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# The Parents League: The Preschool Visit

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One of the best parts of my job as director of the Parents League Advisory Services is the opportunity to visit schools. Annually, I visit over 30 independent or private schools, from preschool to high school, and occasionally a boarding school. There is nothing like seeing a school in action. And nothing brings me more joy than visiting a preschool. I am often asked, “What should I look for in a preschool?” My answer is simple: Joy.

Of course, this simple answer may not seem an adequate response to what can feel like a complex question. Let me walk you through the nitty-gritty of a preschool visit, which I think you will find helpful.

## Before Your Visit

There is a lot of information to be had about a school before you visit it, including the following:

- **Application process** (how and when applications are distributed; whether the application is submitted before the visit)
- **Tuition**
- **Total enrollment**
- **Age range**
- **Hours**
- **Religious or other affiliation**

- **Governance** (a school can be nonprofit; nonprofit, but part of a parent institution; or proprietary)
- **Philosophical approach**

Much of this can be found on a school's website, or in the *Parents League Guide to Preschools* or the ISAAGNY (Independent Schools Admission Association of Greater New York) *New York Independent Schools Directory*.

This information can help you to determine the schools that will seem appropriate for you and your child. If you are a Parents League member, you can attend one of our weekly preschool admissions workshops or speak by phone afterwards with a preschool advisor to help you refine your list.

## The Visit and Tour

Preschool tours are offered to the parents of children who will be entering the school in the following school year. You will learn at our workshop how to go about requesting applications (most schools request an application before the tour), and setting up your visits to the schools.

Schools are delighted to give parents the opportunity to see their program in action, but there are many factors—including the size of the school and the number of applicants—that shape the way in which the visit is conducted. If this is your first foray into school visits, you will want to know what to expect.

**Duration:** You can plan to spend anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour and a half, depending on whether your visit includes a separate interview for parents, or an information session with administrators followed by a tour.

**Who Attends:** Some schools schedule tours for parents only,

and later in the process ask you to bring your child for a play visit. Other schools schedule a family visit, where you tour the school with your child. Your child may spend time in a classroom playing (very few schools will ask you to separate), or your child may play in a corner of the director's office while you have a conversation with the director. Some schools do not require a child's visit.

**Classroom Observation:** On the tour, you may be escorted into the classroom to observe children in action or you may be asked to observe from outside. Every school has a different policy for visitors.

**Touring the School:** Depending on the size and scope of the school, you may observe only one classroom, visit a classroom for each age group, or—in many cases—visit the school's entire facility. Since tours often begin in the fall when children are just separating, you might not observe the youngest children. Too many adults can be distracting for 2-year-olds who are saying goodbye to parents for the first time.

**Who is on the Tour:** Some schools tour parents in groups and some tour parents alone, or with their child. As a former admissions staff member, I can assure you that it makes no difference from an admissions standpoint who tours you—a teacher, a parent, the director of the school or the admissions director.

## Travel to the School

I always advise parents to consider a school's location before adding it to their list. When you visit, test out the transportation and actual travel time. If a school is far from work or home, try a trip—with your child—during inclement weather.

Do not underestimate the value of proximity. During the first year of school, your child may go only a couple of days a week, but by the time your child is 4-years-old, school will most likely be five days a week—requiring, at the very least, 10 trips per week for you or your child’s caregiver. You might want to be close by for emergencies, or to attend afterschool or evening events. And remember playdates.

## During Your Visit

When you visit a school, there are so many things to see and to ask about in a short period of time. If you are prepared, you will know what to look for—and you will be better able to judge a school’s “feel,” and whether it is a good fit for your family.

**The Teachers and the Children:** This is where the joy comes in—it starts with the teachers and the children. A happy classroom is one where the teachers are good listeners, engaging and interacting with the children on their level, asking questions that elicit conversations, and redirecting them if they are having a difficult time. Good teachers show great pleasure being in the company of young children and their activities. They are calm, purposeful and playful (but not too playful) in their speech, directions and manner, creating an environment that feels busy and fun, but not frenetic.

When their teachers enjoy being with them and delight in their accomplishments, it is so often reflected in the children’s behavior. Look to see how the children interact with each other—warmth, kindness and inclusion are infectious. This is true for adults as well; observe how teachers interact with each other and with the other adults in the building.

