

Preparing for Preschool

Your child is old enough for preschool! The first step is making a decision about how, when and where your little one will attend. Begin by considering your youngster's communication skills. Think about what concepts and vocabulary your child knows and what skills you are hoping will be achieved next. Think about what you feel is needed in a program and what the professionals working with your child have recommended as important to focus on now.

After reading this paper, parents can list:

- Considerations for making decisions about school programs
- Information for preparing staff to serve your child with hearing loss
- Ideas for helping your child become ready for new activities
- Suggestions for simple strategies for classroom communication

Do not wait until your child's birthday or for the start of a new school year to begin preparations. Planning can begin six months before any expected change of services. If you have an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) you can have transition goals for what needs to happen to get ready for preschool. If your child has or will have an Individual Education Plan (IEP), professionals in the school system can meet with your family to discuss the process for writing a plan or talk about goals. Written plans can help families obtain specific services and assist with documenting what preschoolers will achieve in this new setting. Planning is meant to be a way for staff and parents to discuss directions and agree upon strategies to encourage success.

You can consider what preschool services are available. Asking questions is one way to gather information. There are multiple examples of questions provided here as a guide, but they would not all be asked by one family. Choose only the questions you feel are most important to you. Encourage the teachers to ask you questions, too. By gathering and exchanging ideas with families and staff, you give your preschooler the opportunity to reach his or her greatest potential.

Questions to ask as you consider a decision

Preparing your child for preschool can be a process that involves thinking about your child, available programs, suggestions from



professionals and your rights to services. As you consider your little one and what you want next, you might ask yourself these kinds of questions:

1. Does my child use spontaneous language regularly? Is my child communicating like others of the same age?
2. Can my child play alone and participate in groups of varied sizes? Is my child ready to be in a class designed for children of the same age?
3. Does my child need a program focused on special learning needs? What type of program has been suggested by the professionals who know my child?
4. What class is being offered? Is it a mainstreamed program, a special day class for children with varied needs, a preschool supported by therapy, a program specifically designed only for children with hearing loss, or a community group for all children?

5. What rights do you have to ask for and choose services? Who in the community can help you know what might be requested and how you can do that?
 6. What do you wish for your child to be doing now? What services have helped your child make progress?
 7. How can you find other parents nearby who have made decisions about programs for their preschool child? Where are adults with hearing loss and advocacy organizations that can offer support throughout this process?
 8. What makes my little preschooler happy? What types of activities encourage my child to use lots of language?
- Has the staff worked with children with hearing loss? What experience does the staff have teaching students with different needs? What information do the teachers want to receive?
 - Is family involvement welcomed? Can parents watch the class on a regular basis? What roles can parents have to help the teacher?

Questions to ask about the preschool

An important consideration is the type of preschool available to your youngster. To determine if a class will be a good experience for your child, set up a visit to the school. Observe the class “in action” and see the activities. Watch the teachers guide and instruct the children. Talk to the staff and ask questions about what they teach and what methods they use. Topics to talk about with staff could include:

- What is the classroom schedule? Are there fun activities that provide language learning both formally and informally? Does the routine allow for short attention spans, different interest levels and times for quiet play?
 - Are there children who can be language models and peers? Are there children using age-appropriate language so your youngster can have many opportunities to communicate with classmates? Are there activities where children are learning from one another?
 - Will there be special support services for your child? Is speech therapy or language support provided? Are there any specialists available to help your child and the teacher? Examples: occupational therapists, teachers of children with hearing loss, or school psychologists)
 - What program or curriculum do the teachers use? Is the emphasis on gaining specific skills or is the focus on exploring varied subjects? Does the staff have a clear written set of guidelines about what to teach or can staff describe what instructional methods are used?
 - How are the children assessed? Do the teachers document the children’s abilities using checklists or informal methods? Do formal evaluations cover multiple developmental skills such as motor, social or thinking? How does the school measure language growth?
 - Is there a focus on literacy and learning language? Are pictures, words, books, songs and conversations valued in this program? Does each day include activities for children to explore language and help them get ready to read?
1. Short suggestions for school obtained from the Speech-Language therapist, the audiologist, the ENT (Ear, Nose and Throat) specialist or other professionals serving your child and family.
 2. If your child has a cochlear implant, brief reports from the implant team about the device and the child’s individual needs.
 3. Little lists of daily things to remember. For example: using flashlights for dark room, nap time chats or not swimming until amplification is taken off.
 4. Written explanations about equipment and reassurances to eliminate worry. For example: what to do if any hearing device comes off.
 5. Materials on strategies for social inclusion, methods for language expansion, teaching techniques for children with hearing loss or other helpful topics.
 6. Demonstrations of how to handle hearing devices. Examples might include how to change a battery, check the hearing aids or implant and put them on your child. It might be helpful to include a Daily Listening Check of the amplification device in the child’s everyday classroom routine and list it on the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP).
 7. Answers to questions the teachers have for the parents or recommendations staff need from other professionals.
 8. Descriptions of your child’s interests, the abilities being practiced at home, and the progress your precious one has made.

