. Preschools are also more likely to be closed for holidays, while daycares are not.

While there are also playgroups and preschool cooperatives (some licensed and some not), the PSP Guide to Finding and Securing a Preschool does not focus on these choices.

New York City also has a Universal Pre-K program that starts the year your child turns four and is free for families. You're not guaranteed a spot close by, but you will be given a spot. Some preschools with twos and threes programs also have a Pre-K program, making the transition between years easier for children who might need more consistency. That said, the majority of children transition very well between preschool and Pre-K programs at different schools. The Pre-K application process typically starts early in the calendar year the child would start Pre-K (more [here](#).)

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## When to start looking

Most preschools will start tours in fall for the following fall season (e.g., Fall 2017 tours for a Fall 2018 start date), so you'll want to start looking into the locations that would work for you in early fall of the prior year. Members tell us that some of the more competitive preschools open their applications on the Tuesday AFTER Labor Day (September), have rolling applications, and fill up quickly. Starting the search in late summer will mean you don't miss out on any of the choices. That said, since the number of preschools has tripled in the last 10 years, there are still plenty of choices if you don't start until the January before your child starts school. Also, some preschools require that you have a "playdate" (a structured one-time playgroup that helps the school determine the fit of your child), so touring early and applying early will help you have more choices of playdate times.

## Step 1: Figure out your points of focus

First things first. You should do a quick Google search of preschools in your area to get a feel for distance and resources. [Check the PSP website](#) for the preschool reviews (hyperlink below) to get a feel of why parents love (and may not love) the preschool. Our members say that distance is one of the key things to look for—who wants to trek in the rain, sleet, and snow for blocks and blocks to get their child to school each morning? Or, if you want to get exercise every day, you might choose to look farther from your house. You might also look into preschools around where you work, if that might be best for your schedule.

Now you need to narrow down the choices based on what is most important to you, your child, and your family. Here are some of the things Park Slope Parents members have told us are most important:



**Location.** Is it an easy commute? Is it on your way into work? When it's 20 degrees and snowing, is this a commute you want to make? Is it on a busy, noisy street?



**Programs.** Do you want your child in a full time (M–F) or a part time (e.g., MWF) program? Half days? Full days? Is it important that the school is year-round, or do you want the option to send the kids to camp somewhere in the summer?



**Hours.** Most popular programs have extended hours. Consider: Do you need extended care? Do they have an early bird program if you need to drop off for an 8:30 am meeting? Do they stay open late enough for you? If you work in the city and have to take three trains for pick-up, what are the fines for late pick-up? Do they only have coverage until 3:00 pm? 6:00 pm?

*Keep the big picture in mind of how much extra stress on you and your family is entailed in extra time getting to school and remember that if your kid is loved and happy, they will be fine!*

*Find a place that is convenient. Most of these schools are lovely with a few downsides—nothing is perfect. So choose somewhere that will make your life easier, not harder.*

Check out this PSP article:

[“Can working parents realistically pick up their children from daycare/preschool at 6pm?”](#)

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**Food.** Does the facility provide food for the kids or do you need to pack food and snacks? If so, is the food healthy, and how important is that factor to you? One complaint from PSP members is that the facility they chose only serves pre-packaged food that lacks any nutritional value. If the school doesn't provide food, this can add to your budget, so be sure to factor that cost in.



**Coverage for days off/holidays.** You'll find that many preschools follow the NYC Department of Education calendar. That means you'll need to find childcare coverage for certain days off, including: Columbus Day, Memorial Day, MLK Day, Election Day, Winter and Spring Recess, and religious holidays. Some preschool facilities remain open (they typically call these mini-camps) but will charge you an extra \$75–\$130 per day depending on the length of the day you need.

*It's important to look at the school schedule to be sure you are actually getting the amount of childcare you need. Preschoolers get a shocking number of holidays and breaks.*



**Calendar year.** Many preschools start in early September and run through mid-June, so you'll have to find day camps if you need coverage during the summer. Other preschools run year-round and have rolling applications. Calculate costs accordingly.



**Special needs.** If your child has any special needs, can the preschool accommodate those needs? Is the facility ADA compliant and ready? Do any teachers have a background in special education? Does the school have on-site therapists or social workers? Are outside therapists allowed to come in? How do staff communicate with parents and with each other about the child's challenges and progress? Do they meet to strategize? How often will you be notified about progress on IEP goals?



**Allergies.** If your child has allergies, how would they accommodate that? Is the school nut-free? Are other parents informed and educated about allergies in the classroom?



**Language needs.** Are you looking for a program that will help your child become bilingual or offer language support for your bilingual household?



**UPK program.** Does the facility also offer a Universal Pre-K program you can apply to when the time comes? Some people would prefer to stay at the same school rather than changing places. (This is different from your public-school options, where it is likely that your UPK and Kindergarten schools will be different.)



