

Wondertime's Preschool Checklists

Tina Grotzer, an assistant professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, principle investigator at [Harvard Project Zero](#), mom of twins, and member of [Wondertime's](#) advisory board, provides this comprehensive checklist to guide you through the process of touring schools, interviewing administrators and observing in the classroom.

The Teachers

- Does the teacher get down to your child's level and make eye contact when talking or saying hello?
- Is the teacher's tone of voice calm? Or does she/he order and yell?
- Does the teacher listen carefully to what your child is saying and use that information to have a conversation?
- Does the teacher help children listen to each other and figure out how to get along? Or does he/she step in to solve the problem?
- Does the teacher appear to be engaged with the children? When you talk to her/him, does she/he seem interested in her/his work and thoughtful about the dynamics in the classroom?
- How long has the teacher been teaching overall? How long at this school? If it's more than three or four years, what does she/he do — evening classes, for example — to stay excited about work and current on new education ideas?
- Does the teacher strike a good balance between interacting with small groups and managing the broader class? Or does she/he seem to focus so narrowly on one activity or group of children that she/he misses, say, the hair-pulling contest in one corner and the shoving match in the loft?
- Does the teacher set firm and clear expectations that children treat each other respectfully?
- Does the teacher seem to have many rules? Do the rules fade seamlessly into the functioning of the classroom or do they take a front-row seat? How are rules explained? (For instance, are they in support of making it possible for everyone to learn together, or more because rules are rules?)
- Is the teacher able to see things through the eyes and excitement of the children as they are making discoveries for the first time? Does she/he celebrate their discoveries — even if she/he has been watching children make similar discoveries for the past 20 years?

The Classroom

- Are things at the right height for children?
- Are there areas for large groups, small groups, individual activities, quiet time, noisy and messy activities, and so on?
- What do the objects around the room and on the walls tell you about the class activities? Is there a great deal of individual variation in the pictures and projects (which suggests flexibility and an appreciation for individual creativity), or do they all conform to a certain way of doing things (which might signal a greater emphasis on rules and prescribed ways of doing things)?
- Is the environment set up to support children's independence? For instance, do children have access to materials? Is there a chart to show how to do things like feed the class guinea pig?
- Does the balance of messiness seem appropriate — enough stuff strewn around to show that children are busy doing interesting, engaging things, but not so much that it's dirty, chaotic, or unsafe?
- Does the environment support a feeling of community? For instance, is there a job chart so that children all have a role in contributing to the classroom?
- Do the walls showcase children's ideas, thinking, and work in multiple forms — visually, verbally, etc.?
- Are there enough materials to meet the needs of the children but not so many that no one has to learn to share?

The Activities

- Are activities set up so that children can fully engage? For instance, if they're "cooking," are they doing the measuring, smelling the ingredients, and feeling the texture of the oats, or has the teacher premeasured everything in little bags to keep from making a mess?
- Do the activities (everything from tricycling to beading) cover a range of gross- and fine-motor experience?
- Do they allow for the expression of different types of interests and intelligences?
- Do they invite children to express themselves in a variety of ways — drawing, writing, dancing, and the like?
- Are the concepts developmentally appropriate for the age group — for instance, hatching butterflies to talk about how things change over time but stay the same in other ways?

The Schedule

- Does the schedule allow for a balance of individual and group activities?
- Is there both structured and unstructured time?
- Is there downtime after more intense or physically demanding activities?
- Is there a consistent and predictable routine, and do the teachers make the children aware of what the routine is?
- Is the schedule developmentally appropriate? (For instance, does it offer enough time for snack, napping, going to the potty?)
- Does the schedule allow for different types of needs? For example, is there adequate time for clingier children to say goodbye to parents without interfering with scheduled activities, such as going off to a movement class outdoors?

The Other Children

- Does the group's energy seem balanced between boisterous and quiet children?
- Does the boy-girl balance seem right for your child?
- Do there seem to be some gentle boys and rambunctious girls in the mix?
- Are there children who stand out as having needs that will have a high impact on the group? If so, does the classroom have the resources to handle these needs without sacrificing your child's needs?
- Do children behave toward each other in ways that seem respectful and reciprocal?

The School and Its Policies

- Is the head of the school around much? Does she/he greet children in the morning? Does she/he answer voice-mail and e-mail promptly?
- How flexible is the school to the needs of children and parents? Are they willing to accommodate someone with a wacky schedule? What about the child who can only nap with a pacifier or special blankie?
- How long have teachers been at the school? If turnover is high, how does the school explain this? If teachers have been there a long time, what does the school do to support their continued engagement — for example, paying for continuing education classes?
- What holidays does the school celebrate? How are they celebrated? (For example, is Halloween marked with costumes and a parade? Are children forbidden from wearing certain kinds of costumes to school?)
- What foods are allowed in the school? Are parents allowed to bring birthday treats? Does food brought into the school have to be prepackaged? If the school provides snacks, what time of the day are they served?
- What does the school do to foster a sense of community among parents and children?