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Preparing for preschool: are you ready?

by Christy Laverty

As printed in the Summer 2008 issue of Urbanbaby & Toddler magazine

It's summer and it's all about relaxing. But wait, your little baby is now a preschooler and will be going to preschool in a two months. Is he ready? Are you ready?

Don't worry; there is lots of time to get ready. There is no doubt that sending your child off to preschool is a difficult thing to do. It is likely the first time your little one has been in a real social situation without you right beside him.

Melissa Leonard, etiquette expert and mom, agrees: "Preschool is a big, new world for young children. It will be the first time that they may be in a group setting, where structure is integral day in and day out."

But the transition from home, a safe haven and place of security, to the larger world of preschool can be an overwhelming one for even the boldest of children.

There are a few things that parents can do to help make it a smooth and happy experience.

Samantha Sacks, a working mom to Harper, Oliver, and Jessica, put both her boys in preschool. The boys went for the

school year before they started junior kindergarten (JK). "I wanted to get them used to the routine, rules and expectations they would be dealing with at school. They had never been in any organized setting before so it was a good easy entry into the system," says Sacks. "By the time the boys got to JK, they understood what it meant to be part of a larger group, that they needed to put their shoes, snow suits, etc. on by themselves, stand in line when they were asked to and sit quietly for circle time," adds Sacks.

Dina Boni Agnew is a mom to six-year-old Trajan, three-year-old Samuel and two-month-old Veronica. She says she is considering preschool for Samuel. "He's had a hard time adjusting to the new baby and with Trajan in school all day, and me busy with Veronica," says Agnew. "So I think he would benefit from a new environment, a more structured day where he'll learn rules, how to interact with other children, and hopefully it'll prepare him for school next year."

As the first day of school approaches, it will make things easier for you and your child if you try to go to the preschool with your child and meet the staff.

It is also important to talk to your child about the new routine and help your child look forward to the experience. That's something that Agnew is trying to do with three-year-old Samuel: "I've already started talking to him about it. He asks about where Trajan is all the time, so now I take the opportunity to let him know that he will be going to school soon as well," she says. "I make sure he watches shows like Timothy Goes to School, and we read books about school, like No David! It helps your child see what school will be like, and what they can anticipate when they get there.

One more thing that will help make the transition easier, is to think about allowing extra time in the morning when starting a new preschool; you both need this time to prepare. Agnew says she is working toward that with Samuel already in anticipation of school days. "Although difficult, I'm trying to get him up, fed and dressed early in the day, rather than have him wander around in his PJs all morning," she says.

Leonard says preschoolers are young, but it is never too young to instill manners and teach them the basics. "As we all know, young children do and repeat what they hear around them. This is why it is so important to teach them the basics and to make sure that they have a solid foundation before preschool," says Leonard.

Parents should help children make the transition by reminding them that when Mommy is not around, they still must behave properly. This should be reinforced every time they go to their grandparents, to playdates, on outings or any other time they may be without your watchful eye, says Leonard. "This really comes into play in preschool, because bad habits and actions by those around them, can make your polite little Polly into an unruly and naughty Polly," she adds.

When it comes to the big day, parents may need to stay in the classroom at first. Education experts say this is normal. If you spend a little less time each day, the break will be gradual and less stressful. Remember that separation anxiety is perfectly normal for a new and exciting situation.

Agnew says her biggest concern about sending her son Samuel to preschool is that he will be resistant to going. "I know the drop-off will be a horrendous nightmare," she anticipates. "He will fight and kick and scream. And that's just the first day! Just getting him in the car the second time will be extremely difficult."

Ultimately, Agnew has the hopes of all parents when it comes to preschool. "I hope he will benefit from a more structured environment"...and of course, have fun.

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Preparing your tot for preschool

by Daniela Ginta

As printed in the Fall 2007 issue of Urbanbaby & Toddler magazine

For most parents and children, going to preschool is the first time a child will be on his own. The mix of joy and worry grows as the first day of preschool approaches. Is he going to manage all by himself in a new environment, or be scared and cry? Or maybe he'll make friends on the very first day and leave home every morning with a smile on his face.

Laura Moore (not her real name) remembers her experience with her oldest daughter, whom she characterized as a shy and not very outgoing toddler. "I put my daughter in an 'all-on-my-own' class where she did well, at two-and-a-half," Moore says. "She went to preschool next, and the first day we walked in, she never looked back to see if I was still there or not. She was comfortable on her own, even if she didn't know anybody, and was still not very talkative."

This, of course, could well be your experience. But there is the other side too, where children cry and simply refuse to go to preschool, even when the kindest of teachers is on duty and all the children share nicely.

