

Bonus Chapter

How to Assess Childcare and Schools from an Early-Literacy Perspective

School is a building which has four walls with tomorrow inside.

—Lon Watters

In *Reading for Our Lives: A Literacy Action Plan from Birth to Six*, my goal is to show parents how reading unfolds, and to help them feel confident and inspired enough to play an active, hands-on role in fostering it from day one. I've traced a path from caregiver attention, nurturing, and conversation with infants and toddlers to reading and academic outcomes with school-aged children. I've underscored parents' unique power to teach vocabulary, sound awareness, print awareness, letter knowledge, phonics, and spelling—easily, incrementally, and affordably. I've offered a toolbox of conversation starters, activities, practices, and journal prompts that could help them along the way.

But none of that is meant to suggest that parents should go it alone when it comes to reading instruction. No one does. Every child's road to reading is supported by a range of people, from the librarians who stock children's books and host story time to the pediatricians who monitor developmental milestones and refer patients for additional assessment and care.

Schools and teachers, in particular, are major contributors to reading development, when they are well-trained and well-supported in delivering high-quality instruction. So part of the work of parenting for reading is being intentional about the formal learning spaces that we place our kids in.

Fortunately, if you engage in the kind of everyday teaching and intentional conversation with kids around literacy that I advocate for in *Reading for Our Lives*, you'll naturally acquire deep, first-hand knowledge of reading instruction. This will inform how you consider and select early childhood education centers and schools for your children. When you have worked to build

connection, vocabulary, and IQ through conversation; to bolster awareness of the sounds within words and the print in books and the environment; to teach letter names, shapes, and sounds; and to connect sounds to print and print to sounds, you can better recognize the education and childcare settings that will do the same. You'll be able to spot the spaces and personnel that will help take your children's reading to new heights.

This chapter will share a short list of items to look and listen for—and reflect upon—when you research and tour schools or childcare settings. However, I want to emphasize that you'll best grasp all of these considerations if you've done the other talking, reading, and teaching work the book prescribes. As Dr. Judson Brewer puts it, "Concepts don't magically become wisdom with the wave of a wand. You actually have to do the work so the concepts translate into know-how through your own experience."

It's our everyday interactions with our kids, not studying reading instruction, that make us their best literacy advocates. What we do to engage our kids and what we learn about how they learn informs every other educational decision we make on their behalf.

How to Pick a Preschool or School That Boosts Literacy

Academic researchers look to things like teacher quality, curriculum, class size, environmental stimulation, and an array of other factors when assessing preschool quality. But I find that most parents typically have a much shorter list of selection criteria. Moms and dads focus on how close the options are to home or work, what the hours of operation are, and whether or not the places look clean and safe. Only after those basic criteria are met (and if they have more than one viable option), do most then delve into the nuances of different curriculum and education philosophies, from Montessori and Reggio Emilia to Waldorf and HighScope.

When assessing options, I urge parents to tune into the sounds of the classroom and listen for the responsiveness, kindness, and knowledge on display. Just as children's back-and-forth exchanges with their parents have a lasting impact on the kids' brain development and academic prospects, dialogue and nurturing relationships with teachers matter greatly, too. So, whether checking out in-home childcare, public-school pre-K programs, Head Start, or private preschool, here are a few things to look and listen for. All of these apply across the board when thinking about literacy in early learning spaces.

Look for settings in which teachers have dynamic, nurturing verbal exchanges with each and every child. Just as parents provide critical language nutrition for their children, educators in infant, toddler, and preschool classrooms also spur vital nurturing, brain-building conversations. So, when visiting classrooms or observing them via virtual tours, pay attention to how much teachers are talking with children; how well they are listening for kids' responses, whether words, coos, or babbles; and whether or not each child in the space gets attention and conversation.

Class size, teacher inclinations and beliefs, and school culture can all affect word counts and conversational turns, and research has found vast disparities in how much talk different children within a space receive and give. Make sure your child is in a school where every child's voice and participation is valued and encouraged.

Questions to Ponder

- Are teachers having nurturing one-on-one conversations with children, in addition to addressing small groups or the whole classroom?
- Are teachers pausing to listen for and respond to the children's speech, whether words or babbles?
- What's the ratio of direction/commands (e.g. *sit down, be quiet*) to conversation?
- Do the teachers speak to students with respect and value their expressions and classroom contributions?

Look for settings in which teachers can state what skills they intend to build, how they will nurture and assess them, and when and how they'll communicate progress to families. The preliteracy and literacy skills that kids should be cultivating at different ages and stages vary widely, so be sure that the programs under consideration have a clear sense of what they're teaching, why, and how.

For example, with infants, a teacher might share that they prioritize care, nurturing, and brain-building conversation and introduce books as objects of exploration, allowing babies to pat, chew, and turn the pages without expectation of great attention to the print or stories. A teacher of toddlers might say they focus on giving children a variety of materials, letting them lead their own play, and encouraging them to create in their own way. The teacher might aim to

provide a great deal of individual attention while also encouraging kids to try things on their own to see how far they get. In a preschool program, you might expect more explicit discussion of the sounds within words and of letter names, shapes, and sounds, paving the way for formal instruction in phonics and spelling in kindergarten and beyond.

Beyond hearing the teachers' intentions and method, also look for signs that they view parents as partners in educating children and listen for assurances that they will keep you posted on what's happening with your child throughout the year, so that you can continue to provide timely, responsive literacy support at home.

Questions to Ponder

- Do the teachers seem to enjoy their work and interactions with children?
- What curriculum or philosophy does the school follow? Is it accredited in the approach?
- What programs, degrees, certifications, or experience do the teachers bring to their positions?
- What blocks, toys, books, and other learning materials are on display? Do they seem to support the kind of learning the school says it emphasizes? How accessible are they to children?

Look for settings in which kids are joyful, playful, active learners. When kids are deeply engaged in activities, and they have the freedom to play and explore the materials in their environment, good things will happen. During site visits, listen for the laughter and squeals of delight that characterize little kids' engagement and discovery.

And, because we're focused on reading, books and print should be an integral part of the fun of the learning environment. Look for books shelved in baskets, bins, and other spots that are visible and accessible to crawlers and walkers. Watch to see if kids are given ample opportunity to handle books themselves. And observe how enthusiastic teachers are about discussing the stories, pointing out illustrations and print, asking questions of their little listeners, and fostering book love.

Questions to Ponder

- How happy and engaged do the children seem to be?

- Does the classroom or school foster a sense of community and connection?
- Are there age-appropriate materials to stimulate imagination, exploration, and discovery?

There is no perfect school, so it's important to get clear about your highest priorities for your child's learning environment and to listen to your gut feelings about the staff and spaces you visit. Tour schools with an open mind, open eyes, and open ears to find the options that will best serve your child and family.