

What to Look for When Choosing an Early Years Setting for Your Child



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The Oak-Tree Group
of Schools



Choosing the right Early Years setting can be a stressful experience. There is a lot to think about and many options available. There are some helpful criteria to consider when reviewing potential nurseries, pre-schools or Early Years settings, some that you may not even be aware of.

Children develop quickly in the Early Years and their experiences up to age 5 have a major impact on their future life and education.

In order to support you with this difficult decision, we have compiled some information that we hope will help you know what to look for when selecting a good early years setting for your child.

Types of Early Years Setting

Day Nurseries

A day nursery is usually privately run and provides care for children from around 6 weeks to school age. They offer full or part-time places. Rooms are divided by the different age groups with a strict ratio of staff to children. Some are less flexible than others and there can be long waiting lists from pre-birth. There are different types of nurseries, with opening times and structures varying.

Playgroups

Pre-schools and playgroups tend to offer care for children from 2 upwards and are often run by community groups. They often work in sessions and can be used as a way to help children adjust to the idea of separating from their parents before starting full-time education.

Nurseries and Pre-schools

A nursery school is a facility that accepts children in their pre-school years, for at least 2.5 hours a day, up to 5 days a week. The Early Years education provided, and constructive play, helps prepare the children for moving up to 'big' school, usually in Reception.

Childminder

A registered childminder is a self-employed daycare provider who works in their own home and provides care for children within a family setting. They are registered with Ofsted and inspected regularly. They may be registered to care for up to 6 children between the ages of 0 to 12.

Independent Schools

Independent schools' Early Years settings may take children in the term that they turn 3. They follow the EYFS Framework.

The Oak-Tree Group's Early Years Foundation Stage includes Lower Kindergarten, Upper Kindergarten and Reception. Children can begin school from the term in which they turn 3 and are able to attend on a part-time or full-time basis during the Kindergarten years. School is full-time from the start of Reception.

Staff

First impressions are an important place to start when it comes to choosing a nursery for your child. Ensure you feel that warm and friendly atmosphere as soon as you step foot in the room where your child will spend most of his/her time. Good staff members will show a passion for spending time with the children, pay attention to their individual needs and deal with any problems in a calm manner.

It is vitally important that the setting has appropriately qualified staff. Trained staff understand the theory behind child development, and so know how to look after your child's needs. When you visit an Early Years setting, you should pay attention to how the staff behave.

There should be an experienced and qualified deputy to take full responsibility in the absence of the manager.

Good things to look for:

- What do the children do at break and lunchtimes?
- How are you greeted by staff on arrival?
- Are the staff attentive to children and each other?
- Are the children engaged in various activities with the support and supervision of staff?
- How do the staff interact with the children and each other?
- Do the children approach staff happily?
- Do staff give reassurance, encouragement and appropriate praise?
- Do staff respond to the children's interests?

Questions to Ask

- How do you ensure safe recruitment of staff?
- What experience/qualifications do your staff have?
- Will my child have a designated key person?
- Is there a high staff turnover?
- Do staff have training in first aid, safeguarding and food hygiene?
- What procedures are in place for covering staff absences?

The Oak-Tree Group

With over 330 staff spread across the four schools, the Oak-Tree Group of Schools has a professional approach to the selection and on-going training of staff. We only employ staff of the highest calibre who share our vision and ethos, and all applicants go through a thorough selection process.

Teachers in the Oak-Tree Group truly care for the children's welfare. They enable the children to develop at their own pace with sufficient opportunities to support, stretch and challenge.

Curriculum and Activities

A good nursery will provide a range of activities suitable for your child's age. Even from a young age, children should be encouraged to try new experiences in a supportive environment. Activities should be planned for both inside and outside the classroom, and support language, mathematical thinking and imagination.

Good things to look for:

- Are the children happy and occupied?
- Are the wall displays full of paintings and activities the children have been enjoying?
- Are there lots of age-appropriate toys and materials available?
- Are the children engaged in the activities?
- Will the activities on offer challenge your child and encourage them to develop new skills?

Questions to Ask

- What does a typical day look like?
- How early do you start teaching phonics and writing?
- Can early years pupils attend clubs?
- How do staff share information about the children's day with you?
- What sort of activities are the children involved with?
- Are there sufficient trips and opportunities for learning outside the classroom?

