

**RESOURCES
ON CALL**



The Toddler Program/ Preschool Kit

*A comprehensive
guide to finding,
evaluating,
and choosing
programs for
preschoolers*

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NURSERY SCHOOLS AND PRESCHOOLS

For many of our children, school bells start ringing at an early age. The following includes questions to ask and factors to consider when deciding on the preschool that is best for your child and your family.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A NURSERY SCHOOL, A PRESCHOOL AND A TRANSITIONAL PROGRAM?

Today, “preschool” and “nursery school” can be considered the generic terms for a variety of programs available for children prior to beginning kindergarten. These programs may also be referred to as day care or child care centers. Some programs are based on a particular educational philosophy such as Montessori.

It is helpful to think of preschools and nursery schools as programs designed for children 2 1/2 years to 5 years old. They usually offer half-day programs with a possible option for extended hours, and often provide flexible enrollments, so you can choose two, three, or five mornings a week. Some preschool programs also offer kindergarten programs.

Child care center programs usually offer a full-day, year-round program that is geared to working parents. A quality child care program has a curriculum designed to meet the appropriate developmental needs of children.

Transitional programs are designed to bridge the gap between preschool and kindergarten when a child is not old enough or mature enough to enter public kindergarten (entrance age for kindergarten may vary within the state). Not all communities offer such programs. And, in those communities that do, transitional programs are usually privately operated.

Find out from your local school district what the entrance age is for your child to begin kindergarten. Your child's preschool teacher can be a good resource to help you to decide if a transitional program is appropriate.

WHAT YOUR TODDLER REALLY NEEDS

As your toddler learns how to balance the need for security with his desire for autonomy, negativism surfaces. “No” is his favorite word as he strives to establish an independent identity from you. Temper tantrums reflect the intensity and passion your toddler feels about each and every decision. You and his caregiver need to recognize and accept this negative behavior as part of the way he develops self-esteem, but also help him learn to contain it. Consistency is key.

Learning. A toddler's thrust toward independence carries with it an energy for exploration. He'll thrive with a caregiver who'll encourage him to try new things on his own without being too overprotective. Play remains his most powerful way of learning.

Tantrums. Although you or his caregiver may trigger temper tantrums, they come from your child's own inner turmoil and are necessary for him to develop self-discipline. He needs space to resolve his feelings; efforts to stop him will only prolong the tantrum. Just make sure he's in a place where he cannot hurt himself.

Discipline. A toddler will explore the limits of tolerance with the various adults in his life, and the methods of discipline you and his caregiver use should be consistent. Remember, discipline means teaching, not punishment. How you or his caregiver react to any single incident is not as important as what you teach him.

Temperament. When frustrated, a toddler will often behave aggressively and hit, bite or pull hair. He still lacks self-control and needs help channeling his anger. He'll need to be monitored closely, since his high energy level may put him in danger (for example, he may run into the street). Although he likes to play with other children his age, he has a hard time sharing and won't interact with them until he's a bit older.

Toilet Training. Don't push it. When he's ready, he'll show you. Agreement on timing and method between you and the caregiver is most important.

Food. Mealtimes may become a battleground. He may eat less or refuse foods. Don't force him to eat, but have his caregiver eat with him - he may try to imitate her.

WHAT YOUR PRESCHOOLER REALLY NEEDS

Your 3 to 5 year old needs someone who will foster her courage to try new things - physically, socially and intellectually. She'll need help in learning to make friends, since she is just discovering and trying to master what social relationships are all about. She'll also need help developing her newfound sense of self, which she will express through a know-it-all attitude. This sense of self is influenced by the way others treat her, so her caregiver should know how to give constructive criticism gently. She desperately wants to please and will seek reassurance constantly. She'll need help expressing her feelings verbally. She'll constantly ask "Why?" and will thrive with someone who has abundant patience. But most of all she needs someone who will sincerely pay attention to her.

Meals. Your preschooler is ready to eat only at mealtimes, although an afternoon snack is fine. She needs to look forward to the conversation and the fun of family meals. Setting up her day so that this can occur is important.

Toilet Training. Regression can occur during a stressful period, such as the birth of a sibling. Accidents will make your child feel bad, it's important not to make her feel bad; it's important not to make her feel guilty. Repeated mistakes are likely because of the pressure she feels from others, or because she is just not ready to be trained. Pressure will only make her feel inadequate.

Fears. Her widening world will bring new fears. She may worry about loud noises, barking dogs or strange places. These fears may be based in reality, and she may need help in sorting out and expressing her feelings.

Imagination and Fantasy. She may develop an imaginary friend, who is valuable in enriching her private world and helping her deal with reality. She'll need someone who will respect her fantasy life.

Peers. Not only can your child learn behavior patterns from her peers, she can test her social skills with them as well.

THE CHANGING NEEDS OF A 3 YEAR OLD

Does your 3 year old need a change in his life?

This may sound like an oxymoron. Child development specialists are telling us, after all, that young children do best with routine, not with change. But they also say that if ever change is called for in a young child's life, age 3 may be the time for it.

A child who has just turned or is turning 3 is a complex little person, they explain, a person with very specific and changing cognitive, emotional and social needs. Whether he or she has been at home for these first three years, or in family or center-based day care, and despite how good the situation has been thus far, it's time for an evaluation.

“Cognitively, this is a good time for change,” says early childhood educator Joanne Szamreta. “The question is, how much?”

It depends mostly on your child.

The surest way to know she needs a change is if she seems bored. That's not necessarily easy to gauge in a child so young, but developmental specialist Polly Greenberg says a likely sign of boredom is a 3 year old who suddenly and repeatedly no longer wants to go to the program that she has always loved.

“That's the best indication that something is missing in terms of age-appropriate stimulation or social relationships, especially age mates and enrichment opportunities,” says Greenberg. She works with parents, children and teachers and is editor of *Young Children*, the journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

To maximize potential for growth, a 3 year old needs to play and interact with children about the same age and stage of development.

“This is an age when they use other children as a resource, so they need to be within the same developmental range,” says Szamreta, who is an assistant professor of education at Lesley College. Her area of specialty is early childhood and child care.

By that she means children need to be “somewhat matched, not equals, but having some developmental levels overlapping, the most important of which is the social one, because that's what simulates other kinds of learning.”

While a typical 3 year old will enjoy playing with a 2 year old or a 5 year old or an adult, Greenberg says, “it's another 3 year old who will engage him in a discussion that will stimulate him the most, who will challenge him at exactly the level at which he needs to be challenged, who will egg him on to a more advanced level of play and exploration.”

Part of what's happening is that a 3 year old has a new found ability to connect ideas to words, according to Eleonora Villegas-Reimers, an assistant professor of education at Wheelock College who specializes in preschoolers.

“At 2, she is drawing to enjoy the colors; now, there is representation. At 2, she talks and chats; now, she has a mental image of what she is talking about,” she says.

