



Preschool choices

A child's needs should guide the choice of program. Above, aide Paula Rossi works with Kyle Johnson, 5, at the Children's School for Early Development in Hawthorne. **Details, 38**

InThe Schools

"It's great to know that while I'm at work, she wants to be here, she's safe and she's happy."

Maureen Toohey, Mount Kisco parent



By The Numbers

128,882: New York 4-year-olds in a formal pre-kindergarten program 2003-04. Source: New York State Education Department

Many options exist, but a little work will find the right one

Diana Bellettieri
The Journal News

As preschool directors tout their various teaching philosophies, selecting a program for your precious tyke may seem as overwhelming as applying to college.

While some local districts have eased the stress by introducing universal preschool programs, many families must still make the choice on their own.

Today, we look at four preschool programs that cater to diverse needs. Last week, we explored three big-name philosophies: Waldorf, Montessori and Bank Street.

Neighborhood day care

Preschools licensed to provide day care are attractive to many working families. Whereas unlicensed preschools cannot keep children for more than three hours, day-care preschools will watch children for more than 10 hours.

The Kiwi School in Mahopac is a preschool and kindergarten program with the option of extended day care. Parents can drop their children off at 7:30 a.m. and pick them up at 6 p.m., if necessary. Most children, however, attend either a three-hour or a seven-hour session.

On a rainy afternoon at The Kiwi School, a class of 4-year-olds took turns cradling baby chicks, playing with puzzles and eating doughnut holes.

At 4 p.m., Maureen Toohey arrived to pick up her 4-year-old daughter, Julia. Despite having been dropped off at 9 a.m., Julia didn't want to go home. She was too busy tending to the flower she had planted.

"It takes me a half-hour to get her out of here," said Toohey, 39, a single mother from Mahopac who works as a hairstylist. "It's great to know that while I'm at work, she wants to be here, she's safe and she's happy."

Tuition ranges from about \$2,580 to \$6,000 per school year.

Cooperative preschool

Cooperative preschool programs are based on the idea that a parent is the most important teacher in a child's life. In a cooperative program, parents actively participate in the classroom under the daily guidance of a head teacher.

Ramapo Community Nursery School in New City was one of the first cooperative programs in Rockland County. Founded in 1956, the program has expanded to include 2-, 3- and 4-year-old classes.

Jill Halpern, whose 5-year-old son, Eric, attends RCNS, praised the program for preparing him for kindergarten, boosting her confidence as a parent and uniting the school community.

"You're immersing yourself in preschoolers and the joy they're getting from being together, learning and growing," said Halpern, 38, a stay-at-home mother from New City. "I think it makes the child value their education more because the parent wants to be so closely connected."

Tuition is \$129 to \$205 a month, and there is a \$20 application fee.

Base preschool choice on what your child needs



Rohanna Mertens for The Journal News

Kyle Johnson, left, 5, and classroom aide Paula Rossi watch as Nolan Spitzer, 3, works with his teacher Helga Coiro at the Children's School for Early Development in Hawthorne.

The ABCs of choosing a preschool

Educators and local parents say:

- Ask whether the school is licensed.
- Do your homework. Learn everything you can about the school's philosophy and policies.
- Check the teacher-child ratio. For 3-year-olds, there should be no more than five children to a teacher; for 4-year-olds, eight children to a teacher; for 5-year-olds, no more than 15 children to a teacher.
- Ask teachers how they deal with conflicts between children.
- Consider your child's needs. Does he do best in small or large settings? How does she deal with separation? Is he potty trained? Does she need extra attention?
- Think about your family's needs. Do you need a half-, full- or extended-day program? Do you want to be involved? How much money are you willing to spend? How far are you willing to travel?
- Be prepared for a quiz. How would you describe your child during an interview?

On the Web

- Child Care Council of Westchester Inc. at www.childcarewestchester.org
- Putnam County Child Care Council at www.putchild.org
- Child Care Resources of Rockland, Inc. at www.childcarerockland.org

alongside typically developing children. In these classes, the disabled children continue to receive their special services.

The Children's School for Early Development is funded through the New York state Department of Education and the County Department of Health. There is no charge to families.

Religion-based preschool

Regardless of the religion, parents and educators said religious preschool offered all the traditional learning and playing opportunities plus lessons of respect, love and faith that are essential to a strong moral grounding.

At St. Catharine of Alexandria School in Blauvelt, prayers are said in the morning and then again at lunch. Teacher Barbara Feeney said the prayers are very simply stated, yet nevertheless set the foundation for an appreciation

of God's presence.

"It's really important today to have that kind of a foundation and to know that God is always with them," Feeney said. "I think that gives them a real sense of security."

Nancy Quirk, whose 5-year-old twins attend St. Catharine, said Feeney's ways of introducing God to the children is "ingenious."

"It gives them the beginnings of religious beliefs in a way that's hard for us, as parents, to bring it down to that level," said Quirk, 42, an IBM project manager from Blauvelt. "It's not the school's responsibility to teach religion, but it gives a good introduction."

Tuition ranges from \$2,025 to \$4,600 per school year and there is a \$75 registration fee.

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