Cindy Graham (not her real name) remembers her experience with her youngest son, who broke her heart every time she left him at the preschool. "He was clingy and just not happy," she explains. "It broke my heart to leave him there, but every time I did, I was told he stopped crying soon afterwards." What to do to circumvent the tears conundrum? There is no simple answer, but there are solutions.

Get to know the environment

All preschools have open house days, when parents and tots are welcome to join in the fun and meet the teachers, the other children and their parents. It is important that you make time to go to the open house with your child. Don't count on the fact that he was a social butterfly over the summer. Things change, and young children are unpredictable, especially at this age. Explore the new environment with your child, introduce yourselves to the teachers and make friends.

Playdates with future classmates also help ease the transition, since your child won't feel intimidated if he sees familiar faces. Preschoolers, like all children, fear the unknown. Make the preschool known to him by visiting the location and playground before school starts. If you believe your child will have a hard time adjusting to the new environment, ask the preschool personnel if you can also drop by before the preschool starts and spend some time looking around. Depending on his interests at the time, your child will be delighted to know that there is an art corner or a water play table.

As for the worrying parents, every preschool holds an orientation event, where you can ask about everything that

crosses your mind regarding preschool. Most parents are just as anxious as their children, but asking questions and knowing what your child is heading into helps tremendously. If you know people whose children went to the same

preschool, ask them to share their opinion.

To participate or not?

If you have the time, by all means, choose a parent participation preschool. That's not to say that others are no good. They are, but if you ask the parents who have put their children, and themselves, too, in a parent participation preschool (PPP), you'll understand why these preschools are different.

"I am particularly fond of parent participation preschools because of the level of parent involvement there," says Kathy Lynn, a well-known parent educator from Vancouver and mother of two adult children. Parent participation preschools are special because they allow you to witness directly your child's first educational experience. Also, parents whose children are enrolled in a PPP have a big input when it comes to organizing things in the preschool. That will help ease your worries about your child, and will also create a special relationship with the other parents involved in making the preschool a safe and fun place. You'll get to know the parents better than you would by dropping off or picking up your child. "Some of my best friends are the parents I met in my children's parent participation preschool," Lynn says.

Downside? You should expect your little one to be very clingy on duty days. It's perfectly normal. Going to preschool is a big thing, and sharing Mom or Dad with the other children is difficult, since the environment is different than a typical playdate. As always, patience is key. Have special one-on-one time after the preschool ends on duty days, and re-establish his confidence that he remains your special little one.

Relax, kick your shoes off

Just as you are about to head out to the preschool, your child starts crying that he doesn't want to go. As you get closer to the preschool, he cries harder, and by the time you are ready to say "good bye," he screams bloody murder. Leaving him there seems the least possible scenario in your mind. If this is what you're going through on preschool days, take heart. You are not alone, and the teachers have been through this many times. Depending on the school policy, the teacher will probably let you stay a while to make your little one comfortable. Read a book with your child, or take him to the art table. Leave as soon as you see he is happy and calm. Give him a good-bye hug and let the teacher guide him to one of the activities in the classroom.

"If the child doesn't settle down after the parent leaves, it is best if the parent stays with the child," advises Lynn. If the child is miserable, then maybe he is not mature enough to be in a preschool environment, Lynn suggests.

If your child has a favourite toy or object, such as a blanket, a pillow, or a toy, let him take them to the preschool at least during the first weeks, until she settles in, if that's what she wants to do, but take special precautions so she will not lose it. Check with your particular preschool though, as some preschools have a policy not to allow students to bring outside toys into the classroom.

Change what?

If nothing seems to work, consider other options. Maybe enrolling your child in another preschool could solve his problems. Take a look around the visit a couple of them with your child, and see what she thinks. Most preschools have similar programs, but something could strike your child, and he might love a different setting because it's brighter, or because the new teacher smiles a certain way. Whatever the case, be enthusiastic and encourage your child to open to the new experience. If you can enroll him in a parent participation preschool, try it. Your presence will help him see the new environment in brighter colours.

If the whole preschool setting is what makes him unhappy, maybe it's time to change your strategy. "Children need to be involved in some sort of social activity," Lynn suggests. "If preschool doesn't work for you and your child, then try some classes by all means," he says. Most community centers offer a great variety of programs geared towards preschool children. Start with a parent and tot class and move on from there.

Some preschools offer classes for two-year-olds, too. In Lynn's opinion, two often is too young an age to start preschool, but ultimately it all depends on your child and whether you will be staying with him school hours. Some children have a slow time adjusting, even at three, Lynn says, so do take your child personality into account when looking into preschool programs.

