

## **How Does The Classroom Taste?**

By Stephen Bauer, Operations Manager  
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Having worked in the field of early childhood education for over twelve years, I am often asked by parents who have young children how to find a school that will best meet the needs of their child. It can be a daunting, perplexing predicament these days because there are simply so many choices available in the local marketplace especially for children ages three to six years old. Schools offer parents and children varied methodologies, curricula, religious and international affiliations, facilities and credentials. At often as twice a year, parents in the country's larger cities spend hours trooping from one "open house" to another, investigating campuses, meeting staff members, and receiving colorful brochures while trying to reach a decision.

My standard response when parents ask me for advice regarding this situation is usually the same: *how does the classroom taste?* This question is meant to provoke the parent to consider the school from the child's point of view. Children, in fact, know nothing about curricula, methodologies and affiliations. Their first learning experiences are based entirely on their senses. They can be overwhelmed by new places that have different colors, sounds, and even smells. Children need sufficient time to adjust to new places, people and things because they are sensitive and do not easily accept changes in their routines.

Since we know that children are sensitive, parents need to consider the aspects of comfort, cleanliness, safety and security in the school because those are things children thrive on. We cannot expect learning to take place unless those components are part of the school's environment. These elements are also attractive to parents and easy to recognize.

Classrooms that are warm and inviting and adequately supplied with appropriate equipment also make the child feel welcome. Parents should look for details: equipment is best when it exhibits signs of the teacher's creativity and originality, includes natural features as opposed to commercialized materials, and most importantly it must be "age appropriate" (challenging—but not impossible for the age group of the child.) On the playground parents should look for adequate space for "gross motor" (large muscle) development as well as evidence that the area is not only used for play, but as another place in the school where learning and socialization occurs.

Once parents have narrowed their choice of a prospective school they should seriously consider arranging time to acclimate their child in that school by arranging a trial session, or visiting after hours to introduce the child to the individual teacher. Parents should inquire as to the teachers' experience, credentials and certifications that can protect children, such as First Aid training. The school could also be evaluated for its longevity,

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its associations and relationships with primary schools (if any); where have the graduates gone after attending the preschool? This will help clarify the school's reputation.

Some parents will prefer recognizable nomenclature that identify the school's academic approach; buzz words like "Montessori," school styles such as "Singaporean" and even religious affiliations attract many parents every year. Competition is so intense that parents can always find schools like the "Saint Mary Had a Little Lamb Singaporean International Montessori Fun Play Group and Preschool," however, upon investigation the school might be no more than a Mom and Pop operation that has only recently arrived on the scene and be of little value to their child.

The key word in the last sentence is "value." How much is your child's education worth to you and your family? Successful placement of a younger child in an educational environment, especially if it is the child's first exposure to the classroom, will depend on the child's adaptation to the school. This means that both the parents and the child must be comfortable with the prospect of attending the school, and be very comfortable with its environs, methods, equipment, personnel and atmosphere.

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