



parents league  
of new york

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Essential Articles on  
Parenting & Education

# Zero to 3: Raising a Child in NYC

## The Parents League School Advisory Service

We at the Parents League know what you're going through: we've been there. Even before your baby is born, you begin to plan for childcare. Will it be in or outside your home? Part-time or full-time? You imagine your baby as a young toddler. What sorts of activities will be fun and fulfilling? You start to think about your child's education. Should I be looking at schools? Checking out preschools?

This is New York City, after all, and there are so many options to consider. But remember: preschools typically do not accept children until they are 2 years or older. Yet so much happens during that special period before your little one is ready for formal schooling. This is when development of self-control, self-regulation and social skills is most important. As Sally Tannen, Director of the 92nd Street Y Parenting Center, underscores, "These foundational skills must come before performance skills."

So, let's focus on that time before preschool. Now more than ever parents have options for their children under 3: preschool alternatives, classes, preschool based toddler-programs or full-day childcare. What follows is a sort of pre-preschool primer to help you understand all of the different options, and consider what will best suit your family's needs.

### What is Preschool?

Before we begin, let's define our terms. We use "preschool" to refer to schooling before children enter kindergarten at age 5. (The age cut-off is slightly different in public and private schools.) You will also hear "nursery school" or "early childhood program"—all used interchangeably.

In the public school system, pre-kindergarten is available for all 4-year-olds. Under the city's Pre-K for All program (often referred to as UPK, or Universal Pre-K), pre-Ks are located in different facilities, including community centers and some public schools, as well as some private and parochial schools. Applications become available in the winter before the child starts. The city is also slowly rolling out a 3-K program in some districts. Information about these programs and the application process is available on the city's Department of Education (DOE) website.

Independent (private) preschools generally accept children between 2 and 5 years of age. They offer sessions whose lengths vary between half-

and full-day. Because classes are small, and preschools seek to build a cohesive community, many have limited openings. Most parents find that they will visit and apply to several preschools. The application process takes place during the fall before enrollment.

Now, let's explore the PRE-preschool terrain.

### **Full-day Childcare**

Full-day childcare is a good option for many families. It can vary from care provided by a family member or paid caregiver to dropping the child at a day care center. In New York City, most day care centers are home-based. (Even if it is home-based, a day care center that serves more than three children for more than three hours a day must meet certain licensing and regulatory requirements.) Others are based in community centers, and there are some, but few, employers who offer on-site day care.

Some day care programs accept children as young as 3- to 6-months. They usually run from Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 or 6 p.m., with options for early drop-off and late pick-up. They are typically open year-round with a two-week summer break. For the older children in day care, the programs resemble a preschool atmosphere.

Because availability may be limited, you will want to visit several day care centers several months before you expect to send your child and get your name on their wait lists. You will need to decide whether it makes more sense to choose one near your home—thereby reducing the time commuting with your baby—or find one near your employment so that end-of-day pick-up can be a bit later. You will want to look for centers that are affordable for your family. Many other considerations will go into your choice, including the amount of stimulation your child will be afforded. Most important, however, will be the level of comfort and trust you feel in the center's staff to respond to your family's needs.

### **Preschool Alternatives**

Typically, preschool alternative programs are for children under 3 years and as young as 18-months. They focus on socialization, parent-child separation, and perhaps some school readiness. Many strive for gradual separation. They typically meet on a regular schedule for several hours and up to half a day. Admission to the class is generally on a rolling basis until the class is full. There is no formal application process; families just sign up and attend. They usually run on a semester schedule.

These programs are not designed to provide academic enhancement for subsequent preschool or kindergarten applications, but they can be a great

social experience in a structured program that lasts longer than a typical 45-minute class. The vast majority of these programs are not licensed. (By comparison, preschools do have to be licensed under stringent guidelines by the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.)

We encourage families to tour the facility. Ask questions about the faculty and their experience working with toddlers, and ask about the educational director. Inquire about a set curriculum, as well as the student-to-teacher ratio.

If you plan to stay at a preschool alternative past the 2s or 3s program, it is appropriate to ask about the kindergarten application process. Who handles this? How much support will be provided?

### **Preschool-based Toddler Programs**

Some preschools offer a separate program for toddlers. These classes are usually one to two hours long, and caregiver participation is required. The activities are similar to those in the preschool but appropriate for the younger age group. Gradual separation may or may not be addressed. It should be noted that, while based in a preschool, this type of program might be separate from the preschool. (Although sometimes the teachers in the toddler program are hired by the preschool director.) Families who enroll may be accorded a priority when applying to the preschool, but placement in the preschool is not always guaranteed.

