

Beyond a day care

Experts offer tips on how to find a preschool

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marlene karas/VIEW Jennifer Kalas, director of early childhood education at Alexander Dawson, says parents should set goals before looking.

For many parents, choosing the right preschool can be tough. With a little help from local experts, though, parents can learn what questions to ask and what to look for when choosing their child's first school.

"The first thing we always recommend is to sit down and look at goals with anyone who is involved in choosing the child's school," said Jennifer Kalas, director of early childhood education for Alexander Dawson School in Las Vegas.

Parents may be looking for socialization, daycare, academic instruction or a combination of the three. Kalas also recommends parents evaluate why they are thinking about preschool, which may help pinpoint a list.

"Be really clear on your goals," she said.

Parents thinking about preschool should set parameters of cost and how far they are willing to travel from their home before seeking out schools, then decide which is the most important goal on the list.

"We realize it's a very difficult decision for parents to make," said Amy Popp, marketing manager for Learning Care Group, which operates Child Time Learning Centers in the Las Vegas area. "What kind of environment do you want for your child?"

After writing down goals, parents should canvass preschools to see which they should consider for their child. Call schools, drive by, talk to other parents and even ask other preschools for recommendations on area facilities. After determining which schools are appealing, take a tour of each one.

"This is not the time to take your child," Kalas said. "Unless you're really ready to introduce them to that preschool, you should leave them at home."

Kalas said parents should go into the tour with expectations, and should take a checklist with them to make sure they don't forget any goals that are important.

"Don't be surprised if some schools don't have scheduled tours," she warned. "Be strong and say 'I really need to see the school.' "

During your time at the facility look for interactions with children from the director, teachers and other children at the school.

"Are the teachers happy? Are the children happy?" Popp asked. "You want to meet the teachers."

Trust your gut while there, and feel out the climate of the school. Look for a well-maintained property, and if the environment is safe for children. Also, look at the ratio of adults to students. Kalas advised not just to ask, but to get a visual of the ratio.

"You're going to get an atmosphere feeling," said Jolene Pruyt, fourth-grade teacher at The Henderson International School. "Is it friendly, is it clean, does it have the security that I need?"

Pruyt also recommended watching a class in action, to determine if the teaching style is what your family desires.

"(Parents) should really trust their instincts," Kalas said. "If you walk in and your neck hair raises, it's probably not a good place."

If a facility doesn't agree to let you take a tour, Kalas added that should signal a red flag. Also, parents should ask about teachers' backgrounds and teacher turnover at individual schools.

"They need to find out what the credentials of the teachers are," Pruyt said. "Ask for certificates."

Popp advised parents to check out the state licensing division for preschools, which in Nevada is the Department of Human Resources, Division of Child and Family Services, Bureau of Services for Child Care. The department can be contacted at (800) 992-0900.

"Make sure the school is licensed and compliant," Popp said. "Also, are they first-aid and CPR certified?"

Kalas added that parents should be aware of the National Association for the Education of Young People, an association that accredits preschool programs.

"If a school is unaware of the association, that should be a red flag," Kalas said.

According to Pruyt, examples of questions parents might want to ask while visiting a school include:

What is the curriculum? Does it allow for creativity? Do children have individual time? What kind of snacks are provided? Are they nutritional, or are they just a filler? How secure is the building? Is there more than one way in? How does the sign-in and sign-out procedure work?

"If they can't spend 45 minutes on the phone or in person to answer questions, that would be a red flag for me," Kalas said.

Once you select a preschool, take your child down and introduce him or her to the environment. On the first day, Kalas recommended parents stay with the children, so they become acclimated to the school.

Finally, Pruyt said every parent should pick their kids up on time -- "Their biggest fear is that you're not going to pick them up," she said.