

early years are learning years

10 Signs of a Great Preschool

If your child is between the ages of 3 and 6 and attends a child care center, preschool, or kindergarten program, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) suggests you look for these 10 signs to make sure your child is in a good classroom.

1 Children spend most of their playing and working with materials or other children. They do not wander aimlessly, and they are not expected to sit quietly for long periods of time.

2 Children have access to various activities throughout the day. Look for assorted building blocks and other construction materials, props for pretend play, picture books, paints and other art materials, and table toys such as matching games, pegboards, and puzzles. Children should not all be doing the same thing at the same time.

3 Teachers work with individual children, small groups, and the whole group at different times during the day. They do not spend all their time with the whole group.

4 The classroom is decorated with children's original artwork, their own writing with invented spelling, and stories dictated by children to teachers.

5 Children learn numbers and the alphabet in the context of their everyday experiences. The natural world of plants and animals and meaningful activities like cooking, taking attendance, or serving snack provide the basis for learning activities.

6 Children work on projects and have long periods of time (at least one hour) to play and explore. Worksheets are used little if at all.

7 Children have an opportunity to play outside every day. Outdoor play is never sacrificed for more instructional time.

8 Teachers read books to children individually or in small groups throughout the day, not just at group story time.

9 Curriculum is adapted for those who are ahead as well as those who need additional help. Teachers recognize that children's different background and experiences mean that they do not learn the same things at the same time in the same way.

10 Children and their parents look forward to school. Parents feel secure about sending their child to the program. Children are happy to attend; they do not cry regularly or complain of feeling sick.

Also ask if the program is accredited by NAEYC. NAEYC-accredited programs complete a rigorous self-study and external review to prove that they meet standards of excellence in early childhood education.

Want more information? Send a self-addressed, stamped, business-size envelope to NAEYC Box 517, 1509 16th Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20036. You'll receive a complimentary brochure entitled "A Good Preschool for Your Child."

Who Attends Preschool or Child Care?

In 1965, just 5% of 3-year-olds attended preschool or nursery school. Today, 41% of 3-year-olds regularly attend a center-based program. Nearly 80% of all children have attended some type of formal program (preschool, nursery school or child care center) before entering first grade.

Despite the increased enrollment, the 1995 National Household Education Survey reveals major differences in preschool attendance on the basis of various demographic factors.

Child's age

Just 7% of infants less than one year of age are enrolled in centers, but this number increases rapidly with age. Three out of four 5-year-olds (75%) not yet enrolled in kindergarten regularly attend a center.

Race/ethnicity

Across all preschool age groups, White and Black children are more likely to attend centers (33% each) than Hispanic children (17%).

Maternal education, household income, and maternal employment

The higher the level of maternal education, the greater the likelihood the child will attend a center. The same trend holds for household income. Although 49% of preschool children with family incomes above \$75,000 attend centers, just 25% of children with family incomes below \$30,000 attend centers. Nearly 40% of children with mothers employed 35 hours or more a week attend centers. Among mothers not in the labor force, just 22% of children attend centers, mostly as 3- and 4-year-olds.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey 1995.