



MUSIC MATTERS

*A Newsletter for the Families Enrolled in the Music-in-the-Box
Music Masters Program*

*"AS HE MASTERS EACH NEW SKILL HIS SELF-CONFIDENCE
INCREASES..."*

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The Pre-Pre-School Dilemma How Do You Choose?

By Ginger Acopiado

(This is an edited version of the Winter 1 Session article for 2004. We update and run this article each January/February to help our moms during this challenging transition from home to school.)

What an adventure finding a pre-school was for our family! I really didn't know there would be so much stress over what initially seemed such a natural and easy choice. In retrospect, I thought I would just pick the school my son's friends were going to attend or the schools attended by older siblings of those friends. In reality, something very different happened. I began to care about specific things for my son, things that were different from those of friends and family.

My sister wanted socialization for her children, but my son had a large weekly playgroup and several friends we saw almost daily. My neighbor wanted religion school, yet that came naturally in our daily routine, so it became less important to my choice of school. I was concerned we needed diversity since my son was surrounded by children mostly like him and I wanted him to learn more about other people and their cultures.

As for us, I would try the educational activities for youngsters at home and found myself frustrated and my son tuning me out. And as he turned 3, I watched my reticent clingy toddler turn into a talkative, creative, and dramatic little boy with a sparkle in his eye and mischief in his genes. Which school would understand that child best? If I sent him to school with all of the friends in his playgroup, would he learn how to make new friends? Would he be so comfortable with his buddies that his behavior would not be conducive to learning? Who could spark his academic interest if I couldn't?

So I opened the phone book, made a list and started to grill anyone who would talk to me about pre-schools in the area. Weren't all pre-schools the same? Why were some so much more expensive than others? Someone suggested I visit some of the schools in the area to see what was offered. I am so glad I did.

Upon visiting the many centers in the area, I found vast differences in philosophy and practices:

- *Some schools parents are welcome visitors or aides, and others find parent disrupt the classroom flow.*
- *Some have you bring in your child. Some have you drop them off to a teacher in the drop off zone.*
- *Some schools foster social development while exposing academics in group settings.*
- *Some allow for individual development while exposing socialization in group activities.*
- *And some focus on academia, with social skills as a background side benefit, just for being part of a group.*
- *And the list goes on...*

I decided I needed a checklist of my son's strengths and weaknesses, as well as a "desires" list of my own.

For myself, I found the school I chose not only needed to meet both my son's thirst for academic stimulation (his questions were getting overwhelming!) and my need for his increased social development, but that it had to meet my wish for creative outlets. I wanted him to be able to engage in religious holiday celebrations of all types and wanted a school that encouraged social responsibility. I also wanted individual academia instead of group instruction. And last, I want a teaching approach to discipline, rather than a punitive one. Pretty tall order, but I was determined.

After months of classroom visits, with and without my son, I finally found the school that was right for us. And though I did have to give in on one or two of the items on my wish list, I found it to be the one that I could live with most or do more with at home. We were done. We had a school. And it was good for us.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR IN THE CLASSROOM:

CIRCLE TIME: Is it used for instruction or for group fun? Why is that important to you? Does your child get any current exposure to circle time in other activities? Does your child work well in group settings or require more individual instruction.

WORK TABLES: Are children placed at tables at the same time for instruction or free to explore other areas of the room when others are at the table? Is there enough space for everyone if it were required? Are they allowed to move on when finished or stay until all are finished? Which do you favor and why? *(Ex: Some parents feel waiting with the group teaches teamwork and self-control. Others feel it restricts a child's inner drive to explore their environment and continue learning when in a workflow.)*

ARTS & CRAFT: Do the children spend a large part of their school time on activities that produce great visuals for parents, but little benefit to development? Are art projects creative? Who does most of the work, the child? or the teacher in preparation? Art is a creative outlet. Look for schools that encourage creative expression if that is important to your family.

SPECIAL ACTIVITIES: Are enrichments like gymnastics and music available to the children? Are they allowed to go outside, weather permitting, for a small portion of class time? If not, does your child need a physical outlet? Is this important to you based on your own lifestyle?

CREATIVE EXPRESSION: Are the children controlled by the environment, or does the environment welcome creative input or activity? *(Ex: Can your child take off their shoes and wear slippers? Are any parts of the day child-directed?)*

DISCIPLINE: How are children asked to resolve the issue surrounding the need for discipline? Socially? Consequentially? How is a disruptive child turned into a cooperative one? Is there a place a child can go to in order to regain composure? *(Ex: Do you want the room to have a quiet corner when a child feels they need to remove themselves or be alone to gain control.)*

LIFE SKILLS: Are the children active participants in maintaining the classroom, the items within the room and the world around the room? Are there live animals? Are there responsibilities each child is required to tend during a part of every day? Is this important to you? Are there allergies to consider?

CLASSROOM TOOLS: Are the "tools" in the classroom build on learning or development or are they play items? *(Ex: Use of tongs to move items from one place to another aid in the writing muscle development. Eye droppers also do this. Tactile sandpaper for allows kinesthetic learners to connect touch with sound earlier than verbal instruction.)* Social play and relationship learning includes: doll houses, blocks, and other common toys found in the home. Do you already engage your child academically at home and prefer a social setting for building relationship skills? Are televisions in the classroom? Would that bother you?

QUIET SPACE: Where does a child go to separate themselves from group activities when they are overwhelmed or need space? Somewhere with comforting items such as pillows and books? Does your child need this or do you want

this for your child?

RELIGION: Is it an integral part of the curriculum? Do children learn about and acknowledge all religious holidays or just religions specific to one denomination? Is it the same as yours or similarly modeled? How important is this to you and your family?

AGE / TOILET TRAINING: Is there a minimum age requirement or a minimum toilet-learning requirement?

TIMES/LOCATION: Is the school in a location convenient to you for the times you need to be available to other children in your family or your work schedule? Are you allowed to pick your days or are they decided by age/ability? Do you choose your days and times, or is there an age-related schedule preset by the school?

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION: While observing the classroom with your child, did he/she immediately want to explore the room? Did you like what you saw? Did your child? Did you get a sense of “rightness” that fit your expectations? Or did something just seem “not quite right” to you? It’s a good idea to pay attention to your instincts - if something doesn’t feel right, ask questions and don’t force yourself to dismiss your feelings because of friends or other people’s choices.

No one can tell you which school will be right for you, but many will try. Nod politely, take your time, make your checklist, visit the schools that are within your budget (and maybe one just a little outside it to see why) and trust yourself. You are the only one that can decide what best suits the needs of your family and your child.

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