

The Defining Characteristics of a Quality Preschool Program

A CULTIVA white paper examining how to ensure preschool children receive the maximum educational benefit

Introduction – The Benefits of a Preschool Education

Investment in early childhood education is proven to drive significant societal returns: every dollar spent on an early childhood program is estimated to [generate a return to society ranging from US\\$1.80 to \\$17.07](#).

The U.S.-based National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) studies the impact of preschool education in young children. Their [research](#) shows children who attend a high-quality preschool are better prepared to read, have a more extensive vocabulary and possess basic math skills.

[Studies](#) that track children from preschool age to young adulthood find that those who attend preschool are *less* likely to develop a drug or alcohol problem. They were also less likely to develop a serious behavior problem that would lead to incarceration. Children who attend preschools are **more** likely to reach academic achievement, seek higher education make more income as adults.

With the benefits of a pre-k education hardly in doubt, the question is what makes a quality preschool? According to CULTIVA's research and some expert tips from *Parent's* magazine, here are the six things to look for:

Defining Preschool:

Preschool is defined as an educational class for two to four-year olds. The words preschool, daycare and childcare are often used interchangeably. For this discussion, the word preschool refers to a childcare center with a specific curriculum in place, well-trained teachers, stimulating activities, and an emphasis on social emotional development.

What Makes a Quality Preschool?

Preschool quality can often be a subjective matter. Families' own experiences and perspectives influence what they value in early childhood education. However, when looking at statistics and research compiled over the last fifteen years, six criteria consistently rank high across the board.

1. **A quality preschool strengthens a child's social skills.** Exposing children to a group setting at an early age delivers tremendous benefits. It allows adults to teach the children how to compromise, be respectful and problem solve. The best preschools allow children to develop their social skills through exploration of their environment, experimentation with their sense of self and conversation with their peers. A quality preschool accomplishes this by offering group *circle time* (when all the children collaborate as a group) as well as *center time* (when children are given the opportunity to explore activities they enjoy in a rotation with their young peers).

2. **A quality preschool is in a centralized location** that offers a safe environment. When choosing a preschool, most parents consider locations either close to work or close to home. Preschools tend to do well when they are in a highly visible area, such as a busy shopping center or in a neighborhood filled with young families. The location itself must offer safety features to parents including an enclosed outdoor play space, video monitoring outside and inside classrooms, and a secure way of checking children in and out of the center. The internet is a great way to research whether a facility meets national or local safety requirements.
3. **A quality preschool offers a variety of scheduling options** to parents, so that a child's developmental rate is taken into consideration. Most preschools are open to children from two years until five years of age. However, just because a child reaches the age of two, it does not mean he or she is ready for full time care. Preschools need to provide a variety of schedule options that address different levels of social-emotional readiness. Therefore, a quality preschool presents parents with half day options, options to attend a couple days a week or flexible schedules based on how the child progresses.
4. **A quality preschool has highly educated teachers.** The quality of the teachers begins with its leadership team, which is often a head teacher or a director. That person should possess a minimum of an associate's degree and formal training in early-childhood education. It is ideal if all the teachers in the center hold a college degree that specializes in early-childhood education. This specific training allows them to provide more positive interactions for children, stay more engaged with the children throughout the day, and offer more chances for the children to develop a rich vocabulary.

When considering the quality of the staff, also factor in the preschool's size to ensure the appropriate teacher-child ratios. Ideal ratios vary by a child's age; however, the lower the teacher-child ratio, the better because smaller class sizes allow children to receive more individualized attention and help to identify any areas where the child may need increased focus. Visit a classroom and observe how the teachers interact with the children. Successful teachers ask a lot of questions, encourage all the children to participate and patiently await a child's answer.

5. **A quality preschool has a strong curriculum.** The curriculum allows teachers to direct the children to certain specific learning activities, but gives each child the chance to explore and make their own discoveries : [a balance of play and learning](#). When evaluating a [strong curriculum](#), there are over a dozen components to consider:

The curriculum is grounded in child development principles, and is evidence based and studied in a peer-reviewed journal or by a major organization. Learning activities progress from simple to more complex. The curriculum specifies child learning outcomes and demonstrates how that is accomplished. The most effective programs include an ongoing assessment that link the learning goals of the activities to the children's learning outcomes.

The curriculum is comprehensive across learning domains. The activities integrate content from language development or literacy skills, mathematics knowledge and skills, science, social studies, logic and reasoning, social and emotional development, physical development, health and creatives arts expression. An effective curriculum covers each of those learning domains in a sequenced, progressive manner.

There are specific, measurable, child-focused goals for each learning activity. The learning activities are well designed, easy to follow and highly interactive. The curriculum includes responsive teaching where teachers use a combination of child-focused and direct teaching strategies to make learning more appropriate to children's needs. Effective curriculum addresses individual differences among children and allows for adaptation based on a child's needs.

The curriculum needs to be culturally and linguistically responsive and meet the needs of the children and their families. It allows for teacher professional development and on-going training. Effective curriculum includes strong family education and incorporates families into the classroom.

6. **A quality preschool promotes the development of social and emotional skills.** To learn, young children need to feel secure with their teacher. Quality preschool programs foster warm relationships among children and teachers, as well as teachers and parents. Most three- and four-year olds are not able to control or understand their emotions like adults. Good teachers understand that when children act out, it creates a teachable moment. Children learn what frustration feels like or which situations make them angry. Teachers should not always step in and resolve conflicts for children but help talk them through what they are feeling and why. This teaches children to understand how their emotions impact others as well as achieve a greater sense of self.

How CULTIVA Builds a Quality Preschool

CULTIVA knows how much goes into creating and maintaining a quality preschool. Through trial and error, CULTIVA created a “preschool in a box”; essentially a step by step guide on how to create a school from start to finish. CULTIVA provides start up support in four key areas, all with their own turn key solutions to some of the most complex start up challenges.

1. CULTIVA begins preschool start up with a comprehensive **market analysis**. This analysis includes:

- Analysis of the boundaries that the school will serve
- Demographic analysis of the size of the target market regarding income, race/ethnicity, education levels
- Analysis of the current educational options

2. After the market analysis is complete, next comes **site planning**. As part of the process, the following is usually performed:

- Compilation of possible building or property locations
- Analysis in regards to parking, traffic, target market, and public transportation
- Analysis of local and state regulatory requirements
- Client support during the acquisition process.

3. The creation of a **business plan** is crucial for securing the funding for a school start-up. CULTIVA designed business plan templates to integrate into the proposal process.

4. Finally, it is time to craft an **action plan** that considers:

- Acquisition of faculty members: CULTIVA hires highly educated English speaking teachers who will be able to instruct students to speak and use English proficiently.
- Hiring of administrative and maintenance personnel: CULTIVA can recruit, hire and train administrators who become the backbone of the faculty. These professionals will manage the school on a daily basis.
- Building and improvement projects
- Applications and other formalities: CULTIVA provides the administration with a step by step guide on running the school and parents receive a detailed handbook that lays out student expectations and policies.
- A step-by-step time schedule for go-live, improvement projects, applications and other formalities

CULTIVA provides the curriculum but make sure it meets the school’s mission and goals, as well as is culturally appropriate.

CULTIVA develops turn-key international education solutions for schools, investors, governments and development organizations. Our global education consultants deliver strategic planning, financing, staffing, curriculum, student recruitment and operational support for projects in areas such as China, Africa, and Latin America.

To read more about CULTIVA, please visit globalcultiva.com or call (202) 600-9827.