

Guide to Preschools In Singapore â?? Which school offers the most value-for-money?

Description

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Does paying more get your child a better education when it comes to choosing between preschools? What are the differences between childcare centres, anchor operators and partner operators? Is a SPARKS certification necessary? Use this guide to help you navigate Singaporeâ??s preschool scene!

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Nate will be turning 18 months next year, which means itâ??ll soon be time for him to go to (pre)school. Given the importance of setting a strong foundation during his developmental years, I embarked on 3 months of research and visited over 10 schools to identify what would be best for my child.

Hereâ??s a quick overview of terms for first-time parents:

- Playgroup (PG) â?? 18 months to 2 years old
- Nursery 1 (N1) â?? the year your child turns 3
- Nursery 2 (N2) â?? the year your child turns 4
- Kindergarten 1 (K1) â?? the year your child turns 5
- Kindergarten 2 (K2) â?? the year your child turns 6

Preschool options are generally between (i) shorter playgroups lasting about 90 minutes â?? 3 hours or (ii) childcare centres offering half-day or full-day programmes. Government-supported preschools like My First Skool are usually more affordable than private centres.

This article consolidates my findings after visiting the following schools:

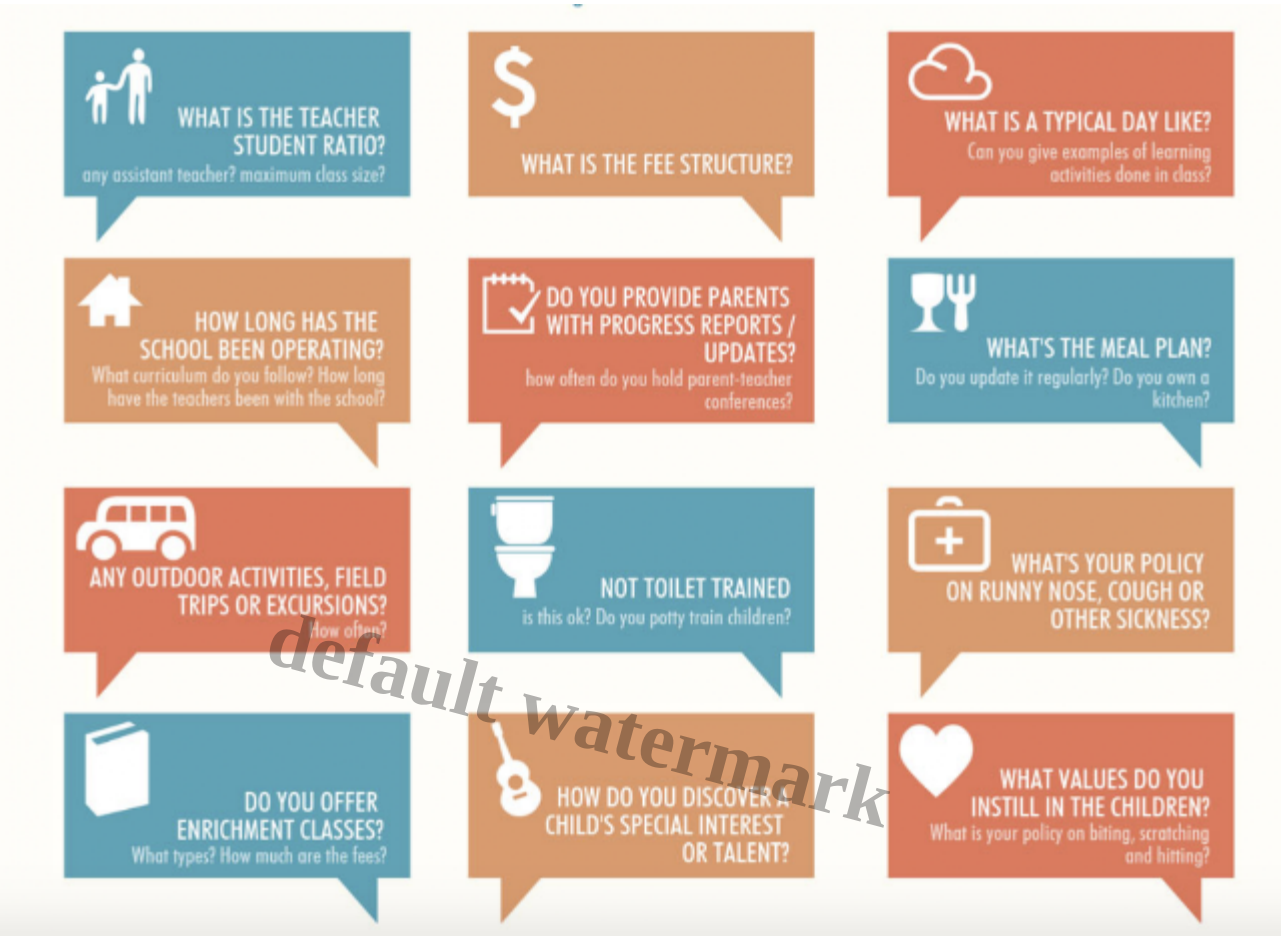
- Playgroups (90 min â?? 3 hours): *Star Tots, Apple Tree*
- Government-supported preschools (anchor operators): *My First Skool, PCF Sparkletots*
- Government-supported preschools (partner operators): *Star Learners, Carpe Diem, Agape Little University*
- Private preschools: *St James Kindergarten, Cherie Hearts, Maplebear, Brighton Montessori*
- MOE Kindergarten (4-hour programme)