There is no "one size fits all" when it comes to preschool experience. Most children have a good time, even if they cry a little at first. If you see any behavioural changes in your child, though, such as loss of interest for activities that he previously enjoyed, mood swings, or acting up and having a hard time settling down, maybe it's a good idea to talk to the teacher about possible solutions. Be flexible and open to suggestions, and remember that our duty as parents is to help our children have a positive experience, especially when it comes to education.

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Scared silly: are scary stories harmful to your child?

by Shannon M. Dean

As printed in the Fall 2007 issue of Urbanbaby & Toddler magazine

Glass slippers, fairy godmothers, magic beans, and happily ever after. Evil giants, wicked stepmothers, ugly witches, and the Big Bad Wolf. Yesterday's fairy tales and today's scary stories are filled with conflicting vivid imagery of both good and evil. Many parents are surprised to discover that the nuances, scary visuals, and dark symbolism they missed as a child are now extremely obvious as a parent. It is no wonder that many parents pause when the wolf is seconds away from making a meal of Little Red Riding Hood or The Magic Treehouse's Jack and Annie are surrounded by circling sharks. Parents can't help but wonder if the scary content is harmful or if children are perceptive enough to internalize any dark meanings.

Many experts reassure us that children mostly take these stories at face value and nothing more. To them, a story is just a story. Family therapist Thomas Whiteman says that children relate only to what they understand and block out what does not make sense. He assures that most children get only the "broad brush" of the story—the hero wins out and the villain is defeated. Younger children don't pick up on other nuances, he says, because they usually are only capable of black-and-white thinking.

Experts even say well-chosen fairy tales can actually be a learning tool for children, navigating them through developmental stages and reassuring them that virtuous behaviour, perseverance and accepting help, aid in overcoming obstacles. When good triumphs over evil "it magically restores faith in a child's ability to conquer his own troublesome emotions," explains psychologist Sheldon Cashdon. He says fairy tales often conveniently explore common issues

children face as they come of age—like the fear of abandonment, vanity, greed, envy and sibling rivalry —leaving those issues wide open for parent discussion.

In contrast though, some scholars caution that traditional fairy tales encourage negative stereotypes. Vanita Braver, a child psychiatrist and children's author, says many fairy tales reinforce harmful stereotypes and imply that it pays to be physically pretty: "From early childhood, little girls are read fairy tales about beautiful princesses who achieve vast treasures and riches simply because beauty makes them special." This is unhealthy, she says, because it contributes to young women feeling they are inferior if they don't meet unrealistic standards of beauty.

Braver strongly encourages parents to understand the messages that are implied in such stories and to initiate a frank discussion with their child about why harmful stereotypes are often both factually inaccurate and morally wrong. "Parents are the most influential people in a child's life," she explains. "They can reinforce positive messages and counter the negative ones."

With all of these tips in mind, how do parents determine which stories are appropriate for children? English professor Sylvia Baer feels it is desirable that children see the main character transcend the events that challenge him to persevere to become a stronger person in the end. She encourages parents to carefully consider not only the subject matter of a book, but also their child's social, language, and cognitive developmental levels as well as his unique personality.

"Scary books are a fantastic idea on a child-by-child, book-by-book basis," says Steven Herb, president of the Association for Library Services for Children. Experts say parents should never force a book on an apprehensive child, and instead carefully read an unfamiliar story before sharing it. If you're not sure that your child is ready, wait. Consider forgoing movie versions for the corresponding book—a book's visuals are usually much less intense for young children and give the child more control. He can simply close the book or look away if it becomes too scary. And remember there are many different book versions of the same story. Many editors will greatly water down or even omit scary parts in collections for younger children.

So if your preschooler wants to hear *Sleeping Beauty* for the 100th time, be glad she wants to read and know that you can use the book as a starting point to discuss important issues.

Paul Borgese, an award-winning author and performer, encourages parents to ask children to make up their own endings. After that, ask them what they would do if they found themselves in the same situation. This helps your child develop good decision-making skills under your guidance.

Finally, don't worry so much that kids blur the lines between fantasy and reality. Karen Rostoker-Gruber, an award-winning children's author, often interacts with and reads to a wide variety of children. She is confident "children know the difference between reality and fantasy and can easily digest the enormity of a character's problem if it is presented in a fantasy-like fashion."

Most adults who read fairy tales and scary stories as children, grew up with the full realization that mirrors don't engage in conversation and magic beans don't literally exist, but it can still be fun to read about them. And isn't part of the enchantment of childhood believing in a little magic?

Suggestions For Appropriate Collections of Traditional Fairy Tales by Age

Babies and Toddlers:

A First Book Of Fairy Tales by Mary Hoffman (Dorling Kindersley Publishing). Contains the classics as well as a few lesser known tales. Each story is just a few brilliantly illustrated pages to keep young readers interested.

