

Selecting the Right International Preschool: A Parent's Essential Checklist

Choosing a preschool is one of the first major decisions you will make for your child's educational journey, and the options can feel overwhelming, from play-based and Reggio Emilia frameworks to Montessori and early IB programs.

As educators and parents, we created this checklist to help you look beyond the marketing brochures. Use this framework during your campus tours and research to evaluate what truly matters: your child's happiness, safety, and natural development.

1. Philosophy & Learning Environment

Every child learns differently. Look for an approach that aligns with your family's values and your child's personality.

- **Educational Approach:** Does the school follow a specific philosophy (e.g., Montessori, Reggio Emilia, IB Early Years, Play-Based), and can the staff explain how it is applied daily?
- **Classroom Atmosphere:** Do the children appear engaged, curious, and comfortable, or do they seem overly structured and anxious?
- **Balance of Play and Structure:** Is there a healthy mix of child-led exploration, outdoor play, and guided group activities?
- **Physical Space:** Are the facilities clean, brightly lit, and equipped with safe, age-appropriate learning materials and outdoor play areas?

2. Language & Communication Strategy

Language acquisition in the early years should feel natural, encouraging, and rich.

- **Language Model:** Is the instruction full English immersion, dual-language (English/Japanese), or another model?
- **Support for Non-Native Speakers:** How does the school support children transitioning from a different home language or local Japanese daycare (*hoikuen*)?
- **Parent-School Communication:** How are daily updates, developmental milestones, and photos shared with parents (e.g., dedicated app, daily journal, weekly newsletter)?

3. Educator Quality & Pastoral Care

Teachers are the heart of any early years environment. Their warmth and training make all the difference.

- **Teacher Qualifications:** Are the educators certified in early childhood education, and do they have experience working with multicultural toddlers?
- **Teacher-to-Student Ratio:** Is the class size small enough to ensure every child receives individual attention and care?

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- **Staff Stability:** Is there low staff turnover, suggesting a happy, well-supported teaching team?
- **Emotional Support:** How do teachers handle separation anxiety, conflict between children, and emotional regulation?

4. Health, Safety & Logistics

Practicalities matter just as much as pedagogy when it comes to your daily peace of mind.

- **Safety & Security:** Are campus access points secure, and are clear protocols in place for emergencies (e.g., earthquake drills in Tokyo)?
- **Nutrition & Meals:** Does the school provide healthy lunches and snacks, or do parents send a bento? How are food allergies handled?
- **Location & Commute:** Is the school easily accessible from your home or workplace via public transit or walking? Is school bus service available?
- **Schedule Flexibility:** Are drop-off and pick-up times compatible with your work schedule? Are extended care options available?

5. Community & Long-Term Pathways

A great preschool supports the entire family and prepares your child for the next step.

- **Parent Community:** Are there opportunities for parents to get involved, meet other families, and participate in school events?
- **Primary Feeder Pathways:** Where do graduates typically go? Does the preschool have established relationships or priority entry with top international primary schools?

The Ultimate "Gut Check" Question to Ask Yourself:

"When I walk through the halls, can I picture my child smiling, making friends, and feeling safe here every day?"

Need Help Navigating Your Options?

Every child and family dynamic is unique. If you would like personalized guidance on shortlisting preschools, preparing for family admissions interviews, or assessing school readiness, the team at **ISA-Tokyo** is here to support you every step of the way.