The 3 year old most likely in need of a change, then, is the one who doesn't have much exposure to other 3 year olds. Perhaps she's at home full time, with no age mates in the neighborhood, or she's in family day care and is the oldest in a group of babies and toddlers or in the middle of an age distribution that includes 5 year olds who go off to kindergarten for half a day.

Luckily, there are ways to solve the age/development gap without leaving your current program. If there's a vacancy coming up, Greenberg suggests asking the provider or director to

fill it with another 3 year old, rather than with an infant. An equally good alternative is for a provider to structure activities several times a week with another provider who also has 3 year-olds.

Making sure your child is playing with other 3 year olds on a regular basis is not enough, however, says Villegas-Reimers. You also need to ask: “Is the curriculum giving her what she needs?”

Here are some things to look for in a curriculum for a 3 year old:

- **A routine to the day.** Three year olds need structure, says Villegas-Reimers. “Not rigidity, but knowing there's a sequence to the day: first comes outside play, then nap, followed by snack.”
- **An equivalent to circle time.** “Even in a group of three, 3 year olds benefit from a public time to share ideas,” says Szamreta. “This could happen when the babies are sleeping.”
- **A variety of more complex activities,** including beginning math manipulatives such as a scale for balancing and cups for measuring; beginning science activities such as mixing food coloring and paints; exposure to nature through plants and bugs; the opportunity to “write,” where a child may make her own book, or dictate a story to the provider.
- **Outings,** including trips to the library, to a local pet store, to the fire station.
- **Props and dress-up clothes** for dramatic play.
- **Conversations.** A provider or teacher needs to be asking questions, probing answers and listening all the time.

There is another reason to consider moving to another program, according to Szamreta . “If your child is very social and thrives on activity and stimulation, he might enjoy a larger grouping more.”

Evaluating your 3 year-old's needs

- Research shows that children with preschool experience tend to have an easier time making the transition to kindergarten.
- Mixed age groupings can be effective for 3 and 4 year olds, as long as they are developmentally appropriate.
- For a child who's at home, a half day preschool program several mornings a week affords plenty of peer group experience.
- Some 3 year-olds have a hard time making changes. Help with the transition by sending a favorite blankie or stuffed animal or family photo in the backpack. Try to have the same settling-in routine each morning, but don't drag out your goodbye.
- Even playing with just one other 3 year old routinely can make a difference for your child, as long as they are compatible.

PLANNING A VISIT

The best way to choose a program for your child is to spend time in a classroom during a regular operating day. Keep in mind the best time to visit is in the morning. Try to include drop-off time in your observations so you can see how the children, parents, and teachers interact.

WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD I ASK MYSELF?

As you begin the process of choosing a preschool program for your child, you should consider what priorities are important to you and your family. Some factors to consider are type of care, location of the school, number of hours and cost. Also, the program may ask for a specific commitment from you as a parent.

Questions to ask about the program

- What do I want my child to gain from this experience?
- Do I think this program offers my child that opportunity?
- Does it meet the needs of my family as well?
- Did I see a variety of age-appropriate material readily available to the children and are the materials in good condition ?
- Are the staff friendly and attentive to the children?
- Did I feel comfortable and welcomed during my visit?
- Were the school policies clearly spelled out?
- Were all my questions answered?
- Did I like the physical space?
- Was the school well-maintained, clean, and safe?
- Do I think my child will be comfortable and able to grow in this program?

Questions to ask during the visit

- What is the school philosophy?
- How long has the school been in existence'?
- Who develops the curriculum?
- How many children are in each class'? The school?
- What is the teacher-to-child ratio?
- How long has the director been affiliated with the program?
- Does the program offer a developmentally appropriate curriculum?
- What does it offer in the way of activities, both indoor and outdoor?
- Is the program flexible enough to adapt to individual interests and needs?
- How long has the average teacher been there?
- How long has the teacher who would care for my child been there?
- What kind of training are teachers given?
- Are teachers encouraged to attend workshops and conferences?
- How is discipline handled?
- Can you please briefly describe a typical morning for my child?

- What chances are there for parents to become involved?
- Can I visit my child whenever I want?
- What is the school's health care policy?
- Do you have any written materials about the program?

SHOULD I TALK WITH THE TEACHERS? IF SO, WHAT SHOULD I SAY?

It's not always possible to talk with teachers in any depth during a visit because their primary responsibility is to be with the children. But there's much to be gained by observing the interactions between the children and teacher(s). If you'd like to meet with the teacher, ask if there is a time when a meeting could be arranged - in person or by telephone (outside of class time). Your observations of the class are an excellent place to begin the discussion. Other questions follow:

Questions to ask teachers

- Can you tell me about your philosophy of teaching?
- Do you have a set curriculum for the class?
- What do you enjoy most about this age child?
- What do the children seem to enjoy the most?
- How do you handle discipline in class?
- Have you ever had a child who was aggressive and hurt other children? How did you handle this?

There should be consistency between what you have seen in your visit, what the head of the school told you, and what the teachers say. If this is the case and you are comfortable, then you'll want to go to the next step - checking references.

Ask to speak with parents who children are in the school. especially a family who has a child in the same class as yours would be. Ask neighbors, friends, or co-workers if they know anything about the school. Go back for a second visit. Talk about your visits with a friend. Give yourself some time to think about it. In the end, it is your decision and you need to feel comfortable with it.

GOOD QUESTIONS FOR A PRESCHOOL DIRECTOR

When choosing a preschool, how can you be sure you're making the right choice? Here are three questions to ask:

- *Exactly how will my child spend each day?* Ask to see daily schedules for your child's age-group. You'll be better able to judge the quality of the school's program that way.
- *How long has my child's teacher been working for the school?* Youngsters need consistency; avoid preschools with high staff turnover.
- *How does the school deal with emergencies?* This indicates how well the school is run. A director who is reluctant to spell out a plan of action should make you think twice.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A TODDLER CLASS

The first time I set eyes on a brochure for baby music classes, I was shocked at its references to such things as “tuition” and “semesters.” I had visions of my 18 month old son, Jordan, heading off to toddler college. Yet I was intrigued by the notion of an organized program with other children his age that would introduce him to the world of singing, dancing, and musical instruments. And I liked the idea of his having a “real” music teacher who, unlike me, might actually sing on key.

Like most parents, I'd love to expose my child to a variety of different activities, but I worry that I don't have enough time or energy to organize them myself. Toddler classes sound like a perfect solution. But are children this age really able to get something out of structured group sessions? If so, how do you choose a quality class? And if you decide not to enroll, will your child miss out on an essential aspect of development?

Toddler classes shouldn't be like school

Although the term “class” implies that 18 month olds will be expected to follow specific instructions, you should avoid any program that purports to “teach” anything, recommends T. Berry Brazelton, MD, clinical professor of pediatrics emeritus at Harvard Medical School. However, classes that are designed for *play*, and that help toddlers learn about themselves, are just fine.”