Information to share with the teacher

Once you have decided on a preschool program, you can share information about your child. Parents can arrange to meet the teacher before their child enrolls. Having a little student with a hearing loss in the classroom may be a “first” for the teacher. Parents can provide descriptions about their child’s learning and communication. If your child has a hearing aid or cochlear implant, the importance of full time use of the device can be explained. You do not want to overwhelm the teacher with too many reports, but provide clear, concise details to make your child’s transition and the staff’s adjustment a smooth process. Some families create a folder of materials for staff to have as a resource. Useful information to discuss might be:

1. Short suggestions for school obtained from the Speech-Language therapist, the audiologist, the ENT (Ear, Nose and Throat) specialist or other professionals serving your child and family.
2. If your child has a cochlear implant, brief reports from the implant team about the device and the child’s individual needs.
3. Little lists of daily things to remember. For example: using flashlights for dark room, nap time chats or not swimming until amplification is taken off.
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Communicating with the teacher

You can ask what is the best time and way to contact the teacher. Parents might set up regular communication with the child's teacher that fits their schedule and the teacher's preference. Such communications could include arranged phone calls, daily emails, weekly observations or brief meetings. There could be a "Communication Notebook" that travels back and forth with your youngster to school each day. Any new information from medical appointments or therapy sessions might be shared to keep school staff updated. Families can provide information to the teachers about what is tried at home, and teachers can share information about classroom activities and how parents might follow-up at home.

Families can ask the teacher to share in advance the vocabulary, concepts, songs or poems that will be presented in class. Practice at home can make it easier for the child to understand new words and stories when they are introduced in the classroom. Parents can do activities at home to support the staff's hard work and help the child use school skills at home too. Children with hearing loss may benefit from exploring ideas and words before and after they are presented in school. Parents can ask the teacher for suggestions about helping a child become ready for preschool.

You might offer to give a little explanation to the class about hearing loss. An introductory activity can help students become aware of your child's hearing aids or cochlear implant. Classmates can learn ways to get your child's attention and communicate clearly. Some questions to ask before school starts could be:

- What will be the regular classroom activities?
- What are some songs they will sing that you can practice?
- Are there books that can be read at home before school begins?
- Can you take some photos to make an experience book?
- How can speech therapy sessions support the class activities?
- Will early intervention goals be continued in the classroom?
- Could the class have a learning activity about hearing?
- How can your family help make school a success?

Classroom Settings

What the children are learning is most important but where they are learning can also have an impact on how well they do.

Background noise can make it difficult for some children with hearing loss to follow conversation and concentrate. Quieter classrooms are easier places for all children to communicate, cooperate and learn.

Parents can share what they do to make sure their child is involved and participates easily in group activities. A personal or classroom "FM system" assures that the teacher's voice will always sound very close to the child. Helping the school staff to be aware of the impact of noise may result in their taking action to create quieter classrooms. Simple strategies to reduce noise and increase communication access could include:

- Place area rugs in activity centers or carpet strips on the path to the teacher's desk.
- Put slit-open tennis balls on the legs of chairs or fabric lining in the drawers of metal desks that open from the top.
- Add cork bulletin boards, fabric wall hangings, or padded panels as room dividers to help absorb sound.
- Act to reduce environmental noise and close the doors or windows when there is noise outside, replace buzzing lights, turn off equipment that is not being used and limit loud speaker announcements.
- Plan quiet zones or simultaneous activities with some tasks involving much sound and some not, so overall noise is lessened.
- Avoid standing in front of bright windows when addressing the class because it is hard for a speaker's face to be seen. Speak at a typical rate and do not overemphasize words or shout. Also, point to who is talking so it is clear who is speaking in the room.
- Allow additional time to answer or use open-ended questions to encourage children to use more language.
- Provide both auditory and visual cues for changing activities or giving directions (examples might be a drum beat or a light blink).

There are many suggestion and questions provided here as guidance as you and your child prepare for starting preschool. You could choose to concentrate on the examples in just one area or pick one idea from each section. Decide what fits best for your situation. You might use these examples but then create a different list of your priorities. Remember, you understand your child best. You know your little one's needs and skills. You can see that those needs are fulfilled and abilities are strengthened in preschool. Together you and your child's teacher can help your child have a successful school beginning!