

EDUCATION UPDATE

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Preschool Admission: Finding the Right Fit

by Gabriella Rowe

Summer's over. Relaxation is replaced by anxiety over a brand new cycle of preschool selection. Over the next couple of months, families all over New York City with young students will be starting the process again, preparing for fall tours and application submissions and anxiously anticipating the interviews, essays and acceptance or rejection letters.

Preschool selection, like hot dogs, taxicabs and the Yankees, is a topic that sensationalizes New Yorkers for the rest of the country. You know the story. In a mad rush to get children into the "right" school, parents will do whatever it takes, including beg, cry, plead and bribe to get their two-year-old into "the" school of the moment. The process is such an ordeal that parents begin the preschool selection hype before the child is even born. The preposterous thought that seems to take over the mind of a parent is, "if my unborn child doesn't get into a certain prestigious school, she will never go to Harvard!" Preschool selection in New York City has even spawned a new industry of interview consultants for toddlers.

Yes, these first decisions about your child's education are very important. It is the beginning of a lifetime of the learning process. Preschool is the first place you will send your child to learn basic life skills from someone other than you. It is the foundation on which you will first demonstrate to your child the importance of an education. It is also important that you as a parent give your child the independence to interact and make decisions away from you for part of the day, and establish that bond of having him tell you about his day and the decisions he made on his own.

The notion that New York private-school admissions directors go into a deep swoon when they see Gucci loafers and fat bank accounts is silly. We're educators. We've chosen work that's relatively low paying because it's deeply satisfying. What captivates us most are smart, engaged, interesting, inquisitive kids whose families are kind, involved, honest and real.

During the admissions process we try to learn who the applicants are, what they might bring to our school, and how our school might fit with their interests and personalities. We don't see the children as accessories of their parents. Rather, we work hard to see the young people for themselves.

We do want to see well-rounded children during the application process, but we realize that they are only two or three years old. We do not expect them to answer interview questions with the charisma of Miss America or perform a flawless soliloquy from Hamlet, much less be able to tie their shoes.

The admissions process should be about finding a great school—not necessarily a "hot" or prestigious school—for a great child. When parents think hard about who their child is, and what kind of academic and social environment will help their child most flourish and find happiness, then the process works as it should.

Parents always ask me: what can I do to be sure my toddler gets into a good preschool? Who should I hire to coach her? It's not about attending the best school; it's about the experience you are beginning together. How do you make sure your toddler gets the best education she can? The answer from a preschool director: Be involved. Continue school lessons with fun activities at home. Be concerned. Ask when you have questions. Be relaxed. Your child's future does not depend upon writing her ABC's next to the child of a movie star. It depends upon you, her parents, believing in her abilities, encouraging her individuality and remaining a life-long participant in her education.#

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