“Participation in these programs is certainly not necessary for optimal child development, says Amy Bamforth, an early childhood specialist in Boston City Hospital's division of developmental and behavioral pediatrics. The real value of toddler classes is that they support parents and caregivers, and provide a nice, fun addition to daily life with a child.”

It's also beneficial for your child to spend time regularly with a group of other toddlers. This helps a child develop a keener awareness of others, says Bamforth. But children can also have this type of social interaction with siblings, in a weekly play group, or at the park.

Parents, too, stand to gain from being part of a group. “When you see 13 other mothers with babies, you get perspective on what types of behaviors are „normal,“” says Burton White, Ph.D., director of The Center for Parent Education, in Boston.

Always try to observe a class before enrolling your child so that you have a better feel for its structure and dynamics. Cleanliness is another important factor to keep in mind, particularly with classes that use equipment. Inspect items like mats and balls to make sure they aren't dirty. And avoid classes whose organizers make an overzealous sales pitch, “because no program is a „must“ for your child,” says White.

THE PRESCHOOL SPACE

Just as a beautifully set table tells a dinner guest, “We were expecting you and we've put out some things you'll like,” so, too, does a preschool classroom speak to 3 and 4 year olds.

The way the room is arranged, the materials that are put out, whether the room is neat and organized or messy and cluttered, all this talks to our children in a loud, clear voice that we, as parents, often never hear.

Hopefully, a child comes away feeling, “I know what I can do here, I feel welcome and secure.” Once in a while, though, the message she gets is more like this: “It's too confusing, I don't feel good here. “

As you spend time visiting prospective preschools with an eye to next year's enrollment, it is good to pay attention to the nonverbal messages these spaces send. It could make the difference between an experience that is satisfying or disappointing to both you and your child.

Space is important for a preschooler.

“Kids this age learn more through their bodies than from words. Everything is sensory for them,” says Elizabeth Jones, an early childhood educator at Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena, Calif. Her area of research is how environment fosters learning.

It's no small thing, if a child doesn't feel good in the space she's occupying. “That means she won't play. And if she isn't free to play, she isn't going to learn,” says child developmentalist Mary Ucci of Wellesley College.

She urges parents to visit prospective schools early in the morning, before children arrive. “You can learn as much from an empty classroom as you can from talking to the teachers or watching them with the kids,” she says. “That child sees what's right in front of her,” she explains.

The water table. The sand table. The table for play dough.

Together, the three form a kind of triangle at the entrance, smack in the middle of the room. This is not happenstance. “These are activities kids are most comfortable with,” Ucci explains. “As they walk in each morning, there's an instant reminder: „Here's something you like.” It's security. And because these activities are centrally located, a child can see what's happening elsewhere in the room from a safe place.”

From this vantage point, what he sees is that he has choices. Young children divide their world by function, according to early childhood educator Diane Trister Dodge. The classroom should be divided by function, too: blocks, dramatic play or dress-up, manipulative toys, sand, water, reading, painting, arts. Interest areas may vary from school to school, but they should always make logical sense.

Just having the interest areas is not enough, however. Dodge says preschoolers need boundaries and definition to the areas. Not only does that help them identify what happens where, but it also provides security and consistency. Ucci's classrooms, for instance, are defined by small dividers, furniture and color - blue for the reading area, yellow for crafts, etc.

Children also need to see how they can make their way from one area to another.

“You should see pathways that are clearly delineated,” says Jones, not by lines on the floor but by the way furniture is positioned. “It's intimidating if a child has to walk through the middle of some other child's activity.” Jones is the author of *“The Play's The Thing”* (Teachers College Press, 1992), and *“Emergent Curriculum”* (NAEYC, 1994).

The areas themselves should be neat and well organized, according to Dodge, who is

president of Teaching Strategies Inc., which develops curriculum and training materials for children through age 8. A lot of clutter makes children feel uncomfortable and tells you the staff doesn't value the materials. Blocks, for instance, should be on low shelves and organized by size and shape.

“If they're just tossed into a toy box,” says Jones, “a child can never see what possibilities there are for them. An adult has to invest thought into arranging them. “

On this day at Ucci's school, the teachers in the 4 year olds' room have used the block area to strategically line up circus animals, one next to the other, each facing front.

“The circus is in town and the kids are talking about it,” she says. “By lining the animals up the way they are in the ring, the kids can see we are responding to their interests. We're telling them, „We care about what you care about.””

Over on the art table is a message that might be lost on the typical parent. The table is set with six places, each with its own piece of paper and its own set of crayons.

“It's right after Halloween,” explains Ucci. “Kids are stressed.” Normally, there might be two buckets of crayons for them to share. Today, she reasons, that would add to their stress. “So each gets his own. The message is, „Relax.””

One reason Ucci tells prospective parents to visit a classroom before children arrive is to get a sense of the planning and effort teachers put in.

Have materials already been set out? “If they are, you know this school takes time to plan. If teachers are putting things out as children arrive, it's reasonable to conclude that not much thought and planning goes on here,” says Ucci.

She points to the play-dough table where three circles of black dough have been set out with tiny teddy bear molds. Here, too, is a message most parents would miss:

“These kids are still scared by Halloween, but they are fascinated by it, too. The teachers brainstormed a way to help them cope. They made black play dough, which the kids will notice because it's unusual. Black signals the scariness of Halloween. But the molds are teddy bears, the height of security.”

Ucci has worked in dark, cramped places, too. It takes more creativity, she admits, but she reassures parents that good teachers can work wonders with less than wonderful space.

“Look for a place that appeals to a child's senses. Look for a place where a child can feel a sense of control, where she can feel independent,” she says. “Look for a school that tells them, „This place is for you.””

SIGNS THAT SOMETHING IS AMISS

If you come across the following items in a preschool classroom, consider them red flags. They would send negative messages to your preschooler:

- Shelves within children's reach that contain items they shouldn't touch along with things that are meant for them - for instance, if the teacher's pocketbook, some disinfectant and some puzzles were on the same shelf. That tells a child this is not a place where she can let down her guard.
- A room that isn't clean and relatively neat. “Just because young children can't keep from spilling juice and don't know how to clean up after themselves doesn't mean they prefer it that way,” says Mary Ucci, director of the Child Studies Center at Wellesley College.
- Shelves that don't have picture labels on them for children to retrieve and return items. That

tells them, “We don't trust you to get your own things, or put them back.”

- Interest areas that seem not to have enough equipment. That can cause a child to worry about not getting her fair share.
- A teacher who can't walk through the room with you and explain why the space is used as it is, or how each area fosters physical, social, emotional and cognitive growth. It probably means she hasn't given much thought to such things.
- Walls decorated with commercial material instead of the children's artwork. “They need to see themselves reflected in the space. It's more important to have their names on the walls than the ABCs,” says early childhood educator Elizabeth Jones.
- Computer in the classroom. While you may be pleased to see a computer, your child may not be. Kids can become stressed if there isn't an appropriate mechanism to make sure they each get their turn. In fact, Elizabeth Jones prefers not to find computers in preschools except in populations where kids aren't being exposed to them elsewhere.
- Dolls, books and props that don't reflect the culture of the children.
- Equipment that looks unsafe.
- If you're visiting during school hours, children who look disorganized or aimless, or a room that looks too neat. Either could be a sign that children don't feel comfortable in the space.

