

This school? That school?



Classes are back in session for kids — but some moms on MinnMoms.com want to learn how to pick the best school for their children. Here are excerpts from a recent post about the topic. Join the discussion or read more on MinnMoms.com.

PIONEER PRESS: KIRK LYTTLE

Posted by Momto5 on Sept. 5: I was wondering what factors you moms considered in selecting an elementary school for your kids? Classroom size? Curriculum?

Posted by AKAmom on Sept. 5: As someone who thought herself a "laid-back" kind of person, I was chagrined to realize I looked at more schools for my child's kindergarten than I looked at for myself for college and law school.

I ended up making a first cut of schools by limiting the geography. Somehow, it just seemed important for my particular (then) 5-year-old that she not be too far away physically. After the first geographical cut, I thought about my girl. She was very smart, very quiet and very responsible, so I excluded the larger schools. I anticipated she would do the work, learn what she needed to learn and cause no trouble in a larger class, and so she would probably be invisible — we wanted her to get more attention than we anticipated she would get in those circumstances.

Posted by on porterborn Sept. 11: As a public school elementary teacher and parent of a 16-year-old and a 3-year-old, I suggest you consider these things:

All schools have wonderful characteristics as well as challenges. No school is perfect, and no school is the right fit for every child. Consider the school's focus or core curriculum, but look beyond that. Talk to teachers. Talk to parents who have children at the school. Talk to the principal or administrator. A school may look great on paper (test scores), but if the staff doesn't collaborate, if the principal doesn't work well with families, it may not be the right place for your child.

Visit many schools during the open houses, but also request tours during the school day. Everyone puts their best foot forward for the open house, but you see how a school really functions when the students are there, when the teachers are teaching.

Also, regarding test scores, don't cross a school off your list based solely on test scores. Those tests do not tell you everything about a school. Small schools are hit especially hard when a small group of kids doesn't pass a test for whatever reason ... test anxiety included. That doesn't show what's going on in a building on a day-to-day basis. We don't test kids on how they treat each other, on how they perform in real world situations, and sometimes kids just don't test well.

Posted by Smiley Always on Sept. 12: I would do the following:

Visit the schools. See if you feel welcome. If no one asks about your kids and their ages and shows interest, red flags should go up. Still, I've learned some people are great with kids and less stellar with parents. I am not going to be the one there all day, so if I think my kids would be thrilled to be there, so be it.

Talk to your neighbors — but take the advice with a grain of salt. I was bombarded with "this school sucks" and "this is the school for you" advice when I first met my neighbors, but after doing my own research, I realized, "Your kid is different from my kid." We made our own decisions and have not looked back.

Ask about parental involvement. If you get a "we love parents" response, go for it. If you get "parents are working and we don't expect parents for much more than conferences," you could consider it. But if you're told, "Parents are encouraged to let us teach and feedback is welcome via e-mail or by phone," grab your purse and run. The beauty is you can change your mind. School choice is fantastic. So, if you find a school your kid likes, the environment feels friendly to you and kids look happy to be there, then put it on your list.

shopping } ask allison

Q > I'm looking for a desk for my studio. It needs to be small enough not to overpower my space, but big enough to actually be useful. Any ideas about decent furniture places in the metro for someone on a budget?

A > If you can hold off just a couple of months, West Elm (Westelm.com) is finally opening a Twin Cities store on France Avenue in Edina (next door to the Container Store, which opens first on Oct. 11). West Elm is the sleek, city-dwelling cousin to Pottery Barn, offering contemporary, space-conscious furnishings at reasonable prices. Desks start at \$299. If you don't want to wait, Take a look at Ikea. And while it's hit and miss, try a few outlets, like the Room and Board weekend outlet (4680 Olson Memorial Highway, Minneapolis) or Odds N' Ends (3740 Louisiana Ave., St. Louis Park; 952-924-1061).

Allison Kaplan has returned from maternity leave and is answering shopping or style questions on her Savvy Shopper page at twincities.com/savvysshopper. Watch for her Savvy Shopper column to return Oct. 5.

relationships } creative parenting

Pick a stick mixes work and play



Put stuff on a stick, and kids are bound to like it. Think ice cream, candy and colorful pinwheels. So why not chores-on-a-stick?

"Call it a gimmick, but if it works, I say go for it," says my friend, Lisa, a busy single working mom with a 7-year-old daughter and 5-year-old son. She was definitely determined to entice the kids to get into the chore routine this fall without the whining and the all-too-frequent response of "It's not mine, so why do I have to pick it up?" Sound familiar?

Her chores-on-a-stick grew out of an idea at an early-childhood

class she attended in her community. Write little jobs that need to be done on one end of a wood craft stick, decorate the other end with cut-out paper flower blooms and stand them upright in tin can to look like a bouquet. When it's time to get the blooming chores done around the house, say to the kids, "Pick a stick!" Whatever is written on the stick becomes the child's responsibility.

Since kids generally get overwhelmed with a huge chore like "clean up your room," Lisa has been broken up big jobs into smaller tasks. The can of chores labeled "BEDROOM" has several sticks with specific things printed on each one that are to be completed in the bedroom over a period of a few days, one stick at a time.

For example, sticks may say: "Put away dolls on the shelf." "Put

shoes and boots in the closet." "Put toys in bins." Other cans might be labeled "PLAYROOM" or "BACK YARD" with specific chores on each stick.

Pick up some craft sticks, decorate them if you wish, label with chores, toss them in a recycled soup can and try out this strategy in your home. Pick a Stick is like a game, so your young kids will no doubt like the novelty of it at first, but even more, they'll feel a sense of accomplishment as they do their part to keep the home organized and humming this fall.

Grandparent pick a stick tip: When the grandkids come for a visit, fill a can with craft sticks with something to do together outdoors: "Watch a soccer game at local park." "See the ducks at the pond." "Walk to the library." Then, enjoy doing the chosen activity together.



Donna Erickson's award-winning television series, "Donna's Day," is airing on PBS nationwide. Watch it in the Twin Cities at 1:30 p.m. Fridays on Channel 2 and 5:30 p.m. Sundays on Channels 13 and 17. Sign up for Donna's e-newsletter at donnasday.com.



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