

TIPS FOR GETTING INTO A COMPETITIVE KINDERGARTEN

By The Testing Mom

If you happen to live in a city where getting your kid into kindergarten is as tough as getting a child into Harvard, take heart. There are things you can do to increase your child's odds of acceptance. Here are strategies that have made a difference for other families:

- **Be relaxed through the process.** How attractive is desperation? Not very, right? If an admissions director smells nerves and desperation on your part, she won't be impressed. The best way to be relaxed throughout the process is to have a good public school backup that you know your child can attend and that you would be satisfied with. Then, relax, and see what better option you might be able to drum up.
- **Do what the school requires to get an application.** In some markets you actually do have to put your child on a list when she's born. In others, you just have to call on a certain day for an application. Some schools are so popular that they hold a lottery for an application. Make sure you do whatever they ask you to do to get the application. Call well in advance to find out what is necessary.
- **Turn your application in as soon as you can.** Very competitive schools have been known to stop taking applications after they've reached a certain number.
- **Give thoughtful answers to essay questions.** You want evoke an emotional response in the director, one that says, "This sounds like a special child, and a family we'd love to have." Touch on the hot buttons of the school. Show why your child would be just right for their particular program.
- **If testing is required for kindergarten, make sure your child is ready.** To learn what you can do at home to make sure your child has the abilities he needs to do well on any IQ test, read *Testing For Kindergarten*.

- **Provide a letter of recommendation if they ask for one.** The ideal recommender is someone the school knows, such as a current or past parent or a board member. But only ask this person if they really know your family and child. If you don't know someone like this, ask another friend who knows you and your child well enough to write the letter. Someone who genuinely knows you will give a glowing, believable recommendation. Never ask a friend of a friend who has some juice with the school to write a letter for you – you never know what they will say. I've seen this backfire more than once.
- **Have someone vouch for you even if they don't ask.** If the school doesn't ask for a letter of recommendation and you do have a strong contact connected to the school, have that person visit the director or call the director on your behalf with enthusiastic support for your child and family.
- **Tell them you'll donate through someone else.** If you happen to be a family that is likely to donate to the school, that should be communicated in a letter of recommendation or by a person who goes to the director on your behalf. You'll want the school to know of your donor potential without being obnoxious about it by personally bringing it up.
- **Tell them what you bring to the table.** If you're not a family with donor potential (and most of us aren't), make sure to communicate any special abilities or connections you might have to help the school. Maybe you're a professional fundraiser. Maybe you have access to a restaurant where the school could hold a benefit. Maybe you work for a winery that would donate wine for the benefit. Maybe you work for a famous actor who would be willing to direct the class play. Whatever. Let them know what special benefits you would bring to the school.
- **Show your best side.** Don't make dumb mistakes other parents have made. When you're touring the school, be courteous to the secretary and whoever leads the tour. They will out you to the director if you're obnoxious. Turn off your cellphone and act like you have all the time in the world. If you're married or have a partner, both of you should come. Dress up for your visit, because that shows you care. But if

you're touring a low-key progressive school, however, don't go overboard on the wardrobe. You want to look like you'll fit into the community.

- **Make the director like you.** If you do have a chance to meet with the director, your goal is to make her like you. Establish a personal connection with her, show that you're interested in the school, and be your warm, enthusiastic, down-to-earth self.
- **Say thanks.** Send a thank you letter after you tour the school or interview with the director expressing your genuine interest in their program. Make it personal. Say why you feel the school would be the perfect fit for your family and child and mean it.
- **The visit.** If your child is going to have a school visit, make sure she's rested and in good health when she goes. Don't schedule the visit during her usual naptime. For nursery school, you'll be able to stay in the room during the visit, but relax and let go. Don't try to control or answer for your toddler from across the room. For kindergarten, you'll most likely be separated so have the person your child separates most easily from take her to the interview.
- **Try to relax.** I know it's hard, but do your best. Any stress you are feeling will be transferred to your child and that won't help anything. I always found that if a family had a good public school back-up that they knew they could get their child into, and knew they would be happy with, then they could apply to competitive schools feeling much more relaxed and like themselves. What does this tell you? Find a public school that you know your child will qualify for and keep it as your back-up, knowing that no matter what, you'll be satisfied with the school you choose.
- **Improve your odds.** Apply to extra schools if you have twins or triplets. For kindergarten, tell the director you are willing to separate them. You can always apply the one who didn't get in next year and then, she'll have the sibling advantage.
- **Consider age.** If you want private school and your child is on the young side, consider putting him in a public kindergarten program for

a year. He'll gain all kinds of skills and mature during that period. Then, apply him to private kindergarten for the next year. He'll be a much more attractive candidate and will always be ahead of other kids in his class due to his age.

- **Have a balanced list.** Be smart about the combination of schools you apply to. Don't apply only to the hardest-to-get-into-schools. Have a balanced list – in competitive markets, this can be like college. You want your safety schools, schools you know you'd be happy with, and your stretch schools. Crazy but true.
- **Send a first choice letter.** If you really love a particular school and think it's just right for your child, send the director a first choice letter declaring, "You are our first choice school. If you'll accept our child, we will accept a spot in your school." But if you send one of those letters, make sure you are prepared to accept the spot if offered.
- **Good luck!** If you follow these suggestions, your child will have an excellent shot at getting into a competitive kindergarten.