**Costs.** Preschool costs can start at \$8,000/year for two days a week and as much as \$30,000/year for five days a week with extended hours for a school that runs 12 months out of the year. Do you have a budget you need to stick to? Does the extended care include any timeframe up to 6:00 pm, or do they have shorter periods (e.g., 3:00 pm–4:00 pm)? Furthermore, is this a drop-in daily rate for when you need it, or is it a standard fee? Remember to calculate costs depending on the school calendar as well as extra days of coverage you may need for holidays.

Some preschools have discounts for Park Slope Parents members, so be sure to [check the PSP website](#) for discounts available.



**Deposits and penalties.** What is required in terms of deposit and payment? Some schools require fewer, larger payments, so if you are managing costs month-to-month, then you need to

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plan accordingly. Also be careful about putting down deposits when you're not 100% sure of your child attending the preschool. School tuition contracts are enforceable contracts and preschools differ in their enforcement if you decide not to go to (or keep your child at) the preschool. Finally, see if you qualify for subsidized child care by visiting [NYC Administration for Children's Services](#).



**Phase-in schedule.** Some preschools have a required phase-in period where children have shortened days to ease the transition to the new environment. If you go to a school that requires this, you may need other childcare coverage if you have other obligations, as the phase-in period can last days or even weeks.



**Curriculum/teaching/play.** Is it important that a program help your child learn specific academic skills? Social skills? Is it more important that you find a play-based program or get a head-start on numbers and letters? Do you want playtime to be structured or freeform? Take a moment to consider your philosophies when it comes to your early childhood education. [This PBS.org article compares different preschool philosophies](#) and gives you a general background. Also check out the reviews on the PSP website, which many times talk about the types of play and learning children do at the school.



**Type of school.** What kind of school are you looking for? Do you want an elite preschool (typically \$\$\$\$) that often continues through middle or high school? Most have very well-trained and ultra-qualified teachers and are considered as stepping stones on the path to more elite colleges. Do you want a more intimate private preschool that isn't as elite but provides some structure and school readiness mixed with play? Play-based schools focus more on hands-on learning and movement, which may be something you want for your two-year-old. Schools that have a religious affiliation mean that your child will be indoctrinated into beliefs and traditions that you might care about. Finally, cooperative preschools require parents to be more involved (read, more hours at the school), which can be a helpful transition but may require more time than you have to give.

Check out  
[The PSP Guide to Starting a Preschool Co-op!](#)



*There are so many quality programs in the area and many kids can adapt well to lots of different environments. You're likely to be happy with whatever program you end up choosing.*



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## Step 2: Create a short list of relevant preschools

Park Slope Parents has a [list of preschool reviews by PSP members past and present](#). This list of preschools includes the names of local facilities, contact information, and other details that will provide you with an overview. Be aware that this is not an exhaustive list of preschools but a list of the ones reviewed by our members. In this way, it's a curated list of predominantly well-loved local preschools.

[NYC Child Care Connect](#) is another great resource. The NYC Health Department regulates and inspects childcare facilities. You can review the licensing status of all them by entering a zip code, neighborhood, or specific facility name on the Child Care Connect website. In addition, you can generate a list of all licensed preschools, compare preschools across the city, and sign up to receive updates about specific facilities. It is highly advisable that parents choose licensed child care facilities! While our PSP members tell us that location is one of the main drivers of their preschool choices, we advise you to search using as many zip codes as possible (i.e., if you live in the North Slope with a zip code of 11217, include other Park Slope zip codes, such as 11215, or 11234 for Prospect Heights). Some parents opt to enroll their children in preschool centers near their jobs in Manhattan and elsewhere in the city, so include those zip codes in your search as well.



**Once you have a list of potential schools, you need to do research.**

**Check the preschool's website for as much information as you can glean.** Look for calendars, cost of mini-camps and extended hours, Pre-K options, etc. Keep in mind the things that are important to you and how those are represented on the website (e.g., allergy issues, diversity and inclusion, gender fluidity, etc.)

**Find any reviews of the preschool.** Check the Park Slope Parents website and do a Google search for the preschool. Ask questions on local online parenting groups and the [Park Slope Parents Advice Group](#). *[NOTE: There are some schools with different campuses owned and/or managed by different people, so double-check to make sure that you are looking at the right facility.]*

**Talk to your friends, pediatricians, neighbors and baby group members.** Find out why they made the choices they made about their preschool. Probe if a family left their preschool to find out why

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it wasn't the best fit. Remember, though: Just because a school is or is not a good fit for your best friend's family doesn't mean the same will be true for you.

**Show up onsite.** If you'd like more direct feedback, show up outside the school at pickup and ask both parents and any childcare providers (e.g., nannies and babysitters) how they feel about the school. One member told us her mother walked door-to-door in a neighborhood they were interested in moving to and asked about schools in the neighborhood.

