



“My heart, my head or everyone else; to whom should I listen...?”

A ‘personal’ guide to choosing a Preschool.

For those who have never done it - or have long since forgotten the thinking involved - the idea of choosing a Preschool (or a first ‘proper’ place of education for your child, depending on the system in place in your country of residence) can seem insignificant compared to some of the ‘big’ choices that lie ahead for you and your family in later education.

The reality for those facing this choice, however, is very different. In terms of a change in family lifestyle - other than choosing to have children in the first place - this is arguably one of the most significant you are likely to face with regard to education. It is likely that with this decision you are no longer going to be spending the majority of your time with your child, your direct influence on them will undoubtedly diminish, and members of the family may even be able to renew their careers. It is understandable, with this in mind, that great emotional strain is to be expected. Our first conclusion, then - do not underestimate this decision; it is allowed to feel difficult because it is.

This article is written from a very personal perspective; I am the father of a nearly-four-year-old and am making this choice alongside my wife. Choosing from a ‘shortlist’

of options is now the norm across the world, so the question is how to choose? We were both aware that practical factors of decision-making are unavoidable - location, finances (where applicable), ‘official ratings’ etc - but herein lay our main initial confusion. Neither of us cared about those factors when compared to another; how each setting ‘felt’. For every school we visited, we took a seemingly uninformed intuitive ‘read’ on the place that seemed, to us, the most important factor. This felt unscientific, under-researched - almost childish.

Eventually, however, we realised that this intuition and emotional ‘connection’ was a manifestation of things that cannot be measured empirically. We were searching for a ‘values fit’ with our family - a place where their definitions of certain elements of life and education married with ours. This is, inherently, intuitive. Below I have laid out some of the questions I wished I had considered previously; that subconsciously influenced that intuitive sense of ‘fit’. Armed with an understanding of these ideas, our decisions now feel secure and vindicated.

I believe there are three prime drivers that need consideration. That parents want their child “...to be happy...” is a truism in every sense of the word. The



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challenge, we found, was defining it. 'Happy' can exist in a completely hedonistic form, playing with their favourite toy for eight hours a day with no interruptions or structure, for example. Many would not deem that 'truly' happy, however. Overcoming a challenge makes us happy, a sense of achievement makes us happy - for some the relief after a hard 'shift' at work is great happiness. What does your 'happy' look like as a family? For us, we wanted some adversity, some challenge, some activity outside of our son's comfort zone - to safely 'push' him when his mind was best suited to be pushed.

The second concept, that some might feel could run against the first, is the idea of 'success'. Different educational settings will define success differently on a spectrum - from a set of grades alone right through to a nebulous set of self-defined achievements. Again, what does that mean for you and your family? Are you happy for the "...achievement to come in time..." or are you keen on a firmer structure of development, especially in core literacy and numeracy competencies? These are your decisions to make, but be mindful of this 'measure' before you begin.

A third element of which we have become conscious is the idea of longevity and 'establishment'. Again, having an understanding of the various interpretations of how long something has existed is important. Although most of us, I would imagine, would have some nervousness about a Preschool that has only opened six months ago, they could equally bring ideas, modern facilities and exuberance that might surprise you. Persistence is not necessarily a virtue, and getting an understanding of what 'traditional' or 'established' means in a modern world where the requirements of education are shifting so dramatically is vital.

So how can one apply these ideas to any given setting when we meet them? We found the most telling indicator to be how much each organisation wanted to know our son. At a young age it is easy for people to treat children as homogenous and 'not yet themselves', but as parents, we are acutely conscious of their nuances and idiosyncrasies. From my own (wide-ranging) professional experience in education, I believe the difference between good and great is the level to which decision-making is made based on the best interests of each individual child in a school's care. This manifests itself, often, in intense curiosity about each child. Are they telling you about themselves or asking about your child?

Is this an over-simplification? Perhaps; but then intuition is often a simple response to a complex situation - and if we understand from where it has come it can be our greatest tool as parents.



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