**Atmosphere:** Each school has its own flavor—relaxed, vibrant, energetic, calm, serene, orderly, formal, informal. In one school’s

classroom, children refer to their teacher by her first name, in another they might refer to “Mr. Z.” In still another, you might see children in uniforms. So many things contribute to a school’s “feel”: you will find yourself responding when something seems compatible with how your family lives.

**Philosophy and Curriculum:** Preschool should be an extension of your home. It’s the first step children take outside of home, one in which adults other than parents or caregivers observe them, guide them, care for and teach them. Look for a school whose philosophy is compatible with your parenting style and values. For example, does your family regularly turn your living room into a store or a ship or a circus for an extended period of time? Look for a school that allows plenty of opportunity for child-centered projects. Or perhaps a more teacher-directed program will feel just right to you.

Schools have varying approaches to curriculum. What is most important is that a school’s teachers buy into its curriculum and approach—this is a school that will shine.

**The Director:** The director of the school sets the tone. How does he or she get to know the children individually? Is the director approachable, someone you would feel comfortable talking with about your child and your child’s development? A good director cares not only about you and your family, but also cares for and supports the school’s teachers, and provides ample opportunities for their development.

And while exmission—the kindergarten admission process—is certainly not the focus of your visit, be aware that most preschool directors oversee exmission. Even if the school is a larger one that has a placement officer or consultant to handle the process, it is the director who will offer you support and guidance as you go through the kindergarten admission process.

**School Size:** The number of children in each classroom and the student-teacher ratio are similar from school to school. The youngest, the twos, have very small class sizes; as children grow and become more independent, the class size increases. The total size of the schools varies widely; schools may have a total enrollment of 50 children, where some may be as large as 200.

**Children's Age Span:** There is a very narrow age span—anywhere from three to six months—in the classes offered for youngest children (typically the 2-year-olds). As children grow older, the age span grows as well. By the time the children are 4 or 5, you may find almost a one-year age span in a classroom.

Montessori schools, on the other hand, typically have a mixed-age group, with an age span of two to three years in a classroom.

**Facilities and Resources:** In your search you will come across a wide variety of physical plants. Some schools are located in church or synagogue basements, some occupy a floor of an apartment building, others take up entire townhouses.

Is the facility safe, clean and bright? Is it shared with other organizations? Is there a library? Is there access to an outside play space, or do children go to a nearby playground? Is there an indoor play space where children can play in inclement weather? Do the children remain mostly in the classroom, or move about the building for various activities?

Some schools are affiliated with a parent institution, such as a church or synagogue or community center, or they operate under the umbrella of a larger corporate entity. A school associated with a church or synagogue may share its classrooms with afterschool religious classes or other classes the institution offers. Must things be put away at the end of the school day so that others can use the space in the evening? If the parent institution

has a gym or pool, does the school have access to it? Can the school use any other community spaces?

**The Learning Environment:** Classrooms should be well-organized, with a logical layout of areas dedicated to dramatic play, blocks and art, and a nook for reading or quiet time. Does the classroom have a supply of books? Are there musical instruments and resources for dramatic play? Is there space for indoor play?

What is the school and classroom decor? Classrooms in schools inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach are decorated with elements from nature, like live plants, branches, bird nests and leaves. The walls are neutral and the lighting is dim. Other schools might employ bright primary colors. In some schools you will find large-scale community projects in the classroom and hallways, while others display mostly individual artwork on the walls. In a Montessori school, expect to find a classroom filled with Montessori materials and designed specifically for that program.

**Safety and Security:** All schools must comply with stringent city laws regulating safety and hygiene. That said, look for schools that are secure, clean and well maintained.

**Daily Schedule:** Look for organized routines and schedules. Young children thrive with routine and structure; knowing what to expect builds trust and a sense of security. It is important that the class schedule is posted in the classroom where children can see and understand it. (Once children know the routine, they will be the first ones to inform their teacher what's next.)

**Specials and Specialists:** Some schools employ full- or part-time specialists to teach music, art, movement, yoga and language. The number of “specials” and specialists varies from school to school. In

smaller schools, the classroom teacher may have a background in music or art and double as the pianist for sing time or the yoga instructor. You will also find schools that choose a less modular approach.