## Step 3: Set up a preschool tour

Once you identify preschools with the most important characteristics that you need, check their websites. Some schools require you to apply before they will give you a tour, only scheduling a visit once you fill out the paperwork. Others allow you to tour before you apply. Many facilities only provide group tours rather than individual tours, as it is less disruptive to the kids already attending. Also, due to privacy and security issues, some places will not give tours of classrooms in action. Visit as many places as possible and explore a wide range of options so that, at the end of the day, you don't feel like you've settled.

There is no "one size fits all," as each preschool has its own philosophy and atmosphere. Some will focus more on creativity, others on academic readiness, still others on outdoor play. Your goal is to learn about what's available so that you can make an informed decision and have a gut check that says, "This is where my child belongs."

### What questions should I ask?

Make a list of questions from the options below that cover your top issues (e.g., pick-up times, days off) from the questions below. The following list is exhaustive, so pick and choose wisely—you don't want to be one of "those" parents who comes across as micromanaging, especially if you are on a tour with other parents, who will want time to ask their own questions as well.

See our article on [preparing for daycare and preschool in the time of coronavirus](#) for Covid-specific questions and considerations, including masking, testing, communication, and school closures.



#### Philosophy/educational approach:

- What is the preschool's philosophy of care?
- Does the center follow a specified curriculum? (e.g., Montessori, Waldorf, Bank Street, Reggio)
- Who develops lesson plans, and what is that person's training?
- Is there a daily schedule of indoor and outdoor activities, or is it less structured?
- How often do kids have outdoor time? When is it too cold/hot for them to go outside?
- Are the adults asking questions of the children and reading to them?
- What social skills do they specifically work on?
- Is there any faith-based education (e.g., church or synagogue teachings) and are any religious holidays celebrated (or not celebrated)?
- If this is your child's first foray into a social childcare environment, what do they do to help with the transition?

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### Napping/resting:

- Is there quiet time or naps? What do kids who do not nap instead?
- What percentage of children nap during the rest hour?
- Where do kids nap?

Also read:  
[“Afternoon Naps and Pre-School/Daycare” on PSP!](#)



### Health/safety:

- Are health records, including immunization records and emergency contact information, on file for every child?
- Are there children who are not vaccinated?
- Are staff members trained in First Aid/CPR?
- Are staff members required to get flu shots, and if so, when?
- Are there written policies and procedures for reporting accidents and other medical problems?
- Are there procedures for administering medication and treating illnesses and injuries?
- When do you send children home when they are sick?
- How do you make sure that sick kids are not allowed to come to school?
- What happens if a student has lice?
- Are parents required to report bed bugs, and are there any special procedures for this?
- How would the facility handle suspected incidents of child abuse by parents, staff or others?
- Are children released only to authorized persons?
- Where are children taken in a city-wide emergency?



### Recreation/celebrations:

- Do children leave the center for field trips or walks? How often? How are they transported and supervised on these outings?
- How much outdoor time is there? Are children allowed to run/play on equipment/etc.?
- What are some examples of offsite trips?
- Are children allowed to watch videos? If so, how often?
- How are holidays celebrated/acknowledged?
- How are birthdays handled?



### Parent/caregiver interactions:

- Can parents enter the facility at any time?
- Are teachers and the director regularly available for consultation?
- How are problems and concerns with a child handled?
- Is there a parent board or advisory committee? If yes, what is their role?
- Do parents assist in the classrooms or participate in center activities such as fundraising? Is this required or voluntary?
- Are there scheduled parent/teacher conferences? If so, how long?

*I would ask specifically how feedback is communicated and if possible can the teachers send a weekly newsletter so things can be discussed with your child at home. Otherwise you are reliant on feedback from a three-year-old!*

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- If my child cries at drop-off for an extended period of time, how is that handled?
- Do parents have any access to photos or videos of children throughout the day? Are photos kept private, or might they be publicly shared (on the facility's website, etc.)?



### **Behavioral issues:**

- What are the school's views on discipline and praise?
- Can you give me an example of what might happen to a child who bites or hits another child?
- What do you do if children seem to have prolonged tantrums or are disruptive to the environment?



### **Preschool staff:**

- Are staff state certified or registered? Do they have college degrees (or higher)?
- What is the educational level and training of caregivers? Of the director?
- Are staff required to have physical examinations before they are hired?
- Are background checks made on all staff before hiring, including any history of physical and sexual abuse?
- What's the child/teacher ratio?
- What is the child/staff ratio for your child's age and other age groups that your child may move to?
- What is the annual turnover rate for caregivers/teachers? Why do caregivers/teachers most often leave?
- How does pay compare to that of other area facilities?
- Are health benefits provided to staff?
- Does staff receive ongoing training?
- Are substitutes hired when staff are sick or on vacation? If yes, do they receive the same vetting as regular staff, e.g., health, background checks, etc.?