Walt Disney's Classic Storybook (Disney Press). Includes a couple of classics like *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Tortoise and the Hare*, and several classic Disney stories that later became movies. There are beautiful vintage illustrations for each of the 18 tales and the text is kept short and simple.

Preschoolers:

Fairy Tale Classics: Easy-To-Read Collection by Harriet Ziefert (Viking Books). Includes these six classics: *The Gingerbread Boy*, *Henny-Penny*, *The Little Red Hen*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *The Magic Porridge Pot*, *The Princess and the Pea*, and *The Ugly Duckling*. Features simple, large text with engaging pictures.

Disney's Storybook Collection (Disney Press). Contains several classics like *Cinderella*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *The Three Little Pigs*, but also a very extensive collection of Disney tales, like *Peter Pan*, *Lady and the Tramp*, and *The Little Mermaid*. The illustrations are the vivid images expected from Disney. The text is longer and more complete than *Walt Disney's Classic Storybook*, but still edited enough to dilute the scary parts so they aren't overwhelming to preschoolers.

Eric Carle's Treasury of Classic Stories for Children by Eric Carle (Orchard Books). Includes stories from *Brothers Grimm*, *Hans Christian Anderson*, and *Aesop* and features the wonderful illustrations for which Carle (popular author of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*) is so famous.

The Helen Oxenbury Nursery Story Book by Helen Oxenbury (Knopf Books for Young Readers). Includes 10 classic stories like *The Gingerbread Boy*, *The Three Little Pigs*, and *The Billy Goats Gruff* as well as vivid, large illustrations, some of them a full page.

The Golden Book of Fairy Tales by Adrienne Segur (Illustrator) (Golden Books). This beautiful book is filled with classics from around the world such as *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*, but its real draw is the elaborate illustrations, each a work of art. Originally published in 1958 and reprinted in 1999, parents may remember this book from their own childhood.

Elementary Aged Children:

The Random House Children's Treasury: Fairy Tales, Nursery Rhymes & Nonsense Verse by Alice Mills (Gramercy). Spanning 448 pages, this book contains just about every fairy tale or nursery rhyme you can think of, along with some treasures you never knew existed. The nursery rhymes at the beginning of the book can be read to younger siblings.

Treasury Of Virtues. Courage. Love. Honesty. Twenty Stories to Grow On by Jennifer Boudart (Publications International, Ltd). Features 20 stories specifically designed to teach morals, including the classics *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* and *The Ugly Duckling*. The end of each story features a discussion on the moral

presented and questions that encourage communication on the same topic.

Read Me a Fairy Tale by Rose Impey (Scholastic Trade). Includes 14 classic stories such as Hansel and Gretel, Rapunzel, and Beauty And The Beast and whimsical watercolour illustrations by Ian Beck.

Classic Fairy Tales by Scott Gustafson (Illustrator) (The Greenwich Workshop Press). This large format book offers 10 classics like Puss in Boots, Hansel and Gretel, and Snow White with luminous, painted illustrations beautiful enough for framing.

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Kindergarten 101: what you need to know before your child's first day

by Daniela Ginta

As printed in the Summer 2007 issue of Urbanbaby & Toddler magazine

Few parents think of school when they first hold their newborn baby in their arms. And then, the journey starts: the first smile, the first laugh, the first step and before you know it, the first day of preschool. Finding a preschool is not an easy thing, but kindergarten is an even more sensitive issue. Kindergarten is where 'real' school starts, so to speak, and that's why parents look for the best available school for this educational debut. And that's where concerns start. Public or private? English only or French immersion? Should you go with your gut and the few tidbits of information heard through the grapevine, or do your own research and get ready for some serious elbow fighting when it's time to register? And what if you learn that the public school in your catchment is rated low? Overwhelmed? Most parents are. But a glimpse into the life of kindergartners and their parents can help you find answers. Read on.

The Fraser Institute Report – What to Make of It?

Some parents fear the 'report cards' issued by the Fraser Institute. Will anyone put their children in a school that was rated among the worst? But then, some argue, is the report accurate? The proponents of the report say that it measures academic performance, based on the provincial government's Foundation Skills Assessment that evaluates numeracy and literacy skills of students in grades 4 and 7. It also takes into consideration the number of years of education the parents have, which may not be always accurate, some argue, since there are always people moving in and out of a neighbourhood.

Following the publication of the report cards, some parents feel pressured to put their children in private schools. But a private education is not necessarily the answer. George Bluman, mathematics professor at UBC, has come up with his own ranking of the schools, based on the students' performance in the first year of university.

