

HOW TO PREPARE FOR YOUR PARENT INTERVIEW

By The Testing Mom

If you are applying to a private kindergarten, the parent interview is just one of the hoops you'll be jumping through. Many gifted programs, charter and magnet schools interview parents as well, although not nearly as frequently.

Why do schools interview parents?

- They want to learn more about the child who is applying, and who better than the parents to tell them that.
- They want to know how serious you are about their program.
- They want to know the kind of person you are – whether you'll fit into their community, volunteer and give when needed, and whether you'll be cooperative to work with or a thorn in their backside when an issue arises.
- Admissions directors want to give you the chance to get to know them better, to ask questions, observe, learn more and determine whether or not the school really is right for your family and child.
- The interview is just one piece of the puzzle that the director will look at when deciding whether or not to admit your child. While doing well with the interview won't get your child in, doing poorly may certainly keep him out.

What is an interview like?

- They range from the director sitting in a room with several sets of parents doing Q&A to the director with two families together, to the director sitting down one-on-one with you.
- Some directors ask all parents the same questions in a structured interview. Others just let the conversation flow like an informal conversation. Many directors of Admission are very cordial and good at getting you to feel

comfortable so you'll open up and talk freely. Others may be harder to connect with.

- I've always told parents not to judge a school by the director of admissions. Sometimes she isn't all that representative of the rest of the administration. Make sure that you have a chance to see the school director speak and meet some of the teachers before deciding which school is the best fit.

What advice do you have that will help us do well at our interview?

- The important thing is to make the director like you so she'll offer your child a place and you'll have the option of saying yes or no.
- Be yourself.
- In your mind, tell yourself that this is your first choice school. You'll be more enthusiastic and appealing. If you go in with a ho-hum attitude, the interviewer will sense your ambivalence and won't be impressed. No matter what questions you are asking yourself privately, don't be tentative or reluctant about your interest in the school.
- When talking about your child, tell memorable stories that bring him to life in the director's eyes.
- Be concise. Don't ramble.
- Don't interrupt the interviewer. Remember, she holds the key to your child's admission.
- Dress appropriately to the school. For a more formal school, wear a suit or nice dress, but don't overdo it with accessories and jewelry. For a more progressive school, you can be a bit more casual, but look like you care and put in some effort.
- Don't call the director by her first name unless she introduces herself that way.
- Be on your best behavior as you wait for the interview to start. If you are rude to the receptionist, she'll rat you out.

- Admissions directors will respond positively to: sense of humor, warmth, your ability to relate, maturity, confidence, enthusiasm, intelligence, a focus on your child, seeing that you understand your child well, knowledge of current events.
- Admissions directors will not respond well to: name dropping, arrogance, insincerity, impolite behavior, lack of interest, going over her head, being too low key, negative comments, inability to express yourself, being uninformed, expecting her to sell you on the school, a cynical attitude.
- Save your most important interviews for the end. You'll do better.
- Remember, it's not about the director of admissions convincing you to want them. It's about you convincing the director of admissions that your child and family are a great match for the school. This is like a job interview. You want them to say "yes" so that you can decide if you want them.
- Even though your mission is to convince the school to want your child, you should be privately evaluating the school, the director and the vibes you are getting. Does this feel like a place your child would love to go every day?

Should both parents attend the interview?

- If two parents are in the picture, you should both attend.
- If you are in the midst of getting a divorce, you'll have to decide whether coming together is right for your situation. Ideally, you'll come together, showing the director that you are the kinds of parents who can put your differences aside and do what is best for your child. But if you can't be in the same room together without a fight, don't come together.
- If you are a single parent, you can come alone or bring someone who is very involved with your child's life like an uncle or aunt.

How should I prepare for the interview?

- Read all you can about the school on its website.

- Go over what you wrote to the school in your essays and don't restate what you already said on paper.
- Be ready to articulate why the school is a good match for your family and your child.
- Find out what each school seeks in the students it accepts and address that. For example, if the school mixes kindergarten and first grade classes, come prepared with stories that illustrate your child's maturity.
- If you can, find out about the person who will interview you from someone who knows her. What does that person advise you to do so that this director will have the most favorable impression?

What if the Assistant Director of Admissions interviews us? Does that mean we don't have a chance?

No, families who are interviewed by the assistant get in all the time. But you'll want to work hard to make a favorable impression because this person will have to pitch you to the director. If you want to be interviewed by the director, ask for her by name when you make your appointment.

What will we be asked?

- Be prepared to be asked 1) Tell me about your child, and 2) Why our school?
- With the first question, tell stories that illustrate qualities of your child that make her a good fit for the school. With the second question, talk about defining aspects of the school that appeal to you and would be wonderful for your child to have access to. If the school has a religious component, you might want to talk about the importance of religion or spirituality to your family. If the school has a distinct educational philosophy, talk about why you think your child would respond well to that.
- Here are some other questions that have come up in other interviews: What does your family do together on weekends? What is your daughter most proud of?

Why did you choose the nursery school that you chose? What does your child like best about preschool? Describe something your child worked very hard at accomplishing in the past? What has been the most difficult experience your child has had to deal with to date and how did he handle it? If I didn't know what your child looked like, how would you tell me to recognize him on the playground – she'd be the one who was doing...?

What “landmines” should I watch out for?

- You may be asked questions that feel intrusive like, “Were there any problems with your pregnancy or birth?” “Tell me about your own parents?” “What is the story behind your child’s adoption?” If you feel uncomfortable answering any question like this, give a short response and try to change the subject.
- If the question is very personal and made you feel uncomfortable, you might question whether or not this school is right for your family.
- Always ask yourself what is behind the question you’ve been asked. For example, schools shy away from children with any kind of learning issues. If you’re asked if your child is in any kind of therapy, and she is in speech therapy for a mild articulation problem, you may choose not to talk about it.
- If you’re asked if your child was premature or if you had a difficult birth, is the director really asking, “Might there be a learning issue that will emerge later because of this?”
- Don’t ask questions that will raise a red flag with the director. For example, avoid questions like, “Does the nurse or teacher give the Ritalin?”
- Plan in advance how you will handle questions relating to therapies your child has had or other sensitive issues.
- If your child is at a school that has an ongoing kindergarten program and you are applying out and the director asks you why, is she really asking, “If you aren’t happy with your school now, are you one of those parents who is never happy?”
- They say interviews are won or lost in the first 5 minutes. This is when your clothes, grooming, personal presence, eye contact, articulation, confidence, smile

and personality will be most critical. The director will be analyzing you in reference to the culture of the school community. Will this family fit in? Will others feel I made a good selection by admitting them?

What questions should we ask?

- Go into the interview with a list of questions to which you'd genuinely like answers. Make sure that you ask about what really matters to you before you leave.
- Avoid questions that are answered in the website, brochure or are really obvious.
- Ask questions that the director doesn't hear every day, especially if it is something you really care about. For example, if morals are important to you, ask what different ways the school instills ethics in their children in the lower, middle and upper schools.