### **Meals/snacks:**

- Are meals and snacks provided to the children as part of the fee, or are you required to bring your own food?
- Can you see an example of a menu? Are the meals and snacks nutritious?
- Do they give the kids sugary snacks?
- Are special provisions made for, or allowed for, children with dietary restrictions?
- Are children occasionally allowed or encouraged to participate in food preparation?
- Are children allowed to eat when they're hungry or only at specific times?
- Are meals served indoors or outdoors?



### **Hours/late policies/closures:**

- What are the daily hours of the school?
- Are there extra fees for picking up your child late?
- Is there a phase-in period, or transition plan, to ease the child into preschool?
- When will the preschool be closed (e.g., holidays, professional development days, seasonal breaks, etc.)?
- What is the closure policy for inclement weather, and how are families notified of a closure?

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### Diversity/inclusion:

- Do they use gender-neutral language on their website and in their handbook?
- Do they assume that all families are binary with a mom and a dad? Do they assume that the child has two parents? Does the curriculum incorporate more than just a one-mom, one-dad family?
- What is the ethnic and gender breakdown of staff? Of families?
- How are holidays such as Mother's Day and Father's Day handled by the school?
- Is there a Parent's Day as well that is inclusive to all types of families and family structures?
- Is the facility's curriculum and philosophy inclusive of diverse groups? Can they offer specific examples?
- Does the school encourage non-gender-specific play and activities?
- Do they assume the child's parent(s) are biologically related to the child, such as in activities like making family trees?
- Are children taught the value of diversity? How so?
- Ask to see their story time's reading list. Do you see books that incorporate topics such as different family structures (including single parents, adoptive parents, and LGBTQ parents)?
- Does the school use multi-racial, multi-cultural, non-sexist, non-stereotyping pictures, dolls, books, and materials? Remember to check the school's parent handbook for examples as well as asking.



### Application/fees/deadlines:

- When are applications due? Is there an application fee? What's needed to apply?
- What are the total fees for the program?
- When are the fees due?
- How are parents billed?
- When do you find out if your child will have a spot?
- Do you receive your deposit back if you are not offered a spot?
- Are there cancellation fees if you wind up not taking a spot (e.g., you end up moving)?
- Is there any financial penalty if my family needs to leave the school but I find someone to take my child's spot?
- What are the financial/contractual obligations of having my child at this preschool?
- Are there sibling discounts for enrolling more than one child in the preschool?

When it comes to all things financial, make sure that everything is backed up in writing.



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**Finally, read whatever material you can find.** In addition to the above questions, you can request the following information (if available) in writing:

- Parent handbook
- Daily schedule
- Food menus
- Newsletters
- Rules and regulations
- Contract with parents
- Fees and payment policies
- Disciplinary policy
- References from past and current parents

## Step 4: After your visit, narrow down your choices

- **Get a gut feel.** As you depart the tour, imagine leaving your child at this preschool. Does that feel like a good choice? Do you see yourself and your child there? Is this where you think your child will be happy? Rarely is your gut wrong on this one. Ask yourself, “Is it really the most convenient choice that covers what I need?” If it doesn’t pass your gut check, scratch the school off your list.
- **Consider cleanliness.** Is the facility inviting? Clean, cheerful and welcoming? How are children’s personal items stored? Do they have their own cubby or are they expected to share with another child? What do the different play areas look like? Check out any outdoor play areas and see if they look safe and clean, and if they have recreational items that keep kids occupied. Is the outdoor play area secured from outsiders?
- **Size up the staff.** The teachers and their mood will influence your child. Are they warm and inviting? How do they interact with the children? Do they have a sense of professionalism about their job? Does it seem like they would be a positive influence in your child’s life and upbringing?
- **Think it over.** Spend as much time as you need to do your own assessment. If necessary, plan a second visit or send someone in your support network to make their own observations independent of your own bias and impressions. Also, if you happen to see other parents during your visit, be sure to pull them aside and ask for their opinions.

**Check out the PSP Top Tips** if you want to get a sense of what our members feel are the most and least important things about choosing a preschool.

## Step 5: Choose and apply

Think about the school that feels like the best option for your family in terms of location, atmosphere, scheduling, and—we can’t say it enough—gut check. Once you find your top choice(s) for your family, you’ll need to apply (if you haven’t had to already). You may want to apply to multiple places to cover your bases. However, some schools have a non-refundable application fee to cover processing costs.

