

Advice To Help Parents In Their Decision About Choosing A Kindergarten Program.

From Professor Nancy Lauter, Ed.D, and Liz Kendall of [Montclair State University's Early Childhood, Elementary Education, and Literacy Education program](#).

"Kindergarten isn't what it used to be and kindergartners are not who they used to be, either," according to the educators.

"Most kindergartners today have attended a preschool program (above 60%) or have had other pre-kindergarten experiences. So, kindergarten is not their first experience with group learning."

But here's what's not changed: **kindergartners continue to be five– six years old. Developmentally, they are not first graders or second graders.**

Professor Lauter and Ms. Kendall urge parents not to overlook several key factors when searching for a developmentally appropriate kindergarten and offer **A Parent's Kindergarten Checklist:**

1. **Check Credentials:** Make sure that the teachers have a substantial background in early childhood education and child development. Public school teachers should have appropriate State Teacher Certification.
2. **Scan the Space:** Is the physical space clean, well-organized, and does it provide enough room for children to move around and engage in large motor play easily? Children should be able to paint, build with unit blocks, and move about freely without being cramped. A room that is overwhelmed with tables and chairs is not developmentally appropriate. The playground should feature well-maintained equipment and a flexible surface, not blacktop, in case of falls.
3. **Each Child Matters:** How does the teacher focus on the unique needs of each child? At this age, developmental pathways remain extremely uneven. Some kindergartners can hold a pencil and write sentences. Others have not yet developed the small motor and cognitive skills to do so. Those who lag some in skill development will catch up with the proper support. All they need is the "gift of time." Will they experience that understanding?
4. **Inclusive Support:** If the kindergarten is inclusive, are supplementary materials and supports available to both teachers and students? Supports might include additional teachers in the classroom, smaller class size, supplementary materials/equipment, consultants and therapists who come into the classroom to work with groups of children, etc.
5. **Creativity & Exploration:** Do children have opportunities throughout the school day to construct their own learning? Do children have substantial time to explore, investigate, and create? Students should have a minimum of an hour per day to choose activities that interest and engage them. The teacher should structure and monitor these experiences. Is the classroom organized into centers that offer children a range of options each day? Centers should include, but are not limited to, dramatic play area (housekeeping area, store, restaurant, etc.), block area (large unit blocks, not only table top blocks), art/creative area, literacy and library areas, science area, and the like. Today, 'centers' often refer to

seatwork and worksheets. Be sure that students have opportunities to work on their own ideas in Centers as described above.

6. Social Emotional Learning: Kindergarten is a key moment to enhance a child's understanding of his/her role as an individual within a larger group. How does the teacher nurture social and emotional development in the classroom? How do children learn to interact with each other, follow routines, adhere to behavioral expectations, address conflict, self-monitor behaviors, and solve problems in this classroom? Social emotional learning must be explicitly addressed in kindergarten and in all elementary grades.
7. Mixing it Up: Do children have opportunities for large group, small group, and independent learning during the day? Students should have outdoor recess for a **minimum of 30 minutes, weather permitting, every day**. Opportunities to interact with peers should be plentiful. The kindergarten year should address developmental needs by providing a range of learning formats and a balance of types of experiences.
8. All Flowers Should Look Different: Prescribed or standardized projects – every child produces a spring flower that is the same as the other student-drawn or colored flowers – are not developmentally appropriate. Do children look engaged, are the materials stimulating, and is there evidence of developmentally appropriate projects that are meaningful to children? Check bulletin boards and child made materials for evidence of engaging and purposeful projects.
9. Ask the Teacher: What are the teachers' beliefs regarding how children learn? What is most important to teachers regarding what children gain from their year in kindergarten?
10. Communication is key: Are parents/family welcome in the classrooms at all times? Ask how often and how teachers communicate with parents/family and if they welcome parental/family feedback. The partnership between home and school is key to a young child's learning.
11. Diversity: Does the curriculum and classroom reflect the diversity of the community? How are children taught to value difference in this classroom? Check the range of books in the library corner for diverse themes and representation of different populations.
12. Impressions Count: Are you comfortable and intrigued by the various activities when you walk into a kindergarten classroom? If you feel 'good' in this setting, your child will be comfortable here as well.