

How to Choose a Good School (for Parents)

It can be daunting to find and choose the right school for your child. The school you choose can have an impact on their development, earliest friends, and even the types of extracurricular activities available to them. By doing your...

Method 1 of 3:

Narrowing Your Choices

1.



Define your ideal school. Before you even start looking, it's important to decide what is most important to you for your child. You can use criteria like foreign language opportunities, strength in arts and sciences, or a variety of other factors you find important to narrow down your choices. Once you decide what is important use the school's website, information available in pamphlets, or in-person visits to make sure the prospective school has proper offerings.^[1]

1. Create a list of values you're looking for in a school with your parenting partner, or even with your child if they are older.
2. A great way to understand how important something is to a school is to look at their available faculty and resources. Schools that have a lot of teachers and a demonstrated willingness to invest will be more likely to be strong in an area.
3. Also keep in mind things like travel time. If it is a public school, find out whether where you live has available bussing. If you are going to need to drive your child to school every morning, make sure the distance and start-times work with your own schedule.

2.



Keep an open mind to multiple options. If your area has a variety of school types ranging from public, private, or charter schools, don't limit yourself. How a school receives its funding, whether government or privately funded, does not necessarily correlate to quality of education. Look around online, go to a school district office, or attend an information fair to get a closer look. ^[2]

3.



Know the numbers. Schools should have statistics available to prospective parents that demonstrate performance on tests, student-teacher ratio and how many of the students continue on to college or employment, depending what you find important. Contact the school's main office and request this information. For public programs, states will make available school district performances. ^[3]

4.



Visit your possible choices. No amount of research, reading, or calling can substitute for an in person examination. Call the school and ask for a tour. Bring your child with you when you go to the school, and make sure you talk to the principal, teachers, and if possible other parents. This is a great time to get an overall feel for what sorts of people run and attend the school to decide whether it's a good fit. Look at the classrooms, the artwork on the walls, and if possible watch a teacher in action so you can see what sorts of interaction and activities your student will get. [4]

1. If a school doesn't encourage pre-enrollment visits, this may be a red flag to inquire about. This may mean that they are not transparent about their teaching methods and it could be predictive of how responsive they will be in the future to any concerns you may have. Choose a school that is transparent and tries to assuage your concerns. Ask why they do not allow pre-enrollment visits.

5.



Ask the right questions. Before you visit the school, create a list of questions based on the values you think are important. When you visit the school, ask your questions. Make sure you know about the

school's hours for your own schedule, what sorts of lunches they serve, their foreign language offerings and sports teams.^[5]

1. If you want to get even more in depth you can ask how their teachers are trained, details on homework and how they handle poor behavior.

6.



Ask around for school recommendations. You may have friends who already have children in a particular school. Find out from them. You may want to consider enrolling your child into the same school.

7.



Know the details of application and enrollment. There can be a lot details that help dictate your decision. If it is a private school, find out about financial aid offerings, whether your child will need to be interviewed or whether admission is lottery based, and whether you'll need to secure recommendations on your child's behalf. Make sure you are able to financially afford tuition prices.^[6]

1. If you want to move forward, you may need to secure paperwork verifying your child's age, identity, vaccinations and residency. If you are unable to do any of this, you'll want to know to avoid any unexpected surprises.

8.



Have a backup plan. Even if you have a dream school, sometimes there are waiting lists, a rigorous application process, or even financial obstacles. Make sure you have other options waiting so that you are not shut out of all your options and forced to send your child to a less than ideal school.

Method 2 of 3:

Choosing a School for Young Children

1.



Decide the environment you want for your child. For preschool there are a lot of different options and approaches. You may want something that is more play-centered versus something that is educational. You may also have an opinion about whether you want your child in a busy environment with lots of activity and classmates or more individual oriented environments that focus on developing particular skills.^[7]



Decide on the educational structure you want. There are many approaches to young child education.^[8]

1. Play-based programs are activities aim to use play to develop skills. This is also known as "child-centered." Many times these classrooms are broken up into different sections such as home or kitchen, science area, water table, reading space, and a space with blocks and toys. This encourages students to gain skills through play.
2. Academic focused programs are typically teacher led and provide more structure. This is similar to a kindergarten setting and aimed at preparing a child for their next steps in school. This is also for parents who want more structure and fear the chaotic environment of play-based programs.

