



Time for school?

Whether or not to send your child to pre-school is a very personal choice for parents. Britsoverseas takes a look at what you should consider.





THE WORDS ATTRIBUTED to Plutarch, the renowned Greek philosopher, ring as true today in the hearts and minds of educators as they did some 2,000 years ago: “The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled.”

Children grow up very quickly and it can seem no time at all to parents since a baby was born. The early, formative years shape so much of a child’s future. Parents are a child’s first and most influential teachers and the first few years of a child’s life, the years

before formal schooling, are the time of the most rapid brain development and very significantly affect a child’s capacity to learn.

Child-rearing responsibilities can weigh heavily on parents who want to give their children the best possible start in life. None of us ever feels fully prepared for such an important role and it may well be a relative, nanny or au-pair who is entrusted with the child-care arrangements.

PRIORITIES

What should be the priorities for parents and carers during these early, pre-school years is a topic for debate.

Emmy award-winning American television presenter, songwriter and educator, Fred Rogers, is very clear about the answer – lots of fun and play.

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“Play is often talked about as if it were an escape and relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood,” says Rogers. It is the opportunity for children to enjoy structured play activities that attracts many parents to the idea of pre-schools for their children.

Whether or not to send a child to pre-school is a very personal decision for parents and there is no right or wrong answer, no one-size-fits-all. Every child is different and it is the needs of the individual that count. What might be best for one child in the family might not suit another. The personality, maturity and needs of the child need to be carefully considered before reaching a decision.

Some parents want to spend as much quality time with their child as possible before the start of school proper and value



the rich and diverse learning opportunities that the home environment can offer. Some stay-at-home parents can even feel guilty about sending their child to pre-school,

opportunity to form good relationships and interact positively with others, especially for those children with no siblings, can be invaluable.

“I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand – Confucius, Chinese philosopher”

feeling that they are pawning off their responsibilities on others.

Those parents who opt to send their child to pre-school often do so because they believe that the wider setting can help a child to develop important social skills. The

Good pre-schools will offer a stimulating and challenging range of opportunities for a child to learn through play-based, exploratory activities where the learning environment has been carefully planned by qualified early years staff.

EARLY YEARS

Jean Piaget, Swiss psychologist and natural scientist, spent much of his life researching the ways that young children develop conceptual skills through memorable sensory experiences in their early years.

Piaget's writings have greatly influenced modern developmental psychology. Like Confucius who lived long before him, Piaget was a firm believer in the value of a child's active participation in learning. "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand" Confucius, Chinese philosopher.

Pragmatically, it can often be the case that attending pre-school before the start of full-time education can be hugely beneficial. A child who is engaged in a part-time enrichment programme, which offers opportunities to develop creative, problem-solving and decision-making skills will, doubtless, become more confident and independent.

Many pre-schools in Hong Kong also offer the opportunity for children to learn a second language through bilingual lessons, something many parents see as invaluable, as the longer you wait for your child to start learning another language, the more difficult it becomes.

Barack Obama, the US president, passionately argues that government investment in early childhood education during the infant and toddler years is particularly important and should be of high quality.

Convinced of the benefits of pre-schools? There will be opportunities in abundance for your child to develop social skills, personal attributes and self-esteem provided that you choose a school that you believe to be in tune with your child's physical, social and emotional needs and potential

Talk to other parents with pre-school children. Seek out their opinions and recommendations. Do your homework.

It was Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, commander of the British Forces in North Africa during World War II and undefeated in battle, who constantly impressed upon his troops: "Time spent in reconnaissance is never wasted."

Try to choose a pre-school that reflects your own vision and values. Do you feel that the school's staff offer more than just day care? Do they exhibit a real enthusiasm for learning that they can impart to your child?

"Better than 1,000 days of diligent study is one day with a great teacher" Ancient Japanese proverb.

With your knowledge of your child's temperament, interests, learning style and specific needs, you may well be that great teacher. At home, equally, you may welcome the support of pre-school staff whose personal qualities and professional skills have impressed you previously.

There is no substitute for actually visiting the pre-schools that particularly interest you and experiencing at first hand with your child something of the atmosphere that pervades the school. Trust your gut instincts. If you walk away with a spring in your step, chances are that your child will feel the same way.

CHOICES

Parents will obviously be attracted by a safe and secure learning environment, particularly if the indoor and outdoor resources are geared to the needs, interests and aptitudes



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of young children. Remember it isn't always the eye-catching features and resources or the most expensive fees that reflect the quality of the educational experience for the children. It is possible to find an Aladdin's cave in the unlikeliest of settings. Above all, it is the people that your child will meet on a daily basis who will make a difference. The ratio of well-qualified adults to staff is also very important if the children are to receive individual attention.

Different pre-schools may well have different strengths. Some may offer specific support for special needs such as autism, deafness, blindness or developmental delay. Maria Montessori (1870-1952) was famous for her pioneering work in early childhood education and was the first woman to receive a degree in medicine from the University of Rome. Montessori schools teach children

about cultures and the natural world as well as providing typical pre-school activities. The staff encourage pupils to develop a range of skills, to think independently and develop a sense of responsibility for the world in which they live.

“While we try to teach our children about life”, she said, “our children teach us what life is all about.”

Most pre-school children are eager to reach out and explore their world. If they have experienced a loving and secure home environment, they carry that security with them into new situations.

Nancy Lu has two highly gifted children. Her son has an IQ of 194 and entered College at age 10. He was awarded a masters degree in computer science from Stanford University at 16 years old. Nancy's daughter is also highly gifted, with an IQ

of 189. Nancy offers the following valuable perspective on parenthood and early childhood learning: “I think of a parent as a farmer preparing a fertile and hospitable place for his seeds to thrive and flourish. He ploughs his fields, sows the seeds then labours day after day feeding and irrigating them and watching over his fields with love. The rest is up to Mother Nature and the innate potential in each seed. At harvest time, the bounteous crop brings joy to the farmer. When I see outstandingly successful children, I see behind them the hands that rocked their cradles.”

Above all, remember that life is for living. Life does fly by but our children can be daily reminders that we should aim to make play and fun an integral part of their lives. In doing so, we help them to achieve their true potential.



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WoodlandPre-Schools

For over 30 years Woodland has set the standard in Hong Kong for quality pre-school education. With ten schools across Hong Kong, Woodland offers classes for children aged from twelve months to six years.

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Repulse Bay Montessori	Tel: 2803 1885
Mid Levels Montessori	Tel: 2549 1211
The Peak Pre-School	Tel: 2849 6192
Repulse Bay, Beachside	Tel: 2812 0274
Happy Valley Pre-School	Tel: 2575 0042
Pokfulam Pre-School	Tel: 2551 7177
Woodland Playgroup (Pokfulam)	Tel: 2872 6138
Woodland Harbourside (Aberdeen)	Tel: 2559 1377
Sai Kung Pre-School	Tel: 2813 0290