The Oak-Tree Group

Activities in the Early Years of the Oak-Tree Group are broad and varied. We aim to encourage children's social, creative, communication and listening skills, as well as physical and emotional development. Children learn through play and we also encourage child-led learning.

We encourage children to learn freely in a structured and stimulating environment. They are taught to listen to others and express their own ideas, and we place high emphasis on kindness, helpfulness, sharing, courtesy and respect for others.

In both Lower Kindergarten and Upper Kindergarten classes, pre-reading, writing and number activities are taught, and the children are helped to discover and investigate through art, craft and environmental activities.

Specialist teaching in a number of areas greatly enhances the curriculum. We use the seven areas of learning as the foundation and enrich the children's experiences through a range of other activities including weekly Music and PE lessons together with assemblies, performances, trips and outings. Reception children also have French and ICT lessons. Children participate in learning sessions in our outside areas.

Groups spend the afternoons participating in creative activities designed to develop their imagination, curiosity and knowledge of the world around them. There are various after school clubs that extend the school day to help parents' childcare needs.

Ratios, Class Sizes and Flexibility

In nursery and school settings, the small class sizes are very beneficial. Key workers talk to children about their learning and progress. This should be shared frequently with parents and carers. Small class sizes should mean a positive and productive relationship between staff and children. Children get to know each other quickly and easily, developing friendships that are supportive and caring, so they can enjoy time together.

Good things to look for:

- Is there flexibility with sessions?
- Do all the children seem to be getting enough attention from staff?
- Does the setting seem too crowded/empty?

Questions to Ask

- Are there any specialist subject teachers?
- What are the staff to children ratios?
- Will my child have a keyworker?
- How do sessions work, and how flexible are they?
- Are the staff ratios in line with the government guidelines?
- Are you able to change sessions mid-term?
- What is the average class size?

The Oak-Tree Group

Independent Kindergartens tend to offer smaller class sizes. Uniqueness can be celebrated and the individual needs of each and every pupil are considered. We keep our classes small and follow the statutory children to staff ratios, with additional staff available to support where required.

Our Lower Kindergarten children attend a minimum of three sessions, and Upper Kindergarten children attend a minimum of five sessions, 3 of which should ideally be mornings. Lower and Upper Kindergarten have the option of staying for lunch and afternoon sessions.

Many of our Early Years children start earlier with Breakfast Club or stay later with Teatime Club. Reception children attend five full days and are taught by a qualified teacher supported by a teaching assistant.

Health and Safety

All schools and nurseries should provide a safe environment for both the children and the staff members. When visiting a nursery, you must satisfy yourself that the setting has taken the steps to minimise every risk to your child.

It is important that a setting reviews its health and safety procedures regularly. Early Years providers are also required to conduct regular risk assessments, which identify aspects of the environment that must be checked on a regular basis.

This involves deciding what should be done to prevent harm and ensuring that the relevant actions are taken and are updated whenever necessary.

Good things to look for:

- Are there clear fire procedures?
- Are fire exits well marked and are there sufficient fire extinguishers?
- Is the setting clean and well maintained?
- Is the equipment in good condition?
- Are there any trailing electrical cables/leads?
- Are the storage areas kept in a safe and tidy state?

Questions to Ask

- What is the procedure if someone else needs to pick my child up from school?
- What are your safeguarding policies?
- Are regular risk assessments carried out?
- Are risk assessments carried out for local trips and visits?
- Are meals prepared on the premises?
- What happens if my child becomes unwell while at nursery?
- Are staff paediatric first aid qualified?
- Are there health and safety procedures in place, including adequate fire exits?
- What security measures are in place when the children are on trips?
- Are the setting's policies and procedures in place and available for you to access easily?

The Oak-Tree Group

Like most good childcare settings, the safety of our children, staff and visitors is vitally important. Each school has its own designated Health and Safety lead, who regularly meets with the Group Health and Safety Manager. There are regular site walks to ensure the safety and upkeep of the premise and regular fire drills. The Oak-Tree cleaning staff thoroughly clean the setting every day, and carry out deep cleans during the holidays. Our policies are all available to download from our websites.

The Premises and Location

When looking at a nursery or school setting for your child, the premises should play a big role in your decision making. This is where your child is going to be spending the majority of their time, so check whether the setting provides adequate space for the children of different ages.