After you apply, some preschools will set up a “play date” to make sure your child is a good match for their school. Don’t worry about preparing your child for the play date; it’s more of an observation to see if your child is ready for preschool. They will be assessing if your child is mature enough to be in a preschool/social situation. We’ve seen situations where children were turned away after the play date because of issues that were later indicative of the need for special services. Other preschools might have a more formal meeting with the parents, and sometimes with the kids, to ascertain the fit.

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If there is neither a play date nor a formal meeting, it might be a red flag that the facility doesn't do any screening whatsoever.

Certain preschools let you know quickly (via email, letter or phone call) whether you're accepted. Other schools will spend more time so that they can balance classes by age and gender. Feel free to call the facility and see where you are in the application process and when you can expect to hear an answer.

## Step 6: Make your decision

When you've been accepted, you should get a gut feel about the acceptance. Listen to that. Is it a "good choice" or is it something that you're excited about? It's nice to be wanted by a school, but is this the best fit for your child?

Do your final gut check knowing, as one PSP member said,

"No place is perfect and there will be challenges that arise. And no matter where you decide to leave your child it will be hard and at times heartbreaking. The only thing you can do is go with your gut when you visit a place, know what is important to you, e.g. size, teaching methods, discipline. Also, be sure to talk to the teachers or providers. Often the administrator takes control of the visit, but the teachers and care providers are the ones who will be taking care of your child. The administrator rarely sees them, so those are the people you need to be comfortable with. And when you find a location, and providers you like, treat them well. Their job is hard, so work with them to problem solve and show appreciation and love, and in turn they will do the same for your child."



If you haven't been given a contract or agreement, ask for one. In the same way you might be required to pay for a year if you want out, if you've paid money but are asked to leave, you'll want to know if you get any money back. Words of caution: be sure to read your contract carefully. Many preschools will often hold you tooth and nail to this agreement. We know there are some preschools that require you to pay a full year's tuition even if you leave early, if you decide it's not a good fit, or if you are moving away.

For more information and advice from parents who learned the hard way, please see [this article on the PSP website about deposits and tuition](#).

Most preschools will ask you to sign a contract and give a deposit. This can be in the form of a non-refundable deposit or an up-front payment of a few months' tuition.

Many PSP members give "don't stress" advice to other folks on our Park Slope Parents discussion groups. Know that there are a lot of great preschools in Brooklyn, especially

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compared to 10 years ago (with options tripling since then), and unless you are looking to get your child in the “private school pipeline” where getting into the “right” preschool means you have a shot at getting into other private elementary, middle, and high schools later on, you should not be stressed about your preschool choice. Do what feels right for your family, pick something convenient that fits the whole family’s schedule, and—as long as they come home happy and you feel good about the place—you’ve made a great choice.

*Go with your gut and know that what’s right for some of your friends and their kids might not be the right choice for your family.*

## Step 7: Get your child ready for preschool

**Help from the preschool.** Many schools host a “preschool mixer” for parents and kids before school starts. You will meet the teacher(s) and get to see your child’s classroom. You typically also get an orientation about the facility’s general rules and procedures. Take this opportunity to understand the separation process as well (e.g., drop-off/pick up procedures). Ask the preschool for first day/week transition processes (e.g., if and how long caregivers can stay, how they deal with tears), and any items you can bring to ease your child into the program (loveys, family photos).

**Practice sessions around your neighborhood.** If you can set up playdates with your child’s future classmates, the transition will be easier. Does the teacher make home visits? The [Park Slope Parents Advice Group](#) and [3s group](#) are great places to post a message asking for playdates for kids starting at your child’s school in the fall. You can also encourage your child to socialize at story time, art/music class, or the local sandbox. Ask parents where they are sending their children to preschool so you can make connections that way.

**Help your child become more independent.** Giving your child more agency will help them become more independent and confident. Making them less reliant on you, and more self-sufficient, can help decrease tears when you leave your child at preschool for the first time. Give them choices in picking out the clothes they want to wear, have them help with meals (e.g., setting the table, clearing the dishes), and have them choose the route to get to school to help foster more independence.

**Talk about the first day ahead of time.** Take your child with you to pick out a lunch box, a backpack, or other school supplies to help them understand that there is something new ahead. Also, you can

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walk by the new school so the route becomes familiar.

**Consider having a countdown calendar to “Big Kid School.”** Talk about the teacher(s) and what will happen at school to help them understand the next part of their childhood. Practice saying goodbye before the big day. If you don’t spend much time away from your child, have them practice saying goodbye (and actually get some extra time for you!) by leaving them for a few hours during the day. Practice some rituals with them (e.g., hugs, high-fives, secret handshakes, a song, dance, etc.).