SUMMER PROGRAMS FOR PRESCHOOLERS

Most summer programs, camps, and activities for toddlers and preschoolers are day programs. In evaluating which one will be best for your child, consider the following:

- **Hours:** If your child still naps, will the program allow that to continue? If you need extended care (before or after the program each day), is it available?
- **Location:** Is it convenient for someone to transport your child to and from the program?
- **Licensing:** If applicable, is the program certified or licensed?
- **Cost:** Are there any extra fees for equipment, food, materials, field trips, or other items?
- **Types of activities:** What types of activities are offered? Is your child excited about these activities?

Once you narrow down your options to two or three programs, do some in-depth research on each one:

- Visit each site for the program and make sure they meet your standards for cleanliness and safety.
- Inquire about the ratio of children to instructors and about the training of the instructors. A good ratio for 3- and 4-year-olds is one instructor per 6 to eight children. The more potentially dangerous the activity (swimming, for example), the more supervision children need.
- Ask about the philosophy of the program and what is expected from the kids in it.
- Find out how the children are disciplined.
- Ask for names and phone numbers of parents who have enrolled children in previous summers, so you can call and ask how they and their children liked the program.

PREPPING FOR PRESCHOOL CAN BE A PLUS

The transition to preschool looms large on parents' radar screens. With more than two months before her almost 3 year old daughter starts, Margaret Chang of Newton is already worried.

"I wonder how she'll do; she's slow to warm up to new situations," Chang says of her daughter, Katherine Man. "Actually," she adds, "I wonder how I'll do. She's the baby of the family. It's caught me by surprise that it's time for her to go to preschool already."

It's not even July, but Margaret Chang is wise to be coming to grips with her feelings now. Her efforts will make it easier for Katherine in September.

All children, even those who have had group experience in day care, need help and support to master the transition to preschool. But parents need help, too, and not just because we tend to get emotional over this. Children pick up on our ambivalent feelings and that makes their adjustment harder.

Like Chang, most of us see preschool as a milestone. "This is the real world. „School.“ Your baby is growing up. It's exciting, scary and sad," says preschool teacher Marina Boni of Cambridgeport Children's Center, a full day program.

Parents also feel guilty. "This is my baby, I can't leave her with just anyone, is a typical reaction," especially for first-time parents, says Deborah Owens, interim director of the Children's School at Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena, Calif.

Families coming from day care have an additional separation to cope with. Karen Kramer of Newton, for instance, is trading a family day care provider she loves for a preschool teacher she barely knows.

At first, she says, she worried about how her daughter Jessie will say goodbye. Now she's realized it's her issue, too. "I'm going to miss this wonderful woman. I'm trying to own and contain my sadness and anxiety so they don't spill over to Jessie," says Kramer.

Nervous parents would be wise to use July to reconnect with the preschool teacher, whom you probably haven't talked to since you selected the preschool months ago. Call for a chat, suggests Owens. "Most teachers don't mind, honestly they don't. Besides," she adds, "it's to their benefit to reassure you. The transition will go smoother for everyone."

Boni tells parents to acknowledge their feelings, particularly working mothers who wish they could be home with their child, or any parent who wishes time would slow down. "I was much more ready to send my first child Alexander, now 5," says Chang. "I'm not ready to relinquish Katherine's babyhood."

Boni says admitting to such emotions, sometimes just voicing them to a friend, can help you get beyond them. However, if your feelings are so strong that you can't get to the other side, Owens says it's better to know it in July than in September.

Getting beyond your feelings is important because you need to be able to exude confidence about the transition, says early childhood educator Cheryl Render Brown: Confidence about the school, the teachers and, most of all, about your child's ability to succeed.

"If you're unsure, she'll sense something is wrong," says Brown, and you'll be into a vicious cycle: "She shows a little bit of hesitation, and you say to yourself, „Oh, maybe she's not ready,“ and she senses your hesitation and loses self-confidence." Brown is an assistant professor at Wheelock College Graduate School.

Because every child has some degree of difficulty, Brown says, "It's better to anticipate

than to be caught off-guard.”

Parents most likely to be caught off-guard are those whose children are very social, and those with group experience, says Brown. No matter how competent they are, however, even these children are entering an unfamiliar environment with unknown children, unknown adults, unfamiliar rules and new activities.

It's “a jolt to even the most social child,” she says, and even to one who is anxious to attend preschool because an older sibling went there. Chang worries about that. “Katherine thinks going to preschool means her brother will be there,” she says.

The child most likely to have the hardest time is one who balks at change, who won't let you out of her sight even at home. For this child, you can use the summer to build up trust and experience, says early childhood educator Jerlean Daniel. She is president of the National Association of the Education of Young Children.

She has two suggestions. The first is to increase the one on one time you spend with him, “not just doing something in the same room while he does something else, but really tuning in and sharing in an activity. Lots of eye contact,” says Daniel. The other is to provide “mini practices” of separation.

“Is there a safe place in your yard where she can be alone for a few minutes while you run inside to go to the bathroom? While she's playing downstairs, tell her, „I'm going up to make the bed.”” The idea, says Daniel, is to give her contained moments of separation where she feels safe and comes to believe that when you say you'll return, you will.

Both strategies will increase a child's capacity for separation, says Daniel, who is an assistant professor of child development at the University of Pittsburgh.

Here are some other things you can do in July:

- Visit the playground. Bring a picnic lunch.
- Create a friendship. Ask the director for a class list and invite some children over, one at a time. Invite back the child she likes most. “This social connection will be really important come September,” says Brown.
- Request a home visit from the teacher. Owens' school does this routinely. It's particularly valuable for children who take longer to warm up to new caregivers.
- Show that you are a part of the school. Daniel says children need to see a fusion between the home and school environment, “to see that you are comfortable in the literal physical setting.” Boni's school invites parents to participate in an August cleanup week. Volunteer to help even if your school doesn't do anything in an official way.

Toward the end of August, or about two weeks before school will begin, there are more things to do:

- Visit the classroom. Find out when the teachers will be setting up and take your child to wander the room and hang out with her.
- Talk about preschool. It's best to build a conversation around what your child already knows or thinks, so begin by asking, “What do you think preschool will be like?” A week before, create expectations around separation: “When we go to preschool, I'll take you in every morning, and we'll find some activity to do together before I leave.”

As tough as she anticipates the transition to preschool may be, Karen Kramer is looking

at it as “a learning and growing opportunity for both of us.” Margaret Chang says, “This summer is about letting go, bit by bit.”