## School Policies

The following are policies and practices that you may not observe on your tour but will have the opportunity to ask about.

**Tuition and Other Costs:** As noted above, a school's tuition is usually listed on its website. Are there other costs? For example, if the school is affiliated with a temple, is temple membership required?

If you want to compare tuitions at the preschools you are visiting, total the costs for the years your child will be at the school and the hours your child will attend. Tuition for a 2-year-old attending two half-days per week is less than for a 4-year-old attending five days for a full-day session.

**Financial Aid:** Some, but not all, preschools are able to offer financial aid. (Independent school financial aid becomes more widely available starting in kindergarten.) The aid that is offered often covers a portion of, but not the full, tuition.

Do not hesitate to ask about financial aid—it is a topic of interest for both families seeking aid and those who want an economically diverse school community. Schools that offer financial aid will want to be sure you have all the information you need. If you have personal questions you want to ask privately, follow up with a phone call or email. Note that you must apply for aid at the same time that you submit your application; if you wait until your child is accepted, there will not be aid left in the budget. Please call the Parents League school advisory team for more information on financial aid.

**Holidays and Religious Observances:** The observation of religious holidays varies from school to school. Schools associated with a religious institution may celebrate a religious holiday in the classroom, or they may close for the day. Most schools affiliated with a synagogue will celebrate all Jewish holidays; a rabbi may come to the classroom to observe holidays with the children. In other schools, children may visit a chapel or church. Some schools celebrate all holidays. No matter what, most schools welcome families into the classroom to celebrate their cultural traditions.

**Separation:** A child's sense of security in a school is cemented when the transition into school goes easily. Ask how the school handles separation. This policy is a window into the carefully thought-out practices that lie behind all preschool environments.

**Drop-off and Pick-up:** Once your child has separated, you may be asked to drop your child off and pick up in the school's lobby or perhaps the gym. Or you may always be welcomed into the classroom to pick up and drop off your child.

**Early Drop-Off and Afterschool:** Some schools offer early drop-off and afterschool programs. Check to see if there is an additional fee. There are even a few schools that offer a package of vouchers for early drop-off or late pick-up, to be used on an ad hoc basis—helpful if a parent has an early meeting or an end-of-day doctor's appointment.

**Field Trips:** Does the school take the children on trips outside the classroom? For the very young, it may be a visit to the receptionist. As the children get older, field trips may include a visit to the local bakery or firehouse. The oldest children may board a bus and take a trip to a farm or zoo.

**Parent-Teacher Conferences:** All schools schedule parent-teacher conferences. Most likely there will be two during the school year. Ask when they take place. As for ongoing parent-teacher communication, each school has its own policy and you can ask about that as well.

**Parent Involvement:** Ask about opportunities—or expectations—for parental involvement. Will there be time for parents in the classroom? Are there any school traditions—bake sales, book fairs—that parents should be aware of? Some schools offer workshops with child development experts, as well as other gatherings for parents.

Whether parents work full-time or part-time or are at home with their children, a preschool should provide formal and informal opportunities for parents and caregivers to get to know one another and support each other.

## Community

Preschool is not only about your child's education. It is also about community. After all, this is probably the first time your child will step out and become part of a group of children—each with an individual personality and background. In a scenario that will play out over and over again in the coming years, your child will learn how to meld into that group, how to find a place within it, and how to make a contribution.

You will find joy watching your child grow and make friends, and you, too, will take great pleasure in making new friends as well. A happy school is one where the parent body is loyal to the school, enjoys being there and enjoys each other. Whether you are bumping into parents in the lobby or in the playground, or sitting together on a school committee, strong bonds are formed commiserating over nap times, potty training and tantrums. Time and time again I come across parents who, years later, count friends

they made in preschool as their closest friends.

Look for a school in which you can see yourself in partnership with its director and teachers, all working together toward the common goal of guiding and teaching your young child. Look for a school that feels like home, a safe haven for your child. Look for a school that seems like a good fit for you as a parent, a place where you will feel comfortable, free to share your concerns and develop relationships.

Above all, look for joy. I promise you: You will know it when you see it.

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