

Navigating Educational Options for Preschoolers with Autism: Finding the Best Fit for Your Child

In Massachusetts, children are required to attend school the September of the calendar year that they turn 6 years old. Prior to age 6, parents and caregivers have an array of options. For parents of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) the choices can be particularly overwhelming, and the decision can feel very stressful, given the impact on the child and family. In this article, we will discuss some options for preschool age children with ASD, factors to consider when weighing the options, and where to turn for additional support.

Educational options to consider

For children diagnosed with ASD, some of the main options to consider for the preschool years include:

In-home Programs: Some families, if their schedules allow, opt to keep their autistic children home until it's time for kindergarten. These families often utilize early intervention services and at home applied behavior analysis (ABA) instruction.

Specialized ASD Centers: Center-based programs occur within a specialized facility. The Center provides a structured environment where your child can receive targeted interventions and practice skills across various domains.

Public Preschool: Every state in the U.S. requires school districts to provide early intervention programs to preschoolers with ASD. The public school system can provide ABA and related services for your child.

Other options: There are many other options as well that you may want to explore, including private day cares.

Which option is right for your family?

First, it is important to recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all “best” option. Each environment has its advantages and may be a good fit depending on your child's specific circumstances. You'll also need to consider not just your child's needs but what works for you and the family as a whole. When beginning to think about what is best for your child and family, it can be helpful to take stock of your child's unique profile, including current strengths, weaknesses, and any particular challenges they are working with.

To help guide your decision making, observe and take note of your child's:

- **Cognitive skills:** such as memory, imitation, number sense, and problem-solving skills
- **Language and communication:** including the ability to communicate basic needs, interact with peers, and follow simple instructions
- **Independence and self-help skills:** including level of independence in activities such as dressing, eating, toileting, and basic hygiene routines

- **Sensory Needs:** including degree of sensory sensitivities and/or preferences
- **Transition Skills:** such as the ability to adapt to changes and transition between activities
- **Response to social situations:** including ability to manage emotions and behavior in social situations; ability to engage and interact with peers, display interest in other children, attempt to join in play activities, and understand turn-taking and sharing
- **Personality:** including traits such as agreeableness, stubbornness, extroversion, sensitivity, shyness, curiosity, activity-level, etc.
- **Need for one-on-one instruction**
- **Other factors....**

When it comes to choosing the right educational option for your autistic preschooler it is important to give yourself time to learn about the options available in your area. The array of choices can be overwhelming, but by gathering information, asking questions, and engaging in discussions with your child's providers, as well as with other parents who have navigated this path, you can make an informed decision that suits your child's unique needs.

Lurie Center for Autism Parent Workshop: Educational Options for Your Preschool Age Child With ASD

This workshop is designed to support parents of preschool aged children with autism spectrum disorder. The presentation and discussion focus on the implications of the ASD diagnosis as it relates to school with a goal of maximizing a successful educational experience. The workshop will specifically address implications and learning of the diagnosis at age 3 years, options for educational interventions, approaching the public school, and how to consider educational options for your child.

Time: 7:00 pm - 8:00 pm, Cost: \$35, Dates: This single session workshop is held four times per year on the second Thursday in February, June, September, and December. See our website for details or call the Lurie Center at 781-860-1700.

About the Author

Gretchen Timmel, M.Ed. is a licensed educational psychologist, certified teacher, and an educational consultant/advocate at the Lurie Center. She provides educational consulting services for children and young adults. Ms. Timmel has extensive experience in school and residential settings collaborating across medical teams, schools, and caregivers to promote individual student success. Ms. Timmel specializes in the development of educational programs, teaching methodology, and advocacy. Since each student is an individual, the type and scope of the educational services recommended will vary based on the student's unique needs.