The Park Slope Parents website has other resources for the transition to preschool/daycare:

- [The PSP Guide to Transitions](#)
- [8 Tips to Help with Separation Anxiety](#)
- [Tips for the First Day Of School - Are you more nervous than your child?](#)

## Additional considerations: Saving money

Forming a preschool co-op is one way to save money. Check out the [Park Slope Parents guide to starting a preschool co-op](#). Keep in mind that, with this option, you’re typically required to work at the co-op, either by helping out with teaching or hosting at your home (which may not be possible). So the cost savings also come with a price.

Some two-parent families decrease preschool costs by staggering their work schedules: One parent will handle drop-off, while the other does pick-up. (For example, one parent works 9:30 am–6:30 pm and does drop-off, while the other parent works 7:00 am–2:30 pm and does pick-up.) This can save you the cost of fees associated with early drop-offs and late pick-ups. Scheduling options can vary for parents based on commuting, flexi-time, and telecommuting.



## Final thoughts from PSP members on choosing a preschool

Also read these [quick but important reminders about choosing a daycare/preschool](#) on PSP!

“Love, location, learn are the top priorities, and in that order. Kids will constantly be learning regardless of where they are, but a strong emotional-social [foundation] starts with a loving and kind environment.”

“No place is perfect and there will be challenges that arise. And no matter where you decided to leave your child it will be hard and at times heart breaking. The only thing you can do is go with your gut when you

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visit a place, know what is important to you, e.g., size, teaching methods, discipline. Also, be sure to talk to the teachers or providers, often the administrator takes control of the visit, but the teachers and care providers are the ones who will be taking care of your child. The administrator rarely sees them, so those are the people you need to be comfortable with. And when you find a location, and providers you like, treat them well. Their job is hard, so work with them to problem-solve and show appreciation and love, and in turn they will do the same for your child.”

“I’d be wary of nursery schools making too many promises. With a degree in education, I’m confident that schools that focus on play, exploration, curiosity, and social skills will teach your child just as much as a school claiming tangible development gains or education benchmarks. Also, make sure vaccinations and flu shots are required!”

“We were not planning on sending our kid to preschool so early, but we found a great program and couldn’t pass up the opportunity. Finding a place where our kid is challenged, mind expanded, and enjoys her days is critical for us. I think a lot of it comes down to fit for you and your child’s learning style and gut feel.”

## Top tips from Park Slope Parents members

### Location/scheduling/convenience

“Don’t discount convenience. There may be an amazing school that you have to commute to and a good school a few blocks away—keep the big picture in mind of how much extra stress on you and your family is entailed in extra time getting to school. Remember that if your kid is loved and happy, they will be fine!”

“Proximity is very important! Beyond that, go with where you feel comfortable.”

“Figure out something that works with your schedule and location—there are many options out there, and I don’t think any place is totally perfect, so trust your instincts, but don’t make yourself crazy.”

“Timing and location are key. Only look at preschools that meet the timing you need. And for working parents, I highly recommend choosing a preschool that is close to home so it doesn’t become a hassle. Then look at the options and pick from there.”

“I’m glad we picked a school close to our home. I don’t think I’d want to travel very far with a toddler for preschool. I’m glad the school is a short walk (especially in bad weather) and we don’t have to take the subway to get there.”

“It’s important to look at the school schedule to be sure you are actually getting the amount of childcare you need. Preschoolers get a shocking number of holidays and breaks.”

“Don’t worry overly much about “kindergarten readiness” in terms of the curriculum, but do think about where you want your child to end up for kindergarten/preK and then work backwards from there.”

*Don’t be afraid to choose based on schedule or location. If it works for you, it will work for your child. I really believe that, especially since there are so many great options here in the neighborhood.*

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“Find a place that is convenient. Most of these schools are lovely with a few downsides—nothing is perfect. So choose somewhere that will make your life easier, not harder.”

### Trust your gut

“Trust your gut. I tried to reason my way into feeling better about a so-so situation with our first facility, and it ended very badly—I couldn’t be happier with our current place, which just ‘felt’ right from the beginning!”

“Go with your gut and know that what’s right for some of your friends and their kids might not be the right choice for your family.”

“Pay attention to your gut when you’re looking. Are the teachers and administrators warm, experienced and calm? Can you see your family/your child meshing well with the parents, teachers, administration? Don’t let yourself be swayed by others’ sense of the ‘best’ school(s) in the area. It’s really about fit for your child.”

“Go with your gut!! We kept hearing from people that it’s so important to choose a place really close to your home. [Our facility] is a longer walk for us than several of the other schools we looked at, but I don’t care a bit. It’s still under 15 minutes one way (versus a few that were about 5 minutes), and I think my daughter and I both enjoy the commute. For my husband and I, it came down primarily to wanting our daughter to be in the most loving atmosphere possible (above the school having certain amenities or a certain location, etc). Following our feelings in that regard was a great decision.”

