



# choosing a preschool

By Maria Johnson \*

Choosing the best fit for your child's early education is vitally important to your child's development, wellbeing and early formative experiences. Here are some key things to consider when making that choice.

As new learners, everything is a discovery and a child's desire to know, uncover, deduce and reinforce is an adventure. During the early years, we have the opportunity to plant the seeds for a love of learning which will grow for the rest of their lives. Parents and family are key in their children's development. Most children experience much of their early learning within the home. In New Zealand, we have recognised the criticality of the home environment as a major influence, and early education and preschool as a critical and positive supplement.

**our preschool ece landscape**  
In New Zealand, your child is not required to attend formal ECE before they begin school, but most do at some stage. Some services begin at birth, but most children begin at age two or three.

NZ has a strong and diverse range of ECE services with over 5000 providers. Some work with parents and whānau; others work directly with young children.

The New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum, Te Whāriki, links to the NZ curriculum in schools and forms the learning framework for most centres. It expresses a common view of what makes the curriculum for the early years distinctive and important. There is also an increasing commitment to addressing the issues faced by children growing up in a multicultural society with more than one cultural heritage.

## to begin

Services in New Zealand are all very different and vary considerably in their driving philosophy, programmes, teachers, facilities and policies. Parents need time to do some investigation. Some factors affecting your decision are obvious. Ask other parents what they like about the preschools they have chosen/are choosing. Word of mouth is your best source of finding out information. Is proximity to home or work important to you? Contact a few preschools on your list and ask about the fundamentals. Most will have informative publications and/or websites to describe admission age, days and hours, fees, class sizes and ratios, etc.

## getting serious

What is important to you? You are your child's biggest advocate and the best judge of what type of environment he or she will do best in. Think about your child's personality. Are they shy? Do they make

friends easily? What do you want from your child's preschool? Are you looking for a programme with some structure or one that is play-based? And so on...

When you have narrowed down your options – and sometimes this will be made for you, based on fees or availability at preschools – then you need to visit the preschools/centres. It pays to ring and make an appointment so you will be given the time needed to show you around properly. Your instinct will tell you if it feels the right place for your child. Were you and your child made to feel welcome? Were you given enough time to have your questions answered? Did teachers take time to interact with you and your child? Were the facilities stimulating and inviting? Is there competence, love and care in the atmosphere or is it superficial: on show for you?

## philosophy and balance

A very important factor in your choice is finding out the centre's philosophy and values. The fundamental principle they subscribe to may be traditional or a hybrid; it may follow the teachings and ideas of Piaget, Steiner, Reggio Emilia or Montessori. You may find programmes run through churches where religion is part of the everyday curriculum; cooperative programmes run by parents; affiliated with community groups; or state-run centres (Kindergartens).

You will surely have a view about the balance between play, planned learning, socialisation and care. Most centres will have elements of all these, but the relative balance between them is an important discriminator in your choice.

## questions to ask teachers:

- 1 How long have you been an Early Childhood teacher?
- 2 How long have you been with this preschool/centre?
- 3 What is your teaching philosophy?
- 4 What ways do you believe children learn best?
- 5 How you will handle children's inappropriate behaviour?
- 6 What kinds of rules will you expect the children to follow?
- 7 How do you assess 'progress'?
- 8 In what way(s) do you provide parent communication?
- 9 How do you feel about parents visiting or volunteering?



## having identified the centre's philosophy, can you observe it in operation?

- 1 How are the teachers relating to the children?
- 2 Do you hear teachers encouraging the children to be confident learners by inviting them to make choices, decisions and be part of the activities in progress?
- 3 Do they treat children, families and each other with kindness, respect and care?
- 4 Do you hear talking, laughing, singing, asking questions, and expression of ideas?
- 5 Do you see children moving about the room, engaged in activities, working with their hands, exploring materials and at play with one another?
- 6 What is the balance between free play and directed activity; indoors and out; informal and structured learning; and individual, small group and larger group activity?
- 7 Is there an outdoor area where children can run, climb, walk, explore, climb, and participate in other types of play?
- 8 Does the environment reflect colour, stimulation, ongoing maintenance, pride and systematic organisation?

Trust your instincts. If it doesn't feel right, it isn't. However, if you like what you see so far, bring your child along for a visit and see how they respond.

## lastly

There really isn't a recipe for helping you choose the 'perfect' preschool for your child. In the end, it will be your job to find a preschool that seems to be the right fit for you and your child. It is important that you love the preschool and feel accepted and appreciated as the parent of your child. Trust your own instincts in the process and find a preschool that makes you comfortable and confident leaving your child, making the early learning years for your child and your family a successful experience.

## quality assurance

New Zealand's Education Review Office (ERO) publishes school/centre reports every three years on average and more frequently if required. These evaluate a preschool's performance. Reports are freely available to the public on the ERO website [www.ero.govt.nz/Early-Childhood-School-Reports/](http://www.ero.govt.nz/Early-Childhood-School-Reports/). Early-Childhood-Reports, or you can ask for a hard copy from the preschool or from any ERO office. Look for the latest report.

- Most ECE providers are licensed by the Ministry of Education and must comply with the Early Childhood Education Regulations. The regulations set standards and expectations for curriculum development, teacher qualifications, group size and ratios, health and safety practices, facilities and premises, and governance, management and administration requirements. See [www.lead.ece.govt.nz](http://www.lead.ece.govt.nz)
- Centres must meet these in order to maintain their licence to operate and qualify for government funding.

If you are interested in homebased care like that offered by Porse and Bamodos, or a nanny service, check out the following link to our story about 'Choosing early childhood education for your child': [www.totstoteens.co.nz/category/preschool](http://www.totstoteens.co.nz/category/preschool)

\* Maria is married with four teenage sons. She owns five preschools called Little School. Maria is primary and early childhood qualified and has worked in education for over 25 years. She is also the President of the Early Childhood Council of NZ.