TIPS FOR PARENTS

- Drive by the preschool off and on during the summer. Casually point it out. "Oh, there's where you'll be going to preschool."
- If your child has had little or no group experience, find some kind of group for him over the summer that he can participate in with you, but with another adult in charge. Most libraries have reading hours for preschoolers and many communities have appropriate summer recreation programs.
- Take a photo of the school and put it on the refrigerator.
- If you decide not to proceed with preschool for whatever reason, find some other social group for your child to participate in on a regular basis, perhaps with you in attendance.

THE PRESCHOOL TRANSITION

On her first morning of preschool, 31/2 year old Jennifer and her mother stood in the play area in the back of the classroom. The girl howled and clung to the legs of her mother, who felt horrible about leaving her daughter behind. Should she try to peel Jennifer off and dash away quickly? Or would she have to stay with her daughter the whole morning and miss an important meeting?

A resolution appeared impossible, but then Jennifer's teacher had an inspired idea. She introduced the girl to a particularly easygoing, friendly classmate. Soon the two were laughing together and sharing a banana while Jennifer's mother sat nearby and kept an eye on things. When her mom waved goodbye at the door some 20 minutes later, Jennifer quickly waved back and continued playing.

The response of Jennifer's teacher is a perfect example of how adults who are attentive, understanding, and flexible can help a young child adjust to what is one of the biggest developmental challenges of her life so far starting preschool.

It's not just a school - it's a whole new world.

Make no mistake; this is a major step for your child, and his readiness for the new experience may not coincide with the date on the calendar when classes start. After all, going to preschool requires that he not only be separated from you for at least part of the day but also accustom himself to an environment filled with new sights, sounds, activities, and people. In addition, he will need to learn the art of sharing and of compromise. Mastering these skills will make him more independent and confident, but he needs to meet the new challenges in his individual way, proceeding at his own pace.

Many children jump right into preschool, but for others the adjustment presents difficulties. Some children react to this momentous change in their lives by becoming irritable and demanding, throwing tantrums in the classroom, or bullying their classmates in an attempt to assert themselves in a situation that seems beyond their control. Other children respond to the new social demands that preschool makes by withdrawing, shying away from other children, and refusing to become involved in circle time or free play.

Because the range of responses is so diverse, parents and teachers must have extra patience as children start preschool, as well as the sort of flexible, attentive response that shows respect for each child's style and level of development. Here are some steps that you can take to ease the adjustment process.

Make the preschool environment comfortable for your child.

If your child is having trouble finding her place in preschool, you may want to talk to the teacher about giving her some individualized strategies. Some children, for example, are especially sensitive and dislike loud noises, unexpected physical contact, or lots of commotion; they are going to find rubbing shoulders with 10 to 15 noisy 3 year olds at circle time too much to handle. Instead the teacher should allow these children to play with one or two other classmates in the corner of the room for the first few mornings, gradually moving them into the larger group.

Three year olds differ considerably in capacities such as motor coordination and word comprehension. Your child may be having problems because she finds it difficult to understand

her teacher's comments or because she is not yet ready for activities such as drawing or coloring shapes, that require a certain level of coordination. If this appears to be the case with your child, ask the teacher to simplify the instructions or match your child with activities that she can enjoy, gradually introducing her to activities that present her with more of a challenge.

Don't say your good-byes too quickly. If your child becomes clingy and fearful, as many new preschoolers do, all it takes to calm her down may be for you to stay a few extra minutes. While you're there you may want to help her get involved with another child. Active pursuits such as running and climbing may help break the ice; so will games such as taking an imaginary trip to the moon. Her teacher's empathy will help her feel confident in this new environment.

Encourage your child to express his emotions about preschool.

When you are at home together give him free rein to talk directly about any feelings of anger sadness or fear that he might have. The two of you can anticipate together what tomorrow will be like possibly by acting out events that could happen. Don't try to minimize his anxieties. Instead, help him envision what he might feel and do if a classmate refused to share or if an activity were something he did not want to do. Give him alternatives.

You can also use pretend play to help your child communicate the excitement and pleasure, as well as the possible fear, anger, and confusion, that his new experiences in preschool may be bringing. Get down the floor with him and allow him to play out his feelings in a make-believe school. If he places one doll all alone or has two dolls fighting over a toy, join in the play. See which role he wants you to take. If he wishes, you can take the role of the scared child and let your child be the teacher. This way he can deal with negative emotions from a position of strength.

Give an aggressive child guidelines and limits.

If your child is pushing or hitting, go over the situations that are likely to lead to her striking out. Help her describe the situation and how she feels when it occurs. She may say something along the lines of: "I get mad! He takes my toy!" You can then go over the ways that she could express anger without pushing or hitting, for example, by telling the other child, "Stop!" At the same time, tell your child that the next time she gives in to the desire to hit or push, punishment - losing TV privileges, for example, will follow.

Try not to compare your child with his classmates.

Even if you never made comparisons before, it's hard not to notice when your child still speaks in simple phrases while many of his peers use complete sentences, or when he is tentative in certain motor skills, putting together puzzles and drawing, for instance, that other children have seemingly mastered. You may be tempted to push your child to reach his classmates' level, or to blame his teacher for not drawing out his potential. Neither response helps you or your child.

It is always possible, although certainly not routine, that delay in motor skills or language development is serious enough to require professional help. If your child's teacher doesn't point out any serious problem, do not be embarrassed to ask her about any concern you have about your child's development. Work out enjoyable ways to give your child extra practice in emerging skills.

Remember that children grow in different ways and at different rates. The best way to help your child grow is to give him a lot of extra comfort and understanding during these first weeks of preschool and to work closely with the teacher to gear the school's environment and activities to his particular needs.

WHAT TO DO BEFOREHAND

Find out about the preschool's transition policy

A good preschool will have an established policy for allowing children to adjust gradually. Some preschools will hold sessions to help children get to know one another before school begins, or else will have shorter days for a while before moving to regular class hours. Some preschool programs will make provisions for parents to stay during the opening sessions, and some will allow parents to stay with their child in the hallway for at least part of the day in the early going.

Don't make preschool seem intimidating

It's easy to want your child to be more independent than is possible for him to be at this point in his life, or to become overly protective and express worry about all the things that could happen when classes start. Your doing this, however, can make preschool seem more threatening and difficult to your child than it is.

Give your child extra comfort

Conversely, if you believe that children who are old enough for preschool are too grown-up to need as much cuddling and nurturing as they did before, reconsider. In fact, during times of transition, the emotional security that physical affection and empathy bring is more important than ever.

THE PRESCHOOL SEPARATION BLUES

Working on a topic about transition to preschool, I can't help but remember the difficulty my own son had. The struggle would begin as soon as he woke up in the morning and continue until the wrenching, tearful goodbye that often culminated in a literal handoff from my arms to a teacher's.

The teachers did their best to reassure me that Eli warmed up after I left, but as separation difficulties dragged on for weeks, I couldn't help but wonder: Is this worth it?

Now 7 1/2, Eli's memory of this is vague until I prompt him with one word -scissors. "Oh, yeah," he says, smiling. "I liked to cut, didn't I?"

