NPC
SUPPORTING PARENTS
SUPPORTING CHILDREN

EARLY YEARS

How do I choose the best pre-school for my child?

How do I choose the best pre-school for my child?

It is widely understood that pre-school care and education offers many long-term benefits to a child's overall development throughout their primary school years and beyond. However, it is also said that the full benefits of pre-school can only be felt if it is quality pre-school care and education. As a parent therefore it's important to be able to recognise what quality looks like. This can sometimes be puzzling particularly if this is the first time for you and your child to visit or join a pre-school.

It is always a good sign in a pre-school when children and their parents are made to feel welcome every time they visit. When pre-schools work in partnership with parents and value parents being present in the pre-school, it can improve how and what your child learns now and into the future.

Listed below are 8 examples of just some of the things to look out for when choosing a pre-school which can indicate quality:

SUPPORTIVE AND CARING RELATIONSHIPS ARE ENCOURAGED

It's important that pre-schools operate in such a way that children and families can develop a relationship with the pre-school teacher. For this to be possible it usually means that your child is in the care of the same pre-school teacher most days. This allows you and your child to get to know the teacher and the teacher to know you and your child helping to develop connections.

WANTING TO GET TO KNOW YOUR CHILD THROUGH YOU

Pre-schools will often ask you for information about your child and their family, so they can get to know your child better. Knowing unique things about each child, like a favourite pet's name, languages spoken at home and the names of brothers, sisters and grandparents help pre-school teachers develop a relationship with children and understand them more.

CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IS SHARED

As parents you can tell your pre-school teacher lots of things about your child which can support their learning and development within the pre-school. You know your child's personality, strengths, likes, dislikes and the areas where they need a little help, so it's both important for your child's learning and development and for the pre-school teacher that you are invited to share this information.

There is a good chance that your child's pre-school teacher can also tell you lots of interesting things about your child; children often display skills and even preferences for things that they haven't shown you at home. For example, your child might like to be helpful with younger children, showing great kindness and patience, or they might enjoy a certain food that you wouldn't usually have at home.

OPEN DOOR POLICY

Some pre-schools have an open-door policy, this is where no appointment is necessary for a parent to visit the pre-school and parents are made to feel welcome at any time. This can give parents the chance to have regular informal chats with their child's pre-school teacher at drop off and collection times.

Being able to chat informally to your child's pre-school teacher is useful because often as a parent you can have little pieces of information about your child which will really help their day in pre-school go well. For example, you may wish to tell your child's pre-school teacher they didn't sleep very well so could be tired, or they are excited to finish off a Lego building they started yesterday. It can also be reassuring to know that you can see your child at any time, particularly if it is your child's first time away from you or your family.

LEARNING JOURNALS

Some pre-schools have more organised activities to help pre-school teachers and parents to both be a part of children's learning and development in a combined way. For example, many pre-schools have Learning Journals for each child. This is a handmade book that follows children's individual learning and development throughout the year. It uses items such as photographs of children playing and pieces of their artwork, and sometimes photographs or artwork from home are also included if the child wishes. Some pre-schools also use online systems to communicate and share children's learning with parents.

When there are chances for parents and pre-schools to come together and share children's experiences it supports children to feel a sense of belonging, and parents and teachers can both feel more involved.

PARENT HANDBOOK

A Parent Handbook is a collection of useful information put together by the pre-school that will help you understand how the pre-school works on a day to day basis. This should tell you about the service and its policies and procedures such as opening and closing times. Some pre-schools have a Partnership with Parents' Policy in the handbook. This policy will explain how the pre-school will go about building a relationship with you and your family, and how you and your child can have a meaningful voice in your child's early education and become involved in the pre-school. There are a number of policies that your pre-school is required to share with you on registration. Contact our helpline for more information on early years policies Tel: 01 8874477 or email helpline@npc.ie.

THE VOICE OF THE CHILD IS VALUED

It is important that your child is seen as an individual in their pre-school and each child's individual voice is heard. The word "voice" is a term which refers to more than just your child's spoken voice, but also includes your child's preferences, choices, thoughts and feelings. For this to happen the surroundings that children play in should be able to offer children choices about important things like who they play with, what they play, where they play and for how long, also giving them opportunities to rest if they wish.

When choosing a pre-school for the first time it may be difficult to decide if the pre-school is doing this. However, some clues that a pre-school thinks your child's individual voice is important is when pre-school routines are flexible, for example children can finish an activity or game, even if it runs a little over time or they have an opportunity to go back to it.

Another sign is when children's work is displayed around the pre-school at their eye level with paintings or drawings showing children's imagination and creativity. For example, some children might like to paint a purple pumpkin in December or a Christmas tree in March! What children are thinking about and what they like to draw or paint isn't always the same as other children or adults, or as traditions or the seasons might tell us. So, when you see this in children's art it shows that children are supported in being creative and given the time and opportunity to figure things out for themselves.

LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

Play Play Play!!! It is widely understood that play is the most natural and effective way for children to learn between the ages of birth and six years. Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in pre-schools, informs us that when children play they are learning a great deal about themselves and everything that goes on in the world around them while having fun. Therefore, giving children the time and opportunity to play freely and imaginatively, is one of the most important and valuable things that a pre-school can offer your child.

Some signs that learning through play and creativity is an important part of the pre-school day are that:

- Children are given lots of time to play
- Children are given choices about who and what they play with and for how long
- Children have access to lots of areas in the pre-school that encourage play such as a home corner (could be a space set up as a kitchen)
- Children have access to a construction area where children can play and build with different materials using their imagination and creativity.
- Children can access an art area at all times where they can freely express their ideas and imagination through free drawing, painting, modelling and creating throughout the day (free meaning their own ideas and not teacher lead)
- Toy boxes are labelled with both words and photos, so children know where to find and return toys which will support independence
- Children are given opportunities to play both indoors and outdoors when possible throughout the day

OUTDOOR PLAY OPPORTUNITIES

Outdoor play is important for your child and it has many health and well-being benefits which cannot be matched indoors in the classroom. Things like running, jumping, climbing and adventurous play are not only fun for children, but they are also important for your child's growth and development.

When considering your pre-school's outdoor play area keep in mind that for your child to get the most out of the outdoor play it should be a space where children can be curious and play using their imagination with the opportunity to do things like running, balancing, digging, climbing and exploring.

Not all pre-school services will have their own garden attached to the pre-school, but they usually can still provide quality access to an outdoor space each day. Pre-schools will usually look for weatherproof clothing that allows your child to play outside in all weathers. These can include welly boots, waterproof jackets and gloves to keep your child warm and dry, and sun cream and hats in warm weather to protect them from the sun. It's important that you provide your children with these items, so they can enjoy outdoor play whatever the weather.

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