3.



Decide on the educational philosophy important to you. There are different philosophies for how to best teach children and prepare them for success. [9]

1. Montessori. This is a method that was developed in Rome. This focuses on letting children learn at their own pace and allows them to work at whatever educational level they are at. It has less emphasis on teacher directing the children and lets children explore puzzles and toys on their own, being rewarded by the successful completion of a task and not verbal reinforcements from an adult. This is great for parents who want their children to develop leadership skills and independence. [10]
2. Waldorf. This is a method emphasizes reading, creative learning, reading, singing and acting. There is also a great emphasis on cooperation amongst students. One thing that is unique about this method is the exclusion of media such as computers, videos, electronics and no focus on academic tasks like tests, homework or even desks. This method is great for parents who want their child to develop individualism. [11]
3. Reggio Emilia. This is a style that encourages students to explore and engage in project based learning. Lessons are based on the interest of the students. Instead of the teacher directing questions, it might ask the student to explore outside and to ask questions and pursue education through their own encounters and interests. The projects are then framed by the student to encourage this. [12]

4.



Investigate the staff and administration. This is important because they will be the ones directing the curriculum, instilling values, and disciplining your child. Meet with them and find out their methods and views on things of importance.

5. **Tour the school.** Bring your child with you when you visit the school to determine if it would be a good fit for them. Inspect the facilities, ask about the teachers' qualifications, and get a feel for what kind of environment the school has. Find out what the daily schedule is and ask about parent involvement.^[13]

Method 3 of 3:

Choosing a School for Older Children

1.



Take into account social and emotional factors. Whereas a younger child may not have built up a lot of friends, older children looking for a middle or high school will have important social and emotional factors that affect their well-being. If your child already has a group of friends that have a positive impact on their life, you may want to not break this arrangement up. Also, things like bullying can become more prominent in older children. Find a school that has a strong anti-bullying policy and helps your child build up solid social skills. [14]

1. Finding out what sort of guidance counselor availability a school has can be one important factor in limiting bullying.

2.



Take elective offerings into consideration. Around this age your children will start to be developing interests and schools will have offerings beyond the basics of education like math, English, and writing. Technology courses, foreign languages, and other special offerings can really distinguish one school from the next. Ask to see what electives the school has and sit down to talk to your kid and see how they may align with their interests.

1. It is also a good idea to ask the school specifics about their programs, such as student-to-faculty ratios, faculty training, and funding available to support students.

3.



Ask about their post-graduate planning program. In high school your child may be starting to consider whether they want to continue on to college or pursue a trade. Schools that offer AP classes for college credit, a guidance program for navigating the application process, and even internship options are great for someone looking to continue on to college. ^[15]

1. If your child is interested in a trade, see if the school has an option to receive hands-on or technical training in various fields.
2. Ask for statistics about where graduate go to college and what sorts of schools they get into. This can give you a general idea how well prepared students are for continuing on to college.
3. See if they have options for students who are advances or excel at subjects. A high school with flexibility and a willingness to challenge students who go above and beyond can be great preparation for academic excellence down the road.

4.



See what extracurricular activities they offer. By the time your children reach middle or high school, they may have interests in a particular sport, playing a musical instrument, or perhaps as a budding thespian. Schools that are able to financially support your child's interests outside the classroom can provide a more edifying educational experience and help make them into more rounded maturing adolescents.

1. Find out how prospective schools rank in any competitive sports your child is interested in.



Decide whether you want a private or public school. While where a school receives its funding does not necessarily make it better or worse than another school, there are differences between public and private schools worth paying attention to. Perhaps you want the structure of a religious education, in which case a private religious based school may be a good option. You'll also want to take into consideration other factors, like whether your child has friends in the community already, how far you are able to drive, and what you are able to financially afford.^[16]

1. The main difference between public and private school options is funding. This can play a role in deciding the type of education your child will get. Public schools are funded by the government and thus typically have to follow set curriculums. This will mean it will be largely standardized and have to adhere to certain standards. Private schools do not have to adhere to these and their independence can be a strength. If your child has special needs, public schools are mandated by law to accommodate, whereas private schools will vary from one institution to another.^[17]

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