In fact, scissors were our salvation.

Once he discovered those pint-sized, rubber handled tools, complaints abated, clinginess diminished and separating became easier. Each morning, Eli propelled himself to the art table to snip and cut, sometimes well into the morning. This went on for months, until he was comfortable enough to branch out.

The transition into preschool often takes longer and is considerably harder than parents anticipate, says early childhood educator Jerlean Daniel, president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and an assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh.

Without realizing it, parents themselves may be the reason why. She says, "I've seen parents stand at the door and say in a wistful voice, „I'm going now, I'm going now.“” That only cues a child: "I'm supposed to be upset."

How you help your child settle in and how you say goodbye are two critical and separate events.

"Every child needs a drop-off ritual," says Marina Boni, a teacher at the Cambridgeport Children's Center, an all-day preschool. One child might like to curl up in the reading corner with you while another wants to do something more active, like play with blocks.

Boni prefers that parents keep the ritual short, 10 minutes at most. Daniel says longer can be better, especially if a child is heartbroken. "Since the separation will be hard no matter what, I'd rather spend the time and build up your child's sense of trust," she says.

The goodbye itself, however, should not be drawn out.

"When you say you are going, go. Don't be wishy-washy, even when the floodgates open," says Boni. Owens says it's harder for children when you say you are going but don't: "They can't get past the sorrow of the departure."

Whatever you do, say goodbye. "Some parents find it so painful to leave, they prefer to slip out," says Daniel. "That erodes trust."

Boni recommends reminding your child during settling-in time that you will be leaving: "After we read the book, and after you draw your picture, it will be time for me to get my bus."

You can even create a ritual around the goodbye itself, waving to your child as she stands in a window with a teacher. Boni has worked up a routine with some children who give a parent a gentle push out the door, as if to say, "Go now." "It's good closure," she says.

Of course, some children are unfazed when you go. "Then you're heartbroken because they don't cry!" says Daniel.

This is often only a honeymoon, however.

"I've seen kids who are great for weeks, even months. In January, they freak and fall apart," says Boni.

Parents typically don't connect this to a separation reaction because it is so long after the fact. But it's not unusual, says Boni, for anxieties to surface only after routines have been established. "Then it dawns: „This is my life!“" she says.

Delayed anxieties after an easy settling-in naturally fuel parents' ambivalence: Is this a bad situation? Should he not be here? Before you panic and pull your child out, ask yourself:

- **Is there gradual improvement?** Separation anxieties should begin to abate within a month from when they start, says early childhood educator Cheryl Render Brown, an assistant professor at Wheelock College Graduate School. Tiny breakthroughs should occur week-to-week if not day-to-day. For instance, is she crying less and less after you leave? Some children need to observe activities from the sidelines before joining in; that's fine for a few days, even a week. After that, are they able to join in with a teacher's support?
- **What is this like from her perspective?** "Some children have a hard time breaking into a group," Brown says. "A child coming from day care, where the teacher-child ratio is higher, may react to having less access and involvement with a teacher. Then there's the teacher's style: In preschool, conflict resolution is often more hands-off, leaving a child initially feeling unsafe." Questions any child ponders but needs you to articulate for her include: Where do I fit in? Is this place safe? Who will take care of me? Will I have friends? What if I don't want to share? Will you come back when you say you will?
- **Is she angry with you at pick-up?** This is a classic tip-off to separation anxiety, according to Boni, particularly if a child has an easy drop-off and a good day. "She's able to hold herself together until you return. Then it's safe to express her anger with you for deserting her," she says.
- **Is there a pattern to separation difficulties?** For instance, does she separate more easily from Dad than Mom? Perhaps Mom is sending ambivalent messages. Is Monday always hardest? That's because she's had a weekend at home with you. Has she been out sick a lot? That requires a new adjustment period each time.
- **Is there a younger sibling at home with you?** "A child can be jealous, feeling the baby is getting all your attention while he's stuck at preschool," says Brown.

Separation-related issues generally are easily solved once identified, says Brown, and are not a reason to pull a child out. But true mismatches do occasionally occur. Some children, for instance, are overwhelmed by large groups. Once in a while, there's a teacher who is not appropriately supportive.

On this last point, Brown warns: "You need to distinguish between a teacher who thinks you are overreacting and is probably right, and one who isn't taking you seriously. If your child is sobbing every night and the teacher pooh-poohs it, this is serious."

How do you know you've reached that point? Six weeks is a reasonable cutting off point, especially if a child is still heartbroken and uninvolved, says Owens. Tell your child, "This doesn't seem to be working, so we're going to find some other things for you to do. When you're 4, you'll enjoy this more and we'll try again."

As for the question that I often asked, "Is this worth it?" Brown says it almost always is. "Not doing preschool tends to put a child at a disadvantage," she says, since 70 percent of all young children in the United States attend. Indeed, there is a national push to make preschool available to all children.

Most kids just need time and support to figure out how to get through this adjustment period, Owens says.

My son has good advice, too. “Did you finish writing that column about preschool?” he asks one night. “Tell parents to give their children an art project with scissors. That will definitely help.”

TIPS FOR PARENTS

- Have discussions with teachers about separation problems over the phone or in person, not at drop-off or pick-up.
- All children have occasional days when leaving you is hard. As tempting as it may be to acquiesce, offer a deal instead: “I know you're sad. You need to stay today, but I could pick you up early or bring you in late tomorrow.”
- Let your child know you feel good about the preschool. Say things like, “This is a great place, I'm happy you go here.”
- Arrange for a child having trouble at drop-off to be greeted by the same teacher each day.
- Even if your child separates easily, allow yourself time to linger. It makes him more comfortable to see you engaged there.

YOUR SHY CHILD

A young mother I know seemed distressed when we talked recently about her daughter's initial visits to a play group. "When the moms and kids walk into the playroom together, most of the other two-year-olds move away from their moms immediately," she said. But not my Anna.

"She takes one or two small steps forward, then leans back against my legs as if she needs my support to even stand up. We inch our way into the room, then she climbs onto my lap at the first opportunity - and there we sit. It seems so difficult for her to be in this play group that sometimes I wonder if we should go at all. But then I think, how else is she going to get over this shyness?"

In a Stanford survey, a group of parents, teachers, and developmental experts agreed that one third of students in the university's preschool program could be labeled shy. What such children need most is a chance to learn and practice social skills. One of the best places to achieve this is a play group. I therefore advised Anna's mother to continue Anna's participation. Over time, Anna will benefit tremendously - with her mother's help. So can your shy child.

Getting comfortable. If your child is particularly wary of others, a small group is preferable to a large one, as is a group in which the same parents and children attend week after week. A mixed-age group often helps; shy children may feel more comfortable and in control playing with younger children.