Students working on their writing attentively at My First Skool.

What should I look out for when I go on a school tour?

To help you better compare between preschools, here are some questions to ask when you visit:



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Source: Skoolopedia

Table of Findings

Aside from higher school fees and a branded curriculum, I did not see much difference between the private preschools and government-supported ones. We narrowed our choices down to 5 government-supported preschools after completing the tours, and I consolidated our key findings of differences in the table below:

	PCF Sparkletots	**My First Skool**	**Star Learners**	**Carpe Diem**	**Agape Little Uni**
Fees	$751.90	$770.40	$856	$856	$856
After Working Mother Subsidy	$451.90	$470.40	$556	$556	$556
Curriculum	Integrated curriculum	Skool-Educare (relationships-based approach) Skool-Ready (inquiry-based learning approach)	Starbeam framework Literature-based approach Activity-based approach	Multiple Intelligence	Inquiry-based learning
Meals		Variety of cuisines in Singapore and other countries *Introduction to different spices*	Variety of cuisines in Singapore and other countries In-house chefs Centres participates in Healthy Meals in Child Care Centres Programme by HPB	Variety of cuisines	
Parental Communications	Communication booklet	Communication booklet Field trips and celebrations *Parental workshops*	Communication booklet Field trips and celebrations Parentâ??s portal app Parent-teacher meetings	Communication booklet Field trips and celebrations Monthly newsletters	Field trips
Convenience	360 centres	146 centres	40 centres	31 centres	12 centres

Teacher-to-child ratio	1:8 1:12 1:15 1:22 1:25	1:8 1:12 1:15 1:20 1:25	1:8 1:12 1:15 1:20 1:25	1:5 1:12 1:15 1:20 1:25	1:8 1:10 1:15 1:20 1:25

View full table in desktop mode.

Sidenote: PCF Sparkletots was quickly struck off our list after we visited 2 branches and observed that the children seemed too noisy and rowdy (even during lessons) for our liking.



Various learning spaces like these are commonly found in most childcare centres.
Most centres by My First Skool are equipped with shock-absorbing vinyl flooring to allow children to run about freely while minimising injuries.

What I learnt from visiting 10 schools:

1. Fees range from $750 to over $2000 (centres under the same brand charge differently)

I was surprised to learn that the rates for different branches varied, even if it was under the same brand name. Itâ??ll thus be best for you to enquire directly with the centres youâ??re keen on to get a more accurate budget.

2. A SPARKS commendation is better than a SPARKS certification.

The majority of preschools we visited were SPARKS-certified, but only a smaller handful receive a commendation.

The centre of My First Skool which I went to, for instance, received a commendation and it truly showed when I toured the centre. I was impressed by their teaching methods and activities, more so than in some of the private centres. They also had very creative uses of their tools and props to create educational learning spaces, and I particularly liked how they created independent play spaces for the

children to socialize and learn, even without receiving directions from a teacher.

3. Good schools focus on a holistic curriculum

The quality of the educational curriculum was generally fantastic among all the schools I visited â?? regardless of whether they were a private business, a social enterprise or a government school. Each also incorporated similar elements such as literacy, English, Chinese, numeracy, science, the arts, music, movement sports, and more.

I compared the timetables among all the schools and found little differences, aside from the naming of their lessons and activities. For instance, although Agape Little University promotes their inquiry-based learning (IBL) as a core approach, I found the same at PCF Sparkletots and My First Skool as well.

The K1 and K2 students I saw at My First Skool were also able to write as well as the kids I saw at another private operator. This is important because you will most likely want to make sure the school you choose will prepare your child adequately for Primary One.

