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# An NYC preschool admissions consultant shares the advice she gives parents to help get their kid into a top program

Robin Madell

Jan 5, 2021, 6:00 AM





**Wendy Levey.** Wendy Levey

**Manhattan-based educational consultant Wendy Levey has deep roots in New York City's preschool scene, having founded and directed her own school on the Upper East Side for 45 years.**

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**She shared the advice she gives clients for helping their kids land a coveted spot at a top program in the city.**

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**First, figure out your ideal school program — what philosophies and hours you're looking for for your child.**

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**Invest in personalized stationary — which will make your thank you notes memorable to admissions — and a high-quality (but not professional) photo of your child.**

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**Follow application directions closely, but express flexibility with different program options if you can.**

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**Showcase how your child is engaged in everyday life, avoid questions like, "Will you toilet train my child?" and dress for the interview as if it's a job interview.**

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Manhattan-based educational consultant [Wendy Levey](#) has deep roots in New York City's preschool scene. She founded Epiphany Community Nursery School, a premiere preschool on the Upper East Side, in 1975 and served as the director for 45 years before closing it in early 2020. She also founded ECNS ETC (formerly Rhythm and Glues) activity center in 1990 and STEAM-E Summer Days Camp in 1996, which also closed in 2020 due to the pandemic.

"I shook the four-year-old children's hands every morning and they learned to look me in the eye and develop interpersonal skills that alums say to this day held them in good stead, whether they went on to work at Goldman Sachs, became a fire-person, writer, chef, scientist, or doctor," Levey told Insider.

Levey has also served on the boards of two independent schools and one college, and was featured in the film "[Nursery University](#)," which documents the uber-competitive process of getting toddlers into preschool in Manhattan.

In her various roles in the education field, she's developed relationships with many school heads in NYC and helped countless parents navigate the elite preschool admissions process. What's more, Levey's own children attended co-ed and single-sex schools in the city.

In an interview with Insider, the consultant revealed her personal roadmap for helping get a client into a top program.

## Figure out your ideal school philosophy and hours

Levey said parents should first commit to understanding the various types of nursery schools and their philosophies the spring before applying.

Families can choose from among a wide range of options when it comes to a school's focus and values. Some of these options include traditional, play-based, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and religious preschools. You'll also need to narrow down whether you want to be part of an ongoing school, stand-alone preschool, or cooperative, progressive, or daycare setting.

Since many preschools offer different options on how many hours per day and days per week your child will spend in class, parents should also think through in advance whether they want to apply for half-day, whole day, or two-, three-, or five-day programs.

"Join [Parent's League](#)," Levey said. "They offer advisory appointments, admissions workshops, and other events and provide lots of invaluable materials." She also recommended their "[Guide to](#)

[New York City Preschools](#)," as well as Victoria Goldman's "[The Manhattan Directory of Private Nursery Schools](#)" — which is currently in its seventh edition.

Beyond that, she suggested that some of the best research often comes from talking to other families in the schools to find out what they like and don't like.

## **Invest in a clear and recent photo of your child**

Many top preschools ask for the child's photo or a family photo as part of the application. Levey said this isn't something that you should take lightly.

"Make sure you have a good photograph of your child — *not* a professional shot, but one that shows your child's face clearly and that is as recent as possible," the consultant said.

If the school asks for a shot of just the child, don't send a family photo. "It looks unprofessional in terms of paying attention to specific requests," she said.

She also warned against sending "naked pictures" and photos of your child in face paint.

Professional photos, she said "can exude an overly privileged impression when they just want to see what the child looks like," Levey said, adding that one year, a family she worked with sent in a photo of their child naked on a horse.

"When I spoke to the director of admissions of one of the schools, she said to me, 'Curious choice of photo,'" Levey said. "The child was not accepted."

## **Follow instructions to a T**

Levey stressed that parents need to closely adhere to what each school's application requirements are, rather than taking a blanket approach to applying.

"Follow the individual school directions for applying — photos, tours, interviews, and so on," Levey said. "If you can't do what the school asks, it is a clear message to them that you are not a fit."

To avoid misplacing important details that can throw you off your game when applying, Levey suggested that parents stay organized by maintaining files — electronic or paper — for each school.

"Add to this as you write notes, go on tours, hear stories, meet people who sent their children to that school, etc.," Levey said.

"Keep track of who you speak to and specific dates that relate to tours, interviews, applications, and so on."

When it comes to indicating which program you prefer, the consultant said a good trick is to be as open as possible.

"For example, saying, 'We trust your judgment and knowledge of the age range in each class and will go with whatever you suggest,'" Levey said. "Schools really appreciate that."

Levey noted that some schools ask for who you know at the school, and she's seen parents name people who don't even know them, which isn't a smart move.

"One particular school asks for the names and addresses of two families for references and they really do contact those families, so you want to be sure you have alerted those families and that you know them," Levey said.

Since schools usually like families with two parents to have both parents attend the interview, it can also be a faux pas to have one parent skip it.

"One year one of my families appeared with just the mother and no excuse as to where the father was; they were not accepted to that

school," Levey said.