In Bluman's experience, public schools have scored very high in math topics in the last years. And the gap between public and private has widened in recent years, with public school students rating highest, followed by religious and independent private schools. While Bluman's research takes into consideration high schools and not elementary schools, the latter are, after all, the foundation upon which the high schools – and later university education – are built. So, the next time you look at the 'report cards,' take the information in with a bit of salt and pepper. It's not all bad if it's rated low. Find out more about the school, and most importantly, find out as much as you can about the teacher, because a good teacher really makes a difference.

All You Need to Know About Your School?

The Vancouver School Board website lists all public schools in the Lower Mainland. As a first step to finding the right public school for your child, this is the source. Look for the contact information that is provided for each school together with the school curriculum, its statement and school highlights. That's what Mary Jo Wagner, mother of two from Vancouver, did when her oldest daughter went to kindergarten.

"We knew about the school," says Wagner, "and we knew that it was a good school from other people who registered their children there."

Talking to other people about the school played influential part in their decision. If they were unsure about the school in their catchment, she says, they would have tried the impossible: crossing the boundary to register for another public school.

"We feel pretty strong about the public school system, and we would have tried for another public school somewhere," Wagner affirms.

While she is aware that the 'report cards' rate private schools high, Wagner believes that for now, public education is all her daughter needs. "We are aware that we will need to put some time in and help our daughter when she'll be in school," Wagner says. So far, she adds, they are amazed at the progress her daughter has made since she started kindergarten. One thing she says they like is the diversity of people found in a public school, which they believe helps their daughter become more understanding towards people.

Private Matters?

According to the Fraser Institute, private schools are among the best schools. They have funding, they have good ratings year after year, and they boast superior instruction. Tuition rates vary from a few thousand dollars to more than \$10,000 a year, starting in kindergarten. While we all love our little achievers, some parents simply cannot afford the fees.

Are we setting our kids for academic disaster by enrolling them in public schools? Not so, according to Bluman.

"In our studies," he says, "for the last 30 years or so, in math, private schools have scored well below the public ones almost every year." Also, he adds, students from private schools might have a hard time adjusting to a university environment, which is a more societal environment.

That does not make private schools bad. They do offer good quality instruction and a wide variety of extracurricular activities. Public schools have their flaws too, and there is no denying that the latest strikes didn't make them look any better. Nor did the funding cuts. Considering the good and the bad in both types of schools helps parents think as

objectively as possible when registering their children for school.

Maria Linden (name changed by request) chose to put her son in a Catholic private school after trying unsuccessfully to register at the school in their catchment in Vancouver. There were long waiting lists, and they knew their son might not get in, Linden said. And he did not.

"After many searches," Linden reveals, "we opted for this private school, and so far, we've only seen positive changes in our son. He loves this school and the religious component helped reveal his gentle side, too." The school is well funded, she notes, but every parent helps, financially or by volunteering. As with many private schools, the school is holding an annual fundraiser, where parents can choose to volunteer as part of their contribution.

Lastly

Ultimately, the decision is yours. Do your research. Get to know the teacher, and drop by for an impromptu observation session. Keep your eyes open for the methods that are used to keep the children focused, ask about the strategies they use to deal with restless children and, take into account your gut feeling. Ask questions and get ready to step in for your little one without making half the school teachers your personal enemies. Work with the teachers to address issues you believe are not dealt with satisfactorily.

Be prepared to spend more time with your child once he starts school. Don't do his homework for him, but do supplement information here and there, clarify issues and learn what his favourite class is. Good things happen when parents get involved, especially when it comes to school issues.

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Talk the talk: developing baby's language

by Sarah Dakin

As printed in the Fall 2006 issue of Urbanbaby & Toddler magazine

Talk. It is easy to take our children's language development for granted until something goes wrong, yet language development is a critical part of our children's early years. We all talk to our children but beyond the directions and reprimands of everyday life, there is also true conversation with our children about their interests and the world in which they live.

Betty Hart and Todd Risley are two American psychologists who studied everyday parent child interactions, and they found how much we talk with our children about what is going on in everyday life varies immensely. In some families, children heard an average of over 2,000 words per hour; in other families, children heard only 600 words per hour. The long-term impact on vocabulary, reading ability and school performance is huge. They also found dramatic differences in what the children heard. The parents who talked less tended to be directing or reprimanding their children, rather than asking questions or sharing information. We all have moments when we feel like an army drill sergeant rallying the troupes, but if we consciously choose to talk with our children, it is one of the greatest gifts we can give them.

