

Getting a Head Start

Devising strategies for kindergarten admissions

Spring is all about renewal. Buds open and hearts sing, but another sign that spring has sprung is the sight of city parents getting a head start on the ultracompetitive kindergarten admissions process. Wherever possible, parents interested in the best private and/or selective public schools for their children are signing up for spring tours, scheduling ERB test dates and checking out private school Web sites, hoping to get a few steps ahead of the pack. Applying 4- and 5-year-olds to kindergarten can be quite stressful, and takes a great deal of time. So, it's only natural that parents would like to get whatever they can over with early.

One parent, whose 4 1/2-year-old daughter attends one of the city's top nursery schools, which sends kids on to some of the best private and public schools, could only manage to score one spring tour, at Riverdale Country School. "At Dalton, they were full," she said. And Horace Mann, Town and Trinity told her they didn't offer spring tours. "And at Spence, either they don't do it or I couldn't get one."

However, there are a few other schools, such as Friends Seminary, that offer lower-school tours in the spring. Friends had two very full tours this April, "but I'm putting the rest on hold until the fall," said Harriet Burnett, the school's

director of admissions. "I don't want to live up to the hype. We have incredible demand, but we'll see. We were able to accommodate everyone last fall, but we have to be flexible," Burnett noted. But she does draw a line: "If you go on a spring tour, then no for fall."

But thanks to ever-expanding technologies, parents can now get virtual tours of many schools on their Web sites. Parents can get 360-degree views of classrooms and other areas. Trinity, a school that many families at this preapplicant parent's nursery school covet — and where kindergarten admissions are fierce — was not as impressive as she thought, judging by her virtual tour.

At some schools like Dalton, Spence, Town and Riverdale, parents can request an application online in the spring, and the school will automatically forward one in the fall. "At Brearley, I thought that's what I was doing," recounted this parent. "But then I got this letter that said, 'Call again in the fall.'"

Right away, this parent X'd a few schools off her list after viewing their Web sites and reading their information online. "I didn't like Birch-Lenox or Bank Street," she admitted. "Lots of schools give in-depth descriptions of

their classroom structure, sports, language and computer programs," she explained. "And I was surprised to see

how few schools have structured computer programs for young children. It was usually around third grade when they start."

This mom also learned that spring tours and application requests weren't the only part of the kindergarten admissions process that can be done early. Quite a few nursery school directors are now urging parents of siblings, older children with summer birthdays, and kids whom nursery directors perceive are ready — usually kids who are turning 5 by December — to take their ERBs, the high-stakes kindergarten admissions test, in the spring.

"They [the nursery directors] try to have as many sibs tested as they can. Those children are more likely to get an early acceptance [for kindergarten], so it's a good idea to get them done early," revealed this preapplicant mom. She explained the rationale as "an unspoken theory. That is, even if they [siblings] don't do as well, they're getting in anyway, unless there's some glaring problem."

As her daughter has no sibling, and has an early winter birthday, she recently received a letter from her nursery school director stating that it would be a good idea to test her daughter this spring. The letter was clear and concise. "It said, 'As you already know, we do

test some children in spring for ERBs. A lot of families find this to be a good time to do testing, as children are comfortable in their classroom settings, things are calm and stable at this time of year for most kids, and it's a good time to do testing for some kids,'" recounted this parent.

Savvy preschool parents already know that the younger kids have a slight edge because they're being compared to kids who are younger, who are age-grouped in roughly three-month increments. It's long been a misconception that older kids do better on their ERBs, as they'll "know more." Recent research shows that waiting hasn't shown a significant increase in test scores, as the kids are compared to older kids. Test expectations are slightly greater, thereby increasing the chance that a child might not do as well, or even worse, get sick.

"For me personally, she's more settled now than she'll be in the fall, when there's going to be new teachers, classrooms and kids in her class," said the almost-applicant parent gearing up for a cutthroat admissions season. "I'm fine, and I think she's ready," she said with resolve. So far, so good, but she's only just begun. Stay tuned. ■



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