## **Prepare smart questions and examples of your child's engagement for your interview**

During the interview, admissions is looking for signs that your child is mature enough for a preschool setting — though this isn't necessarily something that you can control or prep for.

"What they do like is if they ask a child to draw a picture, they sit at the table and do so, or if there are table blocks out, the child can build a building," Levey said. "Children who just sit on their parents' laps — and after all they may only be two when they apply — do not show a school that the child is ready to separate and join a classroom."

What should you do if your child is feeling particularly clingy during a preschool event?

"It is very important to be able to tell the admissions director that your child, while not showing it at this moment, does attend a music class and a swimming class where they fully engage," Levey said. "It is very hard to expect a two- or three-year-old to 'perform,' so if you ask the child to tell the director of admissions the alphabet or to sing



'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,' they are likely to balk, and this just makes the child look belligerent."

Levey also recommended avoiding questions such as, "Do you have an alarm system and what is your lock-down procedure?" ("Not good for an interview and should be in the parent handbook," Levey said), "Who is on the Board of Trustees?" "If my child has wet hair in the morning, can they skip going outside on the roof and have a teacher stay with them in the classroom?" ("True story," Levey said) and "Will you toilet train my child?"

The following, however, are good questions to ask, according to Levey:

- Where do you see the school in five years?
- How do you assess the effectiveness of parent-teacher conferences?
- What happens if you have a "mean girl" in the class?
- How do you handle birthday parties in school?
- How can working parents be involved?

- What is communication with parents like — how will we know whether our child is doing well or not?
- If my child is delayed or excelling in an area, will that be communicated?

While it may seem a minor detail at the preschool stage, what you and your child wear to the interview is also important.

"If the school is a uniform school, dress accordingly: jacket and tie for the man, simple dress for the woman, just as you would for a job interview," Levey said. "Your child should have their hair combed, a nice 'out to dinner' outfit on, and not something that they will fidget with."

Levey shared that one year, one of her families sent their child on an interview with socks that had strings hanging off of them, and he spent his whole play session futzing with the strings.

"The school felt the little boy had poor concentration and focus skills and did not accept him," Levey said.

Another year, Levey worked with a mom who had many visible tattoos on her legs. "We decided it would be best if she wore opaque stockings when visiting the more traditional schools; that worked

beautifully," Levey said.

Another part of your interview preparation should involve knowing key dates for the school's next steps.

"Tours are in the fall of the year you begin the process; interviews are in the fall and winter," Levey said. "Applications are generally due in September and can be requested online."

She added that while the exact application due dates vary from year to year, if you request the application right after Labor Day and don't send it in until late October, you don't look very interested in the school.

"Several of my clients were not granted interviews because they missed the application deadline and had therefore not had a tour of the school," Levey said.

She also said that if in doubt, most New York City preschools adhere to [Independent School Admission Association of Greater New York](#) rules. In 2021, for example, all parents will be notified of the schools' decisions on February 4, and parents have until February 11 to reply.

**Send thank you notes on professional,**

# personalized stationary

There's an unspoken expectation that parents should follow up each tour with a handwritten note thanking the admissions team and other staff. To this end, Levey recommended that parents invest in stationery with their name — or both spouses' names if they're married — across the top in simple block letters



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...ing notes after each tour, and that's important, and you want to be sure the school puts it in the correct file," Levey said. She often refers parents to [Love Laura Gifts](#) on the Upper East Side for admissions-appropriate stationery.

Another trick is to sign the letter noting not only your own name, but also your child's full name and date of birth.

"For example, 'Susan and Jack Schmittleheimer (parents of Lily Schmittleheimer, dob January 4, 2016),' " Levey said. "That way, if they have several families with the same name or several children named Lily, they won't get confused."

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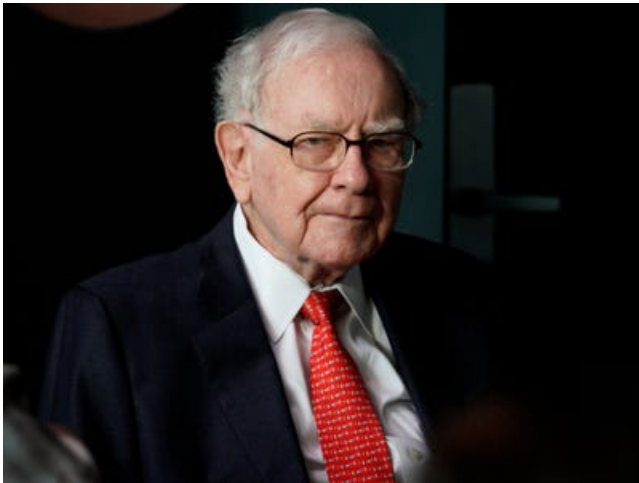
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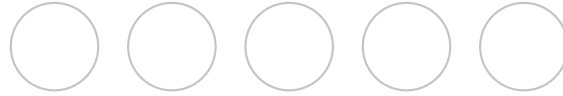


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