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Review of My First Skool

Several of my mummy friends send their children to My First Skool and raved about their childâ??s progress, and after visiting in person, I can see why theyâ??re so popular among many Singaporean parents:

- **Atmosphere:** We really liked their learning environment, which had plenty of natural sunlight, bright walls with colourful furniture, and well-ventilated with fans and air-conditioning for hot / hazy days.
- **Teachers:** Qualifications aside, the teachers should most importantly be passionate about teaching young children, and not raise their voices in a harsh tone too often. Watch how they handle and keep the kids under control during lessons! The pre-schoolers we saw at My First Skool were not only well-behaved but also listening attentively and engaged during lessons.
- **Curriculum: I**nstead of the traditional teacher-directed learning approach found in some preschools, My First Skool focuses on the development, well-being and active involvement of children through a relationship-based approach for children up to 3 years old. This helps to nurture them to become resilient and independent.
- **An immersive mother tongue program:** Effective bilingualism starts from young. At My First Skool, I watched as the children played games that required them to switch between English and Chinese, while being taught basic greetings in the four official languages as well!
- **Spacious and child-safe environment:** for Nate to run around and release his energy. Spaces designed with an open-learning concept are preferred as weâ??re not a believer of keeping children in enclosed rooms.

- **Parental communication:** My First Skool not only has a parentsâ?? portal app to view photos or videos of your child participating in-class activities, but also includes a communication book, parent-teacher conferences, invitations for parents to join in the centre events and field trips. One value-added service were the parental workshops offered, which we didnâ??t encounter in other preschools.

- **Affordability:** My First Skool charges among the lowest rates of all the preschools we visited, second only to PCF Sparkletots.



Indoor play activities at My First Skool.

**** Sponsored introduction to My First Skool ****

It shouldnâ??t come as a surprise to most Singaporeans that My First Skool is the top choice for over 22,000 families. Hereâ??s why:

Learning is fun and effective

If youâ??re a believer in child-directed learning, you will be excited to see the learning environment in My First Skool. Independent activity corners are set up around our centres, which empowers children to engage in their choice of activity (if they finish their work early), such as blocks, musical instruments, jigsaw puzzles, etc. This helps them to learn how to socialise, share, take turns and ultimately create rules of play within group settings.

Meals are healthy and exciting!

Fussy eaters will enjoy My First Skoolâ??s exposure to a wide variety of cuisines, including local hawker dishes, Western, Japanese food, and more. Itâ??ll be fun for your child as he/she learns and tries out the different spices and flavours. The meals are not only nutritious but also carefully designed as healthier versions of both local and international dishes for children to learn while they eat!

As your child will usually have at least 2 of their main meals in school, it is important to choose a preschool accredited under the Healthy Meals in Preschools Programme (HMPP) by the Health Promotion Board (HPB). Take a look at some of the menu items prepared at My First Skool centres â?? or even just to get ideas for home meals â?? by downloading their Recipes of Love cookbook here, featuring dishes such as milo pancakes and teriyaki-glazed fish fillets!

Field trips with a purpose

Although most preschools take the children out on field trips, My First Skool goes one step further by organising trips to places like Little India, Chinatown, and more (often together with the parents).

Moreover, to ease the transition from kindergarten to primary school, K2 students get to go to a nearby primary school so that they can orientate and familiarise themselves with a new environment. Not every preschool has this, but I love the idea!

Accessibility
With close to 150 centres located all around Singapore, the nearest branch should be within 10 â?? 15 minutes of your house if you live in the heartlands. Go ahead and schedule a visit so that you can see their quality for yourself.
Nurturing and getting them â??skool-readyâ?•

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For the younger pre-schoolers, My First Skool adopts a relationships-based approach that focuses on building strong and nurturing relationships between the teacher and child. When a child feels secure and engaged, learning begins. The programme also aims to develop a resilient child with an â??I can do itâ?• attitude â?? a trait that I feel is important for Nate to be empowered with!

Once they enter nursery, the inquiry-based curriculum encourages the children to explore their topics of interest, ask questions and investigate further for answers. Theyâ??ll learn how to read and write, solve problems independently, and will also go on field trips designed to meet specific learning objectives.



A learning and library corner at My First Skool.
Zoom in on the white activity boxes on the left, which are designed to promote independent, child-directed learning.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHOOSING WISELY

While some parents may be inclined to go for established names, I strongly encourage you to **visit several centres to judge for yourself** if the substantial differences in monthly fees are worth it. (We didnâ??t think so.)

The profile of the students also matters. Some preschools have students of mostly certain races (Chinese / expat), so consider this if youâ??re trying to expose your child to the other local races and teach them about tolerance and inclusivity.

The enrichment classes organised by the preschool wonâ??t be free, so youâ??ll need to fork out extra cash for those. We havenâ??t even included fees for swimming classes, ballet, piano, Heguru, or whatever else your child is keen to explore. And for parents who choose to send your child to a centre further away, remember to factor in school bus fees â?? these can easily go up to several hundreds a month!

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**My #1 tip when choosing a preschool:
make sure you can AFFORD it.**

If youâ??re planning