You can also help your child make the transition into a group by enabling her to anticipate who will be there and what they will say or do. On the way to the group, recall pleasant memories of your last visit, play a guessing game using the names of her friends, or rehearse what will happen when you arrive: "We'll ring the bell, and Mrs. Bailey will open the door. We'll say, „Good morning!“ and she'll say, „It's so nice to see you!“"

During the play group, look for opportunities to teach your child some of the phrases and concepts that will promote her social development. For example, Anna's mother might say, "May Anna and I help you build with blocks?" or, "Emily, you and Anna look as if you're having a good time together," or "Good-bye, everyone! Anna, let's wave to our friends."

Beyond play groups. Once a shy child feels comfortable with the others in her group, try getting her together with one or two of them in a less structured setting. Some children enjoy having friends visit their homes, while others prefer a neutral place such as a zoo or a playground.

Most children outgrow shyness on their own, so your goal should be simply to expose your child to positive social experiences. With your support, your shy child will become more confident and comfortable around others.

KINDERGARTEN LOOMS LARGE ON A CHILD'S HORIZON

If your child is entering kindergarten in the fall, welcome to the summer from hell. Is this an exaggeration? Take a look at this list of behaviors some early childhood educators say you may encounter:

- **Mood swings.** One day, your child dresses himself quickly, with no fuss. The next day, he can't put his shorts on.
- **Regression.** It's been months since she sucked her thumb, except at bedtime. Suddenly, she's sucking anytime, anyplace. If thumbsucking doesn't apply, substitute wetting the bed, clinging to you in public, not going to the bathroom alone...
- **Acting out.** You thought you'd seen your last tantrums ages ago. Now they're back, along with whining, pouting and crying.
- **Talking back.** Your normally respectful child is challenging you with words such as, "Why should I?" or "So what?"

It's not that you are going to see these behaviors all day long, all summer long, even in a child who is very anxious. But some degree of them is not only normal but to be expected, even in a child who usually takes change in stride, according to Jerlean Daniel, assistant professor in child development at the University of Pittsburgh.

"Change, any change, is hard for kids, and this, certainly, is a big change. A lot of unknowns," she says.

Therein lies one of the keys for parents.

"The more you can make the unknown known, the easier time a child will have," she advises. She lists questions a typical child has: What will happen if I do something wrong? What will happen if I can't do the work? Who will I know? Will I remember everyone's name? Where's the bathroom?

As a way to reassure children, most school systems invite incoming kindergartners to visit. Whether your school does that or not, Daniel recommends three things you can do this summer to ease your child's anxiety: Take her to play on the playground; drive by the school; arrange playdates with new classmates.

But be careful not to overdo any of this, cautions early childhood educator Hope Dauwalter. Too much - especially of comments such as, "You're so big now!" and "Wow, you're going to be in kindergarten!" will only backfire. She says, instead of making a child feel good, it makes her think, "This is such a big deal, I wonder if I'm up for it." Dauwalter is director of The Preschool Experience in Newton.

Indeed, some children interpret "You're so big now!" remarks in a way parents would never imagine, according to child development specialist Shirley Cassara: "They think you are pushing them away from you." Cassara is a parenting consultant and professor of human development at Bunker Hill Community College and an adjunct professor at Wheelock College.

"Feeling pushed away is often what prompts the regressive behaviors that can make this summer so tough," says Daniel.

"Kids vacillate between being grown-up and acting out because they don't know, for sure, what being big is about," she says. "If I'm 'big,' do the same rules still apply? Will you still take care of me?"

Actually telling your child, "You know, daddy and mommy will still take care of you,

even though you are getting more grown-up,” will reassure her and help keep regressive behavior to a minimum, says Daniel. Nonetheless, you'll still see some. “It's her way of telling you, 'I still need you,'” she says. Regressive behavior also can indicate a child's ambivalence, according to Dauwalter: “If I act like a baby, maybe I won't have to go to kindergarten.”

The flip side of regression is feistiness, a child who challenges you. He's testing you, too, but in a slightly different way, says Daniel: “He's expressing his confidence in his new role as a „big boy.””

Both behaviors require the same response, says Cassara. Yes, the same rules do indeed apply. You can also use this as a conversational entree into the issue: “That kind of behavior is unacceptable, but it makes me wonder if you did that because you are nervous about kindergarten.”

Few children will acknowledge that's so, simply because they can't identify their feelings. In that case, don't push, Cassara says. But she adds: “A child may think on it and come back to you later and say, „I guess I am kinda wondering about kindergarten.””

Your response is important. “If he says he doesn't want to go to kindergarten and you say, „Don't be silly, of course you do,” you make it worse for him,” Cassara says. “He can only conclude you don't understand him.” Instead, she says, reflect back to him: “You sound like you're scared to go to school.” And then: “It's OK to feel that way. Lots of people do.”

The times when you can expect your child's concerns about kindergarten to be most intense are at the start of the summer, as she is beginning to feel the loss of preschool, and as summer ends and older kids begin to talk about school starting. Worries could also surface in spurts during the summer, for no apparent reason.

“It's in their minds, off and on, all summer,” says Daniel.

By August, if the subject hasn't come up, find some way to bring it up yourself. Says Daniel: “Drive by the school and say, „There's Michelle's school. It will be your school soon.”” Leaving the topic untouched until just before school starts is only asking for trouble, she says.

Of course, some of what can make the summer before kindergarten hell has less to do with our children than it does with us. “This is very stressful for most parents,” says Barbara Willar, an early childhood specialist with the National Association of Education for Young Children.

Letting go is part of it, she says. So are practical issues, like new child care arrangements or adjusting to a new schedule. For parents who are going through this for the first time, Dauwalter says, “They feel like they are losing control.”

Daniel and Cassara urge parents to confront their own anxieties and sadness as early in the summer as possible so you don't communicate them to your child. Cassara says you can even say to your child, “Sometimes it makes me sad that you aren't a little kid anymore, but I really enjoy you as a big kid, too.”

Whatever you do, says Willar, “Be positive. If you are, it's more likely your child will be.” That won't guarantee a summer made in heaven, but at least it might not be hell.

INTRODUCING A CHILD TO 'THE BIG SCHOOL'

- If your child doesn't want to visit the playground, don't insist, but offer the opportunity at a later date. When you do go, go when there are few kids there.
- If an older child is going to talk about school to your child, act as an interpreter. Comments

like, “If you don't behave, you get sent to the principal,” could be scary.

- Some books to read with your kindergartner-to-be: “*Will I Have a Friend?*” by Miriam Cohen (MacMillan); “*Starting School,*” by Althea (Dinosaur Publications); “*When You Go to Kindergarten,*” by James Howe (Knopf); “*The Berenstain Bears Go to School,*” Stan and Jan Berenstain (Random House).

Over the summer, help your child be more independent by making sure he picks up after himself and dresses himself. Having him routinely perform a household chore will make him feel more capable and grown-up.

I REALLY LIKE MS. JUDY

If you've ever felt a twinge of jealousy because of your child's affection for his preschool teacher, keep that feeling in check. Your son's attachment actually shows that he is doing well and feeling confident while at preschool, according to researchers Carollee Howes, Ph.D., and Claire E. Hamilton, Ph.D., of the Graduate School of Education of the University of California in Los Angeles.