Why is talking to our children so important? "Communication is an essential part of a child's being," explains Janet Moore, a Vancouver speech and language pathologist. "Language is how we connect with each other, express our thoughts and ideas and understand the experiences and feelings others. When we talk with a child one on one, they are learning more than the words and the sounds. They are also learning to take turns in conversation, to use different styles of speech depending on who they are talking to, to maintain appropriate eye contact and other social uses of language."

Language also teaches our children key concepts. Think about words like "before," "because" or "first." Children are learning much more than how to name the objects they see around them. They are learning how to think and how to understand their world. And such learning can be integrated into everyday experiences.

We are going to brush your teeth before we go out. Is this your toothbrush? (Hold up a parent's toothbrush and wait for your child to laugh. Toddlers love silly games like this.) First we put the toothpaste on. What's that I see on that back tooth? Is it an elephant? No? It must be jam from lunch!

Spending time in conversation with our youngsters also gives their future reading skills a boost. Think about words like brambles, scamper or terror. When a child in elementary school sits down to read a sentence like, "The mouse scampered into the brambles in terror!" even if he can decode the words correctly, the sentence will be meaningless unless he has heard these words spoken to him, in context, enough times to have some sense of what they mean. A mother who talks to her toddler when out for a walk will, over time, provide just that exposure. Look. The brambles are losing their leaves now. Lots of plants lose their leaves in the fall. Do you think there are any creatures living in there?

A final reason to dive into dialogue is that it's fun! It can feel silly at first to be having a conversation with a baby or toddler, and many parents find they only unfurl these skills in private. But once you start, getting to know the inner workings of your child's world is one of the greatest joys of parenting.

So now that we're talking, how can you maximize the chances to build your child's language skills?

Start early. It is never too soon to start talking to our children. Babies also understand much more than we give them credit for, and even newborns have been shown to take turns in conversation with a noise or movement. For example, when picking up a baby to change him you might say something like: Are you awake Liam? You want to chew on Mummy's shirt! Are your teeth sore? (wait for his response) I bet they are!

Elaborate on your child's language. Children can understand so much more than they can express. Help give them the words they need to say more. For example Olivia yells from her stroller, "Doggie." You respond, Yes, that is a big, black dog! He sure looks hot doesn't he! See how his tongue is hanging out! That's what dogs do when they are hot.

Talk to your child about what is going on right in front of him. Talk about past, present or future events. Dinner time and bed time are wonderful opportunities to talk about events that happened earlier in the day – it also helps children learn sequencing skills and develop their memories. First we got up and had breakfast. Then we got in the car and drove to the park. Do you remember seeing the kites?

Expose your child to new words. It is fine for your toddler to say "owie." or "juice" for every liquid he drinks, but you should be precise with your language so you are exposing him to the full richness of language. Don't worry about him not understanding you. Children can pick up new words just from context, and if he seems confused, you can elaborate. Your sandals are your blue shoes. They have openings for air to go through so your feet don't get hot.

Make use of travel time to talk to your children. With the amount of time spent in cars today, travel time can be a potent opportunity for great conversations. Look! Did you see that digger over there? What do you think they are building? Oh, the light is red. Red lights mean we have to stop as other cars get to have a turn.

Enjoy books together. We all know reading to children is important. For young children books are really just something to help the two of you get talking. If he wants to turn five pages at once, that's fine. Talk about what he shows an interest in. Can you see the hippopotamus hiding behind the tree?

Cherish the humour and enjoy hearing thinking in action. I will never forget when a friend came over and asked my husband and me what we did over the weekend. Our 20-month-old son ran up with a grin and said, "Screw! Screw!" My friend and I had a good laugh as I explained that he was very interested in tools at the moment. Children are sorting out how things work in the world. We get to witness the evolution of their thinking.

Talking to our kids, unlike many other tasks on busy parents' to-do lists, requires no travel time, materials or costs, and takes little more than a conscious intention. It is a gift that tells our children they are important and their ideas matter.]

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Preschool pursuit: making sense of your choices

by Mary Jo Wagner

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Preschool. It's a defining moment for both parents and their child. It's a time when parents realize their baby is neither baby, nor toddler but rather a bonafide little child. It's also a time when parents need to step back and determine what kind of personality and characteristics their child exudes. Is he very independent, or shy, or timid, or gregarious or high energy? Does she prefer to play alone or to be in a group? Does he take discipline well? Has she been exposed to regular groups of children at daycare or predominantly at home with a nanny or parent?

It is a necessary analysis, say many preschool educators, if parents want to choose a preschool that best suits their child. After all, just as children's characteristics are uniquely their own, so too are the teaching philosophies and programs of preschools.