“Listen to your gut. Prior to the open house visits, we were all but convinced we were going to send our child to another preschool (that we knew friends loved, etc), but after meeting the staff and fellow parents, a different school felt like a much better fit and we went with it. Couldn’t be happier!”

### Consider the school’s philosophy and how they will expand your child’s worldview.

“Go with your gut and push yourself a little too. While finding childcare is sometimes the primary need that needs to be fulfilled, if you have the ability to search a bit and find a program that diversifies your child’s upbringing (community, education, ethos) then go for it.”

“Tour a few so you get a sense of different philosophies (I didn’t know the variety existed until I spoke with people). It’s so nice feeling like you have a partner in raising your child and that can only happen if you agree with their approach.”

*“Ask how long the teachers have been working there. Happy teachers who stick around are important.”*

### Ask questions

“Ask specific questions about how the school handles difficult situations—kids who bite, who wander, potty training, etc.—and really make sure that you’re comfortable leaving your child in that type of environment.”

“Ask plenty of questions for things important to you before you enroll, whether it is about how they’ll handle difficult transition to school or potty training or behavioral changes.”

“Passing on advice from my sister, a kindergarten teacher and former daycare teacher: Ask how long the teachers have been

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working there. Happy teachers who stick around are important.”

“Ask about staff turnover. Consistency and routine are so important to babies and small children. We once toured a place where the head teacher was leaving that week and after we asked around we heard it was basically a revolving door. That was a big red flag for us—if the teachers aren’t happy and there’s a lot of turnover it speaks to the management of the facility.”

“If possible, have conversations with as many caregivers/teachers as you can. Getting to know them will give you a sense of the kinds of people your child will be around, and that can provide a lot of peace of mind when you do settle on a location.”

“Do not stop at the first impression, talk to other parents who have had experience of that place.”

“Ask questions about a typical day and the types of activities planned. Also, how the curriculum is structured—do they plan and then also use the children’s interests at that particular time to tweak?”

### Good fit

“Talk to a lot of parents and ask what they love and what they would change about the place if they could. A great fit for someone else’s kid is not necessarily a great fit for you and yours.”

“Know your child and how they would react to new spaces and how they handle new places.”

“Figure out the program that is best for your kid and your familys’ needs.”

“In retrospect, I learned that it is important to think about things like: are your kids good with transitions, do they need an environment where the teachers are more hands-on/give physical feedback, how important is the physical space to your child (do they need natural light, will they be okay going between rooms), how will they cope with having different providers at different times, things I had not considered coming from a traditional daycare setting.”

### Caring, stable environment

“For the little ones, I would say don’t focus so much on whether things are new or fancy or if there are a lot of scheduled activities and procedures. Look for people that love children and are affectionate and empathetic. All of the bells and whistles aren’t going to help your baby or toddler develop if they aren’t feeling secure.”

“Try to suss out teacher turnover rate; a program you love can change quickly when a teacher leaves.”

“Pay attention to the environment and find the right one for your child. To the extent possible, match the personality of the school with that of your child.”

“If the school doesn’t seem like a good fit, or if you feel like you need to pretend to be something other than you are, it’s probably not the best place for your family!”

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## Visit a lot of places

“Visit at least three schools: Meet teachers, look at the space, and compare and contrast your impressions of each. We knew right away based on visits which school we liked best, but would not have been able to make that decision based on the ‘on paper’ evaluation.”

“I know some daycares don’t allow this for security reasons, but I found it extremely helpful to visit our daycare while children were there during the day. I was able to see the environment first-hand, and gauge how comfortable I felt sending my son there.”

**“Choose two to three things that are your highest priorities in a school and then identify programs that meet these needs.”**

“Definitely do your research—take in as many tours as you can and observe how the kids are playing with each other, their general interaction with the teachers, etc. I feel strongly that you get a good vibe from a place in the first couple minutes.”

“Every program is uniquely different—public or private. Go visit schools and find the one that hits most of your checklist. Don’t simply rely on your friend’s advice—check for yourself.”

“You can get a good sense of the school from the way you are treated during the admissions process. If the school doesn’t seem like a good fit, or if you feel like you need to pretend to be something other than you are, it’s probably not the best place for your family!”

“Go on tours while kids are in there. Seeing the other kids in the program is really what sold it for us!”  
 “I’d suggest observing teacher-child interaction on your tours and noticing how responsive they are to an individual child, vs. being directive to groups of children.”

## Talk to other parents (you can do this by hanging around pickup).

“Talk to other parents if you have a chance. It might not be comfortable and easy, but it is much ‘easier’ than having an unhappy child and having to make further decisions about your school.”

“Talk to other parents who send their kids to these programs; don’t judge places on tours alone.”

## Plan ahead

“Start early! And, if you may need care up until K, choose a place that will remain stimulating for your child when they’re older than they are now. Once you have a place, talk with the staff about your preferences in order to inform the classroom placement of your child.”

