Playschool vs. Preschool vs. Nursery School vs. Pre-Kindergarten

“What’s the difference between them all?”

By definition Preschool is “an educational establishment offering early childhood education to children between the ages of 3 to 5 prior to the commencement of elementary school”.

For most the terms are interchangeable and the only differences will be in the philosophy of learning, the hours and terms of care and the intended outcomes for the children. Most programs regardless of the name are designed to allow children to build confidence being away from home, skills associated with beginning an elementary education system and the ability to work with peers.

Everything done during your child’s time at an informal early education venue is to prepare them for Elementary School and beyond. Communication with peers & teachers, following directions, accepting challenges and responsibilities, printing names, recognizing letters and numbers, counting, patterning, days of the week, knowing own birthday & last name, using scissors and glue, opening/packing/closing own backpack, putting on shoes, snow pants and the list goes on. These life skills taught during Early Childhood and will carry on – they are the building blocks your child will need throughout their life.

Some differing philosophy’s to know when choosing an preschool or playschool for your child:

Montessori education is an educational approach developed by Italian physician and educator Maria Montessori based on her extensive research with “phrenasthenic” (mentally challenged) children and characterized by an emphasis on independence, freedom within limits, and respect for a child’s natural psychological, physical, and social development. Mixed age classrooms, with classrooms for children ages 2½ or 3 to 6 years old by far the most common

- Student choice of activity from within a prescribed range of options
- Uninterrupted blocks of work time, ideally three hours
- A constructivist or “discovery” model, where students learn concepts from working with materials, rather than by direct instruction
- Specialized educational materials developed by Montessori and her collaborators
- Freedom of movement within the classroom
- A trained Montessori teacher

Waldorf education, also known as Steiner education, is based on the educational philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy. Its pedagogy emphasizes the role of imagination in learning, striving to integrate holistically the intellectual, practical, and artistic development of pupils. Steiner’s division of child development into three major stages is reflected in the schools' approach to early childhood education, which focuses on practical, hands-on activities and creative play; for preschool age and continues to the next 2 stages in elementary school.

The Reggio Emilia approach is an educational philosophy focused on preschool and primary education. It was developed after World War II by a psychologist Loris Malaguzzi, and parents in the villages around Reggio Emilia in Italy. Following the war, people believed that children were in need of a new way of learning. The assumption of Malaguzzi and the parents was that people form their own personality during early years of development and that children are endowed with "a hundred languages" through which they can express their ideas. The aim of this approach is teaching how to use these symbolic languages (eg., painting, sculpting, drama) in everyday life. The program is based on the principles of respect, responsibility, and community through exploration and discovery in a supportive and enriching environment based on the interests of the children through a self-guided curriculum.

A forest kindergarten is a type of preschool education for children between the ages of three and six that is held almost exclusively outdoors. Whatever the weather, children are encouraged to play, explore and learn in a forest or natural environment. The adult supervision is meant to assist rather than lead. It is also known as Waldkindergarten (in German), outdoor nursery, nature kindergarten, or nature preschool.

Whether you choose a preschool, playschool, or pre-k for your child’s Early Childhood Learning the purpose is generally the same and often the name is simply a business/organization name choice.