"I think the way we parents think is a little different from the way it should be," says Atoussa Kashani, senior supervisor at University Hill Preschool. "We tend to put our children into programs that emphasize skills they already strongly possess, like choosing Montessori for the child who is already quite intellectual and knows how to work independently. But we want to make a well-rounded child and help children work on the skills that really need to work on. So I think a child who fits our particular program is not necessarily the child who should be here. A child who comes into our program should be a child who really needs it, who needs to be with other children and who needs a little more structure."

With hundreds of preschools on offer in the Lower Mainland, it may seem daunting to choose the best one for your child. To help narrow the field a little, what follows is a brief look at the most predominant types of preschools – parent participation and Montessori – along with an introduction to a lesser known learning approach called Reggio Emilia.

Parent Participation

According to the Council of Parent Participation Preschools there are presently 48 parent participation preschools (PPP) available in the Lower Mainland. Typically these are play-based facilities that emphasize learning through socialization, free play, behaviour modification, group activities and arts and crafts. The arts and activities often coincide with a particular overall theme such as outer space or bugs and insects.

"Parent participation is a wonderful opportunity for both children and parents," says Cathy Lehtonen, head teacher at Dunbar Memorial Preschool (DMP), a PPP located in the Dunbar Community Centre. "For parents, this is a rare moment in their child's life where they can observe them in a school setting and see how they interact and learn. As this is often a new environment for children, PPP allows the option of gradual entry to ease the anxiety of separation for parents and children. And parent duty days are really special for the children. A parent stays for the morning to assist with the daily routine, and the child is encouraged to participate in show and tell at circle time."

DMP offers programs for three- and four-year-olds and just began its first two-year-old program last fall.

As PPPs are solely parent run, parents will have specific jobs to perform in addition to occasionally being "on duty" in the classroom. And while children get their first taste of play-based learning, parents become better-informed caretakers through monthly parent-education meetings. Recent topics for DMP parents include anger management, first aid and how to build self-esteem and self-confidence in children.

Lehtonen cautions, however, that in a PPP, play is predominant, not academics. "Play-based is a great way to find out what skills and interests your child has for various facets of learning," she explains. "Children will learn their limits, learn how to resolve conflicts with their peers, and explore school for the first time with some freedom of choice. Through observation, parents can then determine if their child needs a more structured setting. However, parents need to remember that routine is structure."

Montessori

To say that Montessori preschools have become quite popular is an understatement. Recent estimates put the number of Montessori preschools in greater Vancouver at around 215 and growing almost monthly it seems. Oakridge Montessori in Oakridge Centre has over 300 children on its waiting list.

The Montessori approach dates back to Italy in the early 1900s when physician Dr. Maria Montessori began working with developmentally disabled children. Through her experience she developed some of her core tenets for the Montessori educational philosophy such as children learn best in a home-like environment, children are their own best teachers, children create themselves through purposeful activity and the most important years for learning are from birth to age six. By the 1950s interest in this unique educational approach began to grow and it hasn't stopped.

However, for as rampant as Montessori preschools have become so too are the misconceptions about what Montessori is and is not. Some people believe that Montessori is very rigid and others believe it's very unstructured. Both ideas, says Fiona Lee, principal and teacher at Oakridge Montessori are misguided.

"Each Montessori class operates on the principle of freedom within limits. The program is highly individualized – each child works at his own pace – but there are well-defined boundaries to encourage self-directed learning while developing essential skills such as accountability, self-discipline, initiative, concentration and intrinsic motivation."

Children at Oakridge Montessori can enter at the age of two and 10 months and continue through age six. Up until kindergarten (where curriculum is introduced), preschoolers are presented with specialized, didactic materials to discover a range of subjects such as math, phonetics, music or "practical life" – an extension of the home setting where children learn to pour water, clean tables and practise personal hygiene.

Although teachers have an overall plan, units of study are typically children-led. For example, a rock brought in by a girl for show and tell led to Lee organizing an entire unit on rocks and geology.

"Montessori can be a rather subtle learning approach to develop a well-rounded child," says Lee. "For example, children learn to clean tables with a left-to-right motion. This is because they will learn to read from left to right and write from left to right. There is a higher purpose involved in many things we do."

Reggio Emilia

Reggio Emilia is another Italian-based philosophy that is gaining more and more notoriety – Newsweek magazine cited Reggio Emilia schools as the best early childhood education in the world – although its practice is still relatively new to Vancouver where only a few preschools offer a Reggio approach.

Its roots date back to WWII, where in the northern Italian town of Reggio Emilia, a group of mothers sold a tank, six horses and two wagons left behind by the Germans and used the funds to build a cooperative preschool for their children. That first school, under the helm of Loris Malaguzzi, developed the core of the Reggio philosophy: children are protagonists, collaborators and communicators; teachers are researchers, nurturers and guides; and parents are partners.