## Other thoughts

“Make sure you’re comfortable with the level of traditional academics versus play.”

“Imagine you’d have to spend a good deal of your time there. Would you look forward to going?”

“See if they give the right balance of love and learning and discipline that suits your goal for your child. Also see if they are willing to work with you on consistency between home and school.”

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“Feedback. One of the hardest things has been to not know what my daughter is doing each day. I would ask specifically how feedback is communicated and if possible can the teachers send a weekly newsletter so things can be discussed with your child at home. Otherwise you are reliant on feedback from a three-year-old!”

“Choose two to three things that are your highest priorities in a school and then identify programs that meet these needs. For us it was location, daily outdoor play, and good hours for working parents. Figure out what these are before you start looking at places if possible.”

“If you are happy at a daycare program, I think it’s worth reaching out to other parents about their plans. I am happy we ended up at [our facility], since most of the other 2.5 year olds in our daycare moved onto preschool and because of the emphasis on outdoor play but ... see above.”

Regarding co-ops. “The number one question that comes up is the co-op model, so make sure you understand the responsibilities up front, as there are time commitments required at different points in the year (school setup/wind-down, Christmas tree sales) to fund and operate the school. Once you understand expectations, it is completely manageable and can actually be fun as you get to know the parents better.”

### Ultimately, relax and try not to stress

“Don’t worry too much. There are a lot of great schools in Park Slope and at some point, any is going to be great, so don’t agonize too much about your final few. Also—go with what works for YOU as an adult.”

“There are so many quality programs in the area and many kids can adapt well to lots of different environments. You’re likely to be happy with whatever program you end up choosing.”

*Try not to stress about it too much. There is so much pressure and anxiety that gets wrapped up in it. Find a place that feels like the right fit, has the right schedule for you and isn’t too far to go in the morning.*

**Was this guide helpful? How could it have been more helpful? Let us know!**

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*Your anonymous review will help us improve our resources and offer better support to parents in Brooklyn and beyond. Thank you!*

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## Glossary of terms related to preschool, daycare, pre-K, 3-K and more

Park Slope Parents understands that the terms involved with the preschool process can be almost as confusing as the process itself. Here are some key definitions to get you up to speed.



**Preschool:** Private education for kids younger than primary-school age. Some preschools begin as early as age two and some end as late as kindergarten, but the age range for preschoolers is generally two to four. Preschools can mirror the Department of Education calendar, requiring people to find (or pay for) extra coverage for school breaks and holidays.



**Nursery school:** While “nursery school” is sometimes used interchangeably with “preschool,” the former term is antiquated. Also, nursery school tends to be geared more toward providing care, while the latter is a structured early educational experience.



**Pre-K or Pre-Kindergarten:** Early education for kids younger than four. Pre-K may be more focused on kindergarten readiness than preschool is (hence the name), and may be public or private. Free public pre-K programs exist mostly in public schools, and some daycares and preschools operate pre-K programs using public funding. However, there are some private Pre-K programs that require you to pay.

New York City has the largest citywide universal pre-K (UPK) initiative in the country. This means that any family with a child turning four by year’s end can apply for Pre-K for the fall of that year. Those applying are guaranteed a pre-K spot beginning that fall, although, for most people in the Park Slope Parents community, that pre-K will not be in the same school for which they are zoned when kindergarten comes around.



**2s and 3s programs:** Daycare and preschool programs geared specifically toward two-year-olds and three-year-olds, respectively. Some may provide a gradual separation experience, with caregivers attending the program at the beginning. There are typically half and full days available, and some programs provide after-hours care for those who need more coverage. These programs are predominantly play-based.



**3-K:** Early education geared specifically toward three-year-olds. Families can apply to 3-K the year their child turns three, while pre-K applications occur the year the child turns four. New York City’s Universal 3-K programs are free and full-day, though the number of free spots (found [here](#)) are limited.

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**Daycare:** A blanket term for various types of daytime child care. Factors that may vary between daycares include age, number of children enrolled, cost, and state licensing status. Daycares, unlike preschools, are typically year-round.



**Mini-camps:** Additional coverage offered by preschools during holidays and winter/spring breaks. Depending on the length of the day, mini-camp coverage can cost \$75–\$130/day.



**Extended hours:** Additional coverage offered by preschools for early and/or late pickup. Extended hours come with an extra charge, which may take the form of a drop-in daily rate or a flat fee and may be higher or lower depending on the timeframe of extended coverage offered.



**Preschool co-ops:** Lower-priced preschools subsidized by parent involvement. While co-ops have full-time teachers on staff as well, they are supported by parents in all aspects, from teaching to administrative duties. In addition, co-op curriculums tend to be more play-based rather than academic. PSP has a guide to starting a preschool co-op [here](#).



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