Good things to look for:

- Does the building seem well-maintained?
- Is there adequate light and heating?
- Are the toys/activities/equipment well maintained?
- Is there easy access to an outside space?
- Is there enough space for all the staff and children using the facility?
- Are the rooms tidy and well looked after?
- Are the toilet facilities clean, appropriate for the age group and well maintained?
- Does the space seem welcoming and nurturing?

Questions to Ask

- Is there easy access to outdoor space?
- How is outdoor time incorporated into the Early Years day?
- How are childhood accidents recorded?
- Is the environment spacious?
- Are the toys and equipment clean and appropriate for children within the setting?
- Are there adequate, clean toilet facilities?
- What is the drop off process in the mornings?
- Do you take the children on trips? If so, where do you visit?
- Are there parking facilities? How is this managed?

The Oak-Tree Group

All four schools in the Oak-Tree Group make the most of their locations. We take learning outside the classroom and into the local environment for Art, Topic/ Understanding the World, PE and more. Epping Forest is on our doorstep, which we make good use of on a regular basis. All early years areas have access to a dedicated outdoor space with age appropriate activities and equipment.

Our in-house maintenance and cleaning teams ensure all premises are well-maintained at all times. Toys are regularly steam cleaned and equipment is renewed as required.

Parental Involvement

Your child is likely to spend a lot of time each week in a school or nursery setting, therefore you will want to have an idea of the sort of activities they have been enjoying and what learning has been taking place. Parents should have easy access to their child's progress.

Working in partnership with parents is a key part of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Parental involvement in how children learn, what their early experiences are and their development helps practitioners plan for effective learning throughout the Early Years.

Even the very best settings have room for improvement, and the only way this can be achieved is if they listen to what parents want.

Good things to look for:

- Are you able to talk to staff during drop-off and pick up?
- Do parents seem involved?
- How well do parents know the staff?

Questions to Ask

- How can I be involved in my child's learning?
- How will you keep me informed of my child's progress?
- Are parents invited to events throughout the year?
- How are parents given information about their child's progress and achievements?
- Are there regular drop-in mornings?
- How do parents access the nursery policies and procedures?

The Oak-Tree Group

We value our close relationships with parents and consult with you on a regular basis. From formal parent/teacher consultations, to drop-in meetings and informal coffee morning chats with the Group Principals and Headmistress. Parents are also invited to attend regular performances, sports days, concerts and Parents' Association events. There are monthly newsletters and every week you will receive a recap of the many activities the pupils enjoyed throughout the week.

Parents have access to an online Early Years portal through which they can see their child's progress. Parents are also encouraged to be involved in the life of the school and some help out at school events.

Nutrition and Food

Early Years settings should be able to cater for the individual dietary needs of each child. Although some bring in outside caterers, this sometimes makes it more difficult to cater to dietary requirements and ensure the food is prepared safely. Settings have much more control if the food is prepared in-house.

The best nursery or kindergarten pays very close attention to the importance of nutrition in this early stage of life and takes active steps to provide a balanced diet for the children who attend.

Good things to look for:

- Is the menu on show or easy to find on the website?
- Is the kitchen on-site, and if so, is it clean with an appropriate local authority rating?
- Are the children provided with healthy snacks?
- Are the children encouraged to make healthy choices?
- Are the children helped during mealtimes?

Questions to Ask

- Is your menu inclusive of all kinds of diets?
- How do you handle allergies and other dietary requirements in school?
- How do you make sure that all meals are balanced and nutritious?
- Do you offer drinks and snacks?
- Is the food freshly prepared on-site every day?
- How often do the menus vary?
- How do you deal with a fussy eater?

The Oak-Tree Group

Chartwells provides the catering in the Oak-Tree Group of Schools. It is one of the biggest education-based catering companies in the UK and provides food for a large number of independent schools nationwide. We work hard with them to ensure the food we serve from our kitchens is healthy, nutritious and prepared using fresh ingredients from scratch.

All our meals are cooked on-site using a selection of fresh ingredients. Lunch follows a three-weekly menu offering choice and variety. We cater to allergies and other dietary requirements. Children are also provided with snacks, which includes fresh fruit. The children develop their social skills as they eat together. Use of cutlery and tasting the wide range of healthy food provided is encouraged and our staff help the children to cut up their food.

All suppliers, including farmers, are audited against very strict food quality and safety standards and regularly undergo independent audits to ensure these standards are upheld.

Fees and Funding

Different childcare settings come with varying costs, depending on the provision. The cost is also dependent on your child's age and what sessions you choose.

