Don't judge a preschool by whether it has computers

By Barbara F. Meltz, Boston Globe | September 29, 2005

Unless you count the plastic one next to the two real-but-not-connected telephones in the dress-up corner of the yellow room, there's no computer in the classrooms at Watertown Cooperative Nursery School. In the search for the perfect preschool, that could make or break some parents' decision.

Teaching director Margaret Cleremont makes no apologies. "If what they are looking for is reading skills and worksheets and an emphasis on academics rather than on social and emotional development, we're not for them," she says.

Her preschool, housed in the basement of the Community Church on Main Street, certainly has a traditional look to it, but even an unseasoned observer can tell that lots of learning happens here. A teacher drops red food coloring in the water table as 4-year-olds ooh and aah. "The water feels the same," a child marvels as it turns a deeper red.

Choosing a preschool is daunting. Is the general atmosphere stimulating but not hurly-burly, calm but not catatonic? Are materials within children's reach or do they have to ask for them? How often do they play outside? How much free play is there? Do the hours of operation fit your schedule? Is there extended day? What happens if you're late at pick-up?

The issue of computers adds one more layer of confusion. Also controversy.

For the first time next September, guidelines for accreditation from the prestigious NAEYC (pronounced nay-cee, the National Association for the Education of Young Children) will include a provision encouraging technology in the classroom, from tape recorders to microscopes, computers to cameras. The standards, to be unveiled at the group's annual conference in December, "are a recognition that technology is part of kids' lives," says Barbara Willer, deputy executive director. (NAEYC accreditation, which is voluntary, is considered the gold standard in the industry. State licensing is mandatory.)

For an organization whose emphasis for nearly 80 years has been the importance of open-ended play, this is a big deal.

"It won't sit well with everyone," concedes Willer. "We're not turning our backs on play. We're asking for more thought and planning. Since there are computers in more and more preschools, let's get teachers more mindful about how they use them."

For parents choosing between two programs, one with a computer and one without, educational psychologist Jane Healy of Vail, Colo., says she "wouldn't consider the computer a knock-out factor. But it would prompt me to ask a lot of questions." Healy is author of "Failure to Connect, How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds" (Simon & Schuster).

"Here's what parents need to know," she says: "It's not that a computer is good for young children. It's that it might not hurt if it's used wisely." Conversely, not having a computer is not a sign of an inadequate program.

In her search for a preschool for son Otis, 4, Diane Wheeler of Belmont visited an astonishing 34 schools before -- bingo! -- she saw Watertown Cooperative. That there were no computers wasn't the deciding factor, but it

didn't hurt. In her experience, schools with computers tended to have other aspects she also didn't like.

At some schools, all she could hear was teachers' shouting. " 'No! No! No climbing the tree! No throwing stones!' You rarely hear that here," she says. "It's not that there aren't rules, but a teacher is more likely to go over to a child and say, 'The rule is, no throwing stones. Someone could get hurt. But you can stack stones or make a pile of them, like this.' That encourages problem-solving and learning." Similarly, other schools were likely to put a finished product on the art table, a not-so-subtle way of saying, "Make this." At Watertown Cooperative, teachers put out materials. Children do with them what they want.

"I'm sending him to preschool for socialization and, yes, learning. But to me, it's not what they learn but how they learn that counts," says Wheeler.

If there is a computer, it should never be used as a reward for compliance in some other activity, and its use should never be required. "Consider one chair in front of the computer a red flag, as well as one child alone at the computer," says early childhood educator David Fernie, dean of education at Wheelock College. "This is a stage of development when that's way too isolating." He wouldn't be upset, however, if three boys who are building a fire station in the block corner go to the computer together to create a sign for it.

"What you want to see is the computer making a concrete, interactive, social experience more complex," says early childhood technology specialist Karen Murphy, also of Wheelock. "If the preschool promises the computer will 'teach,' and they're offering software like 'Math Blaster' and that God-awful Einstein software, or anything that requires a child to click on the letter 'A,' beware." The only software she recommends for preschoolers is KidPix by Broderbund; "I Spy" by Scholastic; or any of the Living Books, also by Broderbund. (Her favorite: "Sheila Rae, the Brave.")

What else do you look for when you're shopping for a preschool?

Figure out your needs beyond the logistics of a school's hours and location. "If you have a shy child, you may not be interested in one large room with mixed age groups; you may want a center that feels more like home and has small groupings," says early childhood educator Roxy Leeson, assistant director of WarmLines in Newton. Leeson leads workshops on preschool decision-making, and WarmLines publishes a preschool guide and is sponsor of an early-childhood expo Sunday at the Fessenden School in Newton (visit warmlines.org for info). The state Department of Early Education and Care (eec.state.ma.us/), formerly the Office of Childcare Services, is also a good resource.

The only way to really know what a program is like is to visit.

"Spend 15 to 30 minutes, and be there during free play," Leeson says. Pay attention to all kinds of interactions, not just teachers to children (Are they respectful, empathetic, and empowering?) but also teachers to each other. As role models, they influence how children will treat each other.

Expect to see plenty of signs of literacy: letters, numbers, signs, books, a cozy reading corner with big pillows, and materials for them to do their own invented writing. "You want a setting to be authentic," says Fernie. "That means the play materials and the environment have some connection to the real world the child lives in -- for instance, the play corner has waiters' pads and menus from restaurants. So what if they can't read or write? They pretend."

In a reading corner at Watertown Cooperative, where parents take turns in the classroom, 3-year-old Kate Esbenshade of Newton snuggles next to her mother, Anne, who is reading to a small group. Kate is Esbenshade's third child and she shopped around. Watertown Cooperative is Esbenshade's third preschool. "Each child is different, with different needs," she says.

In the 4-year-old room, Nick Iselin of Watertown is setting out snacks with his son, Porter. He learned about the school through word of mouth. "We started hearing about it when Porter was 1," he says. "People told us we'd be crazy not to send him. Now I know why."

In her workshop, Leeson's first advice to parents is to find out about application procedures. Deadlines vary from school to school and so do application policies. Her last advice is to find three schools you like. For good reason, too: Watertown Cooperative (watertowncooperativenurseryschool.org) is first-come, first-serve. It's accepting applications now for next year, but it gives priority to siblings. Most of the 32 spaces already are taken.

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