### **Infant and Toddler Classes**

There are all sorts of independent classes offered apart from preschool programs, and available in various venues and programs throughout the city: swimming, movement, gymnastics, music, foreign languages—the list goes on. And many are designed for very young infants. Parents or caregivers must accompany the child; in fact, very often these classes provide benefits to the parent as well (think parent-child yoga classes).

Look for age-appropriate activities, a location that is easy for you to get to, trained teachers, a clean space, and an approach that encourages exploration by the children. As with every class, program or activity you consider for your child, check websites carefully. Use your judgment as to how many and what sorts of classes are appropriate for your child. Preschool teachers caution that less is more: children can be over-programmed.

That said, while it is not necessary to enroll your little one in a baby gym class, you might find it a pleasurable way to spend time with your baby as well as with other parents and children.

## Parenting Groups and Playgroups

You will also find parenting groups and playgroups in your neighborhood, ranging from informal to older, established ones. You might even start your own. These groups offer parents the opportunity to share thoughts and concerns with others who are new to parenthood. They also provide a natural setting for parents and children to develop relationships with families around them, and often result in friendships that last far beyond the infant and toddler years.

## Does Your Toddler Have to be in “School”?

Finally, does your toddler need to be in a program or class outside your home? The answer is: No. Many children, and their parents, may not be ready for a formal program at this tender age. Give your toddler the time and opportunity to lay the groundwork for being a successful student later.

In her *Parents League Review* article “School Readiness,” Temple Israel’s early childhood director Lisa Samick observes that children “cultivate 85 percent of their natural intellect, personality and skills by age 5.” She credits this development not to genetics alone, but to “the everyday experiences the child has” from birth.

Everything in the world is new and different for infants and toddlers, and there are few places like New York City when it comes to opportunities for discovery. Parents, grandparents and caregivers find that a simple walk in the neighborhood lights up the eyes of the little ones in their charge. Adults should let children’s interest in their surroundings be their guide.

Walk down a street and talk about delivery trucks, taxis, street vendors and storefronts. Take the opportunity to converse with shopkeepers and include your child in the conversation. It is fun for children to visit the post office, fire house, grocery store and library. As you stroll you might want to point out street and building construction. Traveling by subway or bus may be mundane for adults, but it can be fascinating for toddlers.

And, as much as you can, take advantage of two great New York City institutions: our museums and our parks. Parks are special assets: they are free, and they provide city children the chance to learn about nature.

At home, infants and toddlers enjoy getting to know the people who live in their building. You (or a grandparent or caregiver) can invite other children to visit and play. Make the most of simple things: cooking, science experiments, reading, even cleaning up. A thoughtful approach to daily activities like getting dressed, sitting at meals and choosing treats helps

children develop self-control and self-regulation that will serve them well outside their home.

In short, each and every “everyday” experience of a little one’s life can help to build the foundation for learning skills later.

Try to avoid anything that prevents a child from being in the moment and interacting with a caregiver—that includes unnecessary usage of mobile devices by children and adults alike. Reading, singing and talking to your child is much more beneficial for language acquisition.

Also, when it comes to classes and other activities, steer clear of any that claim they are a prerequisite for preschool—because there is no prerequisite for preschool. In the same way, avoid any activities that are purely “academic.” Look for programs that involve caregivers and give parent support.

After all, children are in school for many, many years. Let them just be children before they get there.

## Resources

The Parents League of New York is a nonprofit membership organization of parents and independent schools in New York City and the surrounding area. We provide advice and information on parenting and education for families with children from infancy through high school. Among the resources we offer are these:

A list of our member schools, with links to their websites, can be found on our website. Information about public, parochial and charter schools is available as well.

The Parents League website also offers links to parenting resource centers and support organizations.

Parents League members have access to a searchable directory of our member schools.

Parents League members receive our publication *Let’s Play*, a regularly updated, comprehensive listing of activities for infants, toddlers and preschoolers. Programs are organized by category and neighborhood; a description of each is provided.

The Parents League sponsors annual Preschool Admissions Fairs in Manhattan and Brooklyn. Parents are able to speak informally with preschool directors and admissions representatives. Both fairs are free and open to the public.

Members are provided preschool admission workshops, as well as individual consultations on school admissions by our team of School Advisors.

For more information, visit us at [parentsleague.org](http://parentsleague.org).