

NYC NURSERY SCHOOL ADMISSIONS – THE BASICS

By The Testing Mom

It's a fact that new parents in Manhattan worry about getting their children into nursery school. As school admissions advisors, we get calls asking about nursery school admissions from fathers whose children haven't yet left the hospital nursery, pregnant mothers, and women just *thinking* about having a baby. If you are wondering what it takes to get your child into school, here are some answers to the questions parents ask most.

1. Is it as hard to get a child into nursery school in NYC as people say?

Yes, it can be tough because space is such an issue. Most nursery school's programs are small, offering few spots to start with. And, class size is restricted as well, by law. More families are staying in the city today so there is higher demand for the same number of places. Once an older sibling has attended a nursery school, the younger ones are almost always admitted. After sibling spots are taken, there are even fewer spaces for first-time applicants. And, unlike elementary school, there are practically no public nursery school options to handle the overflow. It is not unusual for a school with 30 places to receive over 300 applications.

2. Do I have to sign up for nursery school as soon as my child is born?

No, in fact you can't. For the better programs, you would begin the application process in September, one year before your child would enter the program. The most popular schools accept requests for applications the day after Labor Day, and often run out before the end of the day. Other schools issue applications by lottery. Still, there are many excellent schools that send out applications long after Labor Day. Most nursery schools adhere to an application process that runs from September to March. Families will be notified of admittance on March 13, 2003, and will then have about two weeks to commit by signing a contract. Schools with more space have rolling applications and will accept children all year long.

3. When should my child start nursery school?

Early childhood experts say that by age three, children are usually ready for nursery school. By then, most are able to separate from their parents, eager to explore the world outside their home, and physically developed enough to handle the demands of a nursery school classroom.

You may want your toddler to start earlier if you work full-time and want your child stimulated by professional educators. Even if you don't work outside the home, you may want your child in a program just to give you a break during the day.

In Manhattan, the complicating factor is that many schools offer classes for children as young as two-years-old. Once these classes are formed, they will "graduate" into the three's program in the next year, leaving little room for new applicants for these classes. This is why so many NYC parents apply for two's programs and don't wait until their child is three.

4. What is the process to apply?

If you're applying to extremely popular schools, call the day after Labor Day for applications. Otherwise, call for applications in the early Fall. Some schools require you to apply before touring. Others will ask you to visit or attend an open house first and then apply. When you call for an application, ask them to explain their admissions process. After you submit your application, the school will call to schedule a tour, an interview with you and your spouse (or partner), and a visit for your child.

The most popular schools can be as tough to get into as Union Square Café on New Year's Eve. To improve your child's chances of getting accepted, you should apply to at least eight schools with varying levels of admissions difficulty.

5. Are there really essay questions on the application?

More and more, nursery school applications include essay questions like: *“Tell us about your child. What kinds of activities does your child enjoy? How does your child respond to new situations? Tell us about any separation experiences your child has had. Describe your approach to discipline.”* When you are asked questions like this, take them seriously and answer them thoughtfully. While some nursery schools interview parents privately, others interview them in groups, or not at all. This may be their only opportunity to get to know your child and family in ways that won’t be apparent otherwise. You do not need to squeeze your answers into the two or three lines on the application. You can type your answers and add them as an attachment.

6. What should we look for in a nursery school?

Ideally, the school you choose will be near your home both for convenience and for making friends in the neighborhood. If you have a strong feeling about one educational philosophy over another, such as Montessori versus a traditional approach versus a progressive education, look for schools that offer the type of program you most want for your child. If you aren’t sure about the differences between each approach or you just don’t know what you want, try to visit schools offering a variety of educational philosophies so that you can see what feels right to you.

Is the school too noisy and chaotic or too quiet? Does it feel clean? Are classrooms set up so that children can easily reach the materials? Do the children look like they are having fun? How engaged are the teachers? Do they look happy? What is their education background? Do they demonstrate respect for the children? How do they handle an upset child? Do you feel comfortable with the Director? Is there an outdoor playspace that is easy to access? Where do children who attend the program go on to kindergarten? How does the Director assist families in kindergarten placement? Does everything look safe? And, most important, what is your gut reaction to the school? If you love it and it feels just right for your child, it probably is.

7. What are nursery school directors looking for when they interview parents?

The Director wants to see that you understand their educational philosophy and teaching style and it's what you want for your child. Schools are looking for parents whose values are consistent with theirs and the families who are already part of their school community. When you choose programs to apply to, your child's chances are stronger where there is a match between the school's existing parent body and your family. Schools will be evaluating fit and so should you. The school also wants to know that you are parents they will be able to work with if a problem ever arises. With so many applicants, schools can afford to say "no" to parents who they believe will be difficult.

8. Do nursery schools really interview 2-year-olds?

Children applying to nursery school are invited in for an "interview," which is generally a fun classroom visit with a small group of other applicants. When teachers evaluate these kids, they are looking to see if they are developmentally where they should be. They don't expect your two-year-old to write her name or add and subtract. They are also assessing the personalities of the children because they strive to create classes where there is balance between the personal attributes of the kids.

9. Do I need "connections" to get my child into nursery school?

Families with no connections get their children into nursery schools every day. However, if you are applying to a school and you have a good friend who currently has a child there, by all means ask them to put in a good word for you. If the director respects your friend, her assurance that you would be a great family for the school will carry weight. If you know someone well who teaches at the school, is on their board, or is a former parent, you should ask them to recommend your child and family. For admissions, "knowing somebody" appears to be more helpful in nursery school than it is in the higher grades.

10. If my child attends a “hot” nursery school, is he more likely to get into a “top” private school or gifted & talented program?

Not necessarily. Today, private schools accept children who go to nursery schools all over the city, who are in good day care programs, or even those who are home-schooled. Directors from the “hot” nursery schools have relationships with directors at the most sought-after schools, so they can certainly advocate for your child. But if your child’s ERB scores are low, or his kindergarten interview goes poorly, or his current school report isn’t stellar, your child’s chances are diminished no matter where he was educated as a toddler.

When it comes to getting into public gifted & talented programs like Hunter College Elementary or the Lower Lab School, your child will have to “test” in. So, it’s more important that your child attend a quality early childhood program than a “hot” one. Frankly, the schools that are considered “hot” are also quite good. But there are many less well-known nursery schools out there that offer a solid education and send their kids to the city’s best private schools and gifted & talented programs each year.