In a study of over 400 children, the investigators found that the youngsters who were attached to their teachers were able to: speak to them easily, turn to them for comfort and take direction - all signs that a child is thriving in preschool. The teachers, in turn, were found to be highly responsive and involved with the children most secure with them.

NO NEED TO WORRY

It's a familiar scene: After a long day at work, you've just put dinner on the stove when your three year old launches into a tantrum. She may be hungry, she may be tired (most kids are at the end of the day!), but, like many working mothers, you may find yourself thinking "This wouldn't be happening if I just stayed home all day."

As tempting as it may be to blame a child's moods or misbehavior on the fact that you work, banish the thought. Research indicates that this notion is unfounded.

Jon Ellis, Ph.D., assistant professor in the department of psychology at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City and a clinical psychologist in private practice, studied 120 families to determine the effects of a mother's employment on her children's behavior. The results were clear: The children had similar moods and behavior patterns whether their mothers worked or not.

"Work status was irrelevant to the types of problems associated with the care of preschool children," says Ellis. "Even at this young age, they thrive in a variety of settings."

So moms, take heart: When your preschooler pitches a fit, she is acting her age-not acting out because you work!

BIG ENOUGH FOR DAY CAMP?

The full-color brochure is enticing: pictures of happy children swimming in a clear blue lake, sitting in a circle around a guitar-playing counselor, raising their arms in victory as a teammate slides into home plate. But if you look closely at these familiar glossies, you may notice that some of the kids wearing camp T-shirts are only 3 or 4 years old.

Preschools have long offered summer programs for children who are enrolled during the school year. But in recent years day camps that once catered to school-age kids have started inviting children as young as 3 to get on big yellow buses and head off to the great outdoors.

Now that day camp is available for preschoolers how can you tell if your child is ready for the experience? And if she is how can you be sure that you are choosing the right camp? To a large extent, parents can rely on their own intuition about their child's readiness. There's a good chance that if your child is ready for preschool she's ready for day camp as well.

“Separation anxiety is the biggest problem for children this age “ says David Schmuckler, a family therapist in Saratoga Springs, New York. Camps rarely provide the slow introduction that preschools do. But a good camp will work together with parents to ease the transition. Once separation anxiety is overcome - and for most children it fades within a week - day camp can be a terrific experience.

Even those children who have difficulty behaving at preschool may do beautifully at day camp. The emphasis on outdoor activity, the high tolerance for noise and the lack of “academic” pressure are ideal for kids who have trouble harnessing their enthusiasm in a classroom.

Day camp can also be a useful bridge for children entering kindergarten. “It was the best thing in the world for my daughter” says Susan Geraghty of Saratoga Springs New York. “Lena got used to riding on the bus, meeting new kids and trying new experiences. Starting public school was a snap.”

When trying to decide if their child is ready for camp, however, parents need to consider that long days or constant activity are too much for some preschoolers. Many young children require more downtime than they are likely to get at day camp. Some may feel anxious about the seemingly endless flow of different children, who may stay for a few weeks and then not return for the next session. And some may be intimidated by the school buses many camps provide. “When Nellie was 5, she insisted that she was ready for camp,” recalls Helen Golden of New York City. “But she refused to get on a bus without us. We decided not to force the issue and signed her up for the summer program at her nearby preschool instead.”

Parents who are uncertain about full-time camp for their child may want to find a program that offers half-day or twice-a-week sessions. Signing up your child with a friend is another way to ease the transition for an almost ready preschooler. And some children may feel more comfortable in a setting that is already familiar.

Summer programs at your church or synagogue can be a wonderful first camp experience. But keep in mind, counsels Schmuckler, that “day camp is not a necessity for preschoolers. You can always try again next summer.”

Assessing a small child's readiness for camp is only the first step. The next is assessing a camp's readiness for small children.

Think back to that brochure. The child sliding into home plate makes a great picture, but can you imagine your preschooler doing it? Such win/lose activities can be extremely stressful for young children.

The ideal setup is a camp that has separate facilities and staff for small children. At Camp Riverbend, Warren Township, New Jersey, which recently started admitting 3 year olds, the younger campers have their own pool, as well as their own more relaxed schedule and early childhood teachers as counselors.

“The little ones do the same things as the older kids, but everything is modified,” says Harold Breene, the camp's owner and director. “They play mini golf with rubber clubs, they play tennis with lower nets and Nerf balls. Most of all, we have a noncompetitive approach.”

The best programs for very young children, whether or not they have separate facilities, concentrate on go-at-your-own-pace activities, such as art projects and nature walks. When more competitive activities are part of the program, counselors make sure that all participants are cheered loudly. Waterfront programs focus on games and gentle encouragement, not formal lessons.

Good camps also respect young children's need for frequent snacks, a time and a place for rest, toilets and sinks they can use themselves, and loving hands to hold when they are lonely, scared, or sad.

The counseling staff is just as important as the activities and physical surroundings. Some camps, particularly low-budget town playgrounds, employ mainly high-school students, who can have a difficult time juggling the needs of a group of preschoolers. Others hire certified teachers and experienced college students. Don't hesitate to ask about the qualifications of counselors. In addition, find out the ratio of counselors to campers. There are no national standards, but it is reasonable to expect a camp to meet the ratios set in your state for preschools.

If you're trying to decide among several camps and one of them has been accredited by the American Camping Association, strongly consider its advantages. This accreditation assures you that rigorous safety and program standards have been met. Because of the time and cost involved in qualifying, many fine camps do not apply; only 25 percent of day camps nationwide are accredited. If you choose a nonaccredited camp, though, make sure to check out safety standards (see Safety Checklist). Camps that are secure about their safety records will be happy to respond to your questions.

Finding a good camp for a small child requires asking lots of questions, but for children who are ready for the rich experience, the search is worth it. In many ways, day camp offers children something close to an old fashioned summer vacation. You may not be able to wander the woods with your child in search of salamanders, but at least your child, in the company of friends and counselors, can spend her days creating memories she will never forget.

Safety checklist

If you are considering sending your child to a camp that is not accredited by the American Camping Association, check with the director to make sure the camp meets these safety standards.

- Playground equipment is well maintained, age-appropriate, and on a soft surface, such as wood chips.
- Sports equipment has been modified for small children; for example golf clubs are made of rubber.
- Protective gear, such as helmets and pads, is required for biking and skating.
- Waterfront supervision is sufficient: A lifeguard certified by the Red Cross, the YMCA, or the equivalent, must be present whenever children swim in lakes or non-kiddie pools.
- A “health manager” who is certified in CPR and first aid and can administer medicine is present at all times.
- A nearby doctor and hospital are officially on standby for emergencies.
- Vans and buses are equipped with adequate seat belts - and they are always used.
- Brown-bag lunches and snacks are refrigerated to avoid food poisoning.