"Reggio is difficult to define because it's not a curriculum, it's a constantly evolving educational approach based on the ever-changing science of how children learn," says University Hill's Kashani. "It emphasizes socialization, sharing and cooperating, self-discovery and artistic expression within the scope of science, math, music, drama and literature."

University Hill, located near UBC, offers three- and four-year-old programs. Similar to Montessori, chosen educational themes are children-led. Once a theme is chosen, teachers develop an interactive project to help

children learn about the topic, and then document the process – writing down conversations, recording conversations, videotaping activities – to both show parents what their children are engaged in and to provide an opportunity to the children to learn more from the projects by revisiting what they did. Unlike the individualized approach of Montessori, Reggio emphasizes group learning and requires children to negotiate, communicate and reciprocate ideas in working together on projects.

Reggio also strongly emphasizes the arts for both artistic expression and communication. At University Hill, children work with clay, wire, paint, ink, collage, paper, and metal; they experiment with light and shadow using light tables, overhead projectors, and shadow screens; they explore music and sound using a variety of instruments and recycled objects.

The choice of preschools can indeed be overwhelming. But as preschool is the precursor to school, choosing the right preschool environment can go a long way in helping children develop positive attitudes towards school.

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Program brings babies into the classroom

by Julia Kaisla

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Baby hormones or not, I am not the emotional type. So I was surprised when I was overcome during my last Roots of Empathy (ROE) visit to Champlain Heights Community Annex.

Roots of Empathy is a preventative program coordinated through the Vancouver School Board to help foster empathy in classrooms. The program pairs a family with a classroom of children or teenagers. The family makes monthly visits to the school so that students can learn the 'roots of empathy' through making a connection to the visiting younger child, whom they will see grow and change over time.

Research is proving that the program is successfully increasing empathy and cooperation and decreasing bullying in the classroom. As a result, the program, which began in Toronto in 1996, is booming: nearly 45,000 children were said to have participated in the program last year.

My son Oliver and I began visiting our friends at Champlain Annex when he was four months old. Over the course of the school year, we visited the grade three students at Champlain Annex seven times. They saw him grow from a wide-eyed baby to a crawling, talkative young toddler. Before and after each visit, the ROE coordinator met with the children to discuss a different topic (e.g., temperament, sleep). She encouraged the kids to come up with questions and helped them identify cues to gauge Oliver's physical and mental development and his feelings.

I cannot say if the program succeeded in changing behaviours in the class but the program was a fantastic experience for my family. I never expected that Oliver and I would love the program so much, that we would bond with the children, and that we would become such central figures in their lives (and them in ours). I never realized that the program would help foster my own sense of empathy – that I would learn to see the good intentions that lie at each child's core. I also never anticipated how important it would be for them to see my husband participate in parenting Oliver.

From the beginning, I was encouraged to invite different family members to attend the sessions. Sometimes it was just me and Oliver, and at other times, my mom, my sister or my husband came with us.

The most memorable moment was when my husband arrived and one boy stood up on his chair and yelled "Chuck is here!" The children had been asking me when Chuck was going to come back, so they were thrilled to see him. Needless to say, Chuck loved the attention. He sat on the carpet with the kids and answered all their questions about Oliver's recent changes. The kids, especially the boys, soaked it up.

Both of us were sad to say goodbye to them and we were weepy when they read out letters to Oliver about what it has meant for them to be part of the ROE program. On the day of the last session, they threw a party for us. The coordinator brought cake and goodies, and many of the parents sent snacks. One parent even showed up to the party with her own toddler. She said she had heard so much about Oliver that she just had to come.

As many of us know, it can be a challenge to keep your perspective when raising your child. We often become so focused on our little one that we forget to look at life from someone else's perspective. These children allowed me to see Oliver through their eyes. I remember Mitchell asking if Oliver was right- or left-handed. On another visit, a child asked what Oliver's favourite colour is. Slowly I was remembering what it was like to be eight; when all of these issues really mattered. In their minds, Oliver was one of them and I was just an extension of him.

I learned that one day, when I'd have to let Oliver go into his world, it would be okay. These kids restored my sense of trust – something that had been subconsciously replaced by gloomy newscasts. I was also reminded that many classrooms can deliver a safe and secure environment that will foster our children's sense of understanding. This is the legacy of the ROE program. In her letter to Oliver, a little girl named Rachel wrote, "Before you came to our class, our class was so normal ... You bring sunshine to our class." Funny enough, this is exactly what I feel they did for me: they brought sunshine to my life.

For more information about the Roots of Empathy program, including how to participate visit www.rootsofempathy.org.

You can also hit up one of your teacher friends or visit your local school.

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