All three and four-year-olds in England are entitled to 15 hours of free childcare or early education a week in term time (the universal entitlement) – this is for a total of 570 hours a year. This can start from the term after your child's third birthday.

Some settings accept childcare vouchers and other employer schemes to help pay for the fees.

Questions to Ask

- Does the nursery accept the Funded Early Education Entitlement (Nursery Grant) or childcare vouchers?
- What do my fees include?
- Do I have to supply my own snacks, drinks and lunch for my child?
- When are fees due?
- Does the setting offer a sibling discount?
- Are there any finance options to spread the payment of fees?

The Oak-Tree Group

At the Oak-Tree Group, we administer the Funded Early Education Entitlement (Nursery Grant) on your behalf and apply the large discount to your termly fees. Children benefit from the term in which they turn 3 up to and including the final term of the Upper Kindergarten.

Some companies provide their staff with Nursery Vouchers, which are a tax saving benefit for employees to use for nursery care. Although we cannot administer this scheme for you, we are registered with multiple schemes and apply these discounts to your termly fees.

If you choose to send your child to school all day, lunch and snacks are provided, and are included in the price of the fees. 'Extras' might include trips and optional clubs.

We operate finance options to spread the payments of fees through an accredited third party to help our families to budget for the fees.

The Next Steps

Before you choose an Early Years setting for your child, you may have already started thinking about their next steps when they reach statutory school age. Be sure to consider the next stage of your child's educational journey when decision making, as some Early Years settings have links to local schools.

Good things to look for:

- Are there any good schools nearby?
- Does the Early Years setting have any links with local schools?
- What are the entry requirements for my favourite school?

Questions to Ask

- Where do the children go after the early years?
- Do children get automatic entry into Reception if in a school setting?
- Can the setting recommend any good schools nearby?

The Oak-Tree Group

Starting in Kindergarten in the Oak-Tree Group will help parents secure a place for their children in Reception and beyond. This will save you from having to go for further assessments and interview processes at age 4. Your child will move on to the next stage of their educational journey with the security of his or her friends, in an environment they are already familiar with.

Other Things to Consider

It may take lots of searching, research and visits, but the right childhood setting is out there for you and your child. You may wish to consider joining an online forum for local parents and ask for their feedback on local nurseries. You should also look at previous inspection reports, which should be available to view on the setting's website or available on request.

One of the most obvious things to consider when choosing a childcare setting is the location. In most cases, you would want the setting to be either close to your home or place of work, with convenient transport links and/or a convenient drop-off system.

Sometimes, when you visit an Early Years setting, the feeling you get will help you decide whether it is right for you and your child. If you feel welcomed and the children seem happy and engaged, this can be a good indicator of whether it is worth consideration.

We hope this booklet has helped make the decision making process a little easier. If you have any questions then please contact the schools directly, where the staff will be happy to help.

Braeside School - 020 8504 1133

Coopersale Hall School - 01992 577133

Normanhurst School - 020 8529 4307

Oaklands School - 020 8508 3517

Checklist

Staff	
Do staff seem to have a good relationship with the children?	
Are the staff attentive to children and each other?	
Do the children approach staff happily?	
Do staff have training in first aid, safeguarding and food hygiene?	
Will your child have a designated key person?	
Do staff respond to children's interests?	
Are the staff appropriately qualified?	

Nutrition and Food	
Is the kitchen on-site, and if so, is it clean with a high hygiene rating?	
How are allergies and other dietary requirements handled in school?	
Are the children provided with healthy snacks?	
Are the children helped during mealtimes?	
Are the menus balanced and varied?	

Activities	
Are the children settled and happy?	
Are there set activities planned throughout the day?	
Is there a range of activities and resources available?	
Are there lots of toys, resources and materials available?	
Are the children engaged in activities?	

Health and Safety	
Are the fire exits well marked and are there fire extinguishers?	
Are the storage areas kept in a safe and tidy state?	
Is the equipment in good condition?	
Are regular risk assessments carried out?	
Are staff first aid qualified with paediatric certificates?	
Are there safeguarding policies in place?	

Premises	
Does the setting seem safe and secure?	
Are there suitable toilet facilities in place?	
Do the buildings and grounds seem well maintained?	
Is there easy access to outdoor space?	
Are the rooms and toilet facilities clean?	
Does the space seem welcoming and nurturing?	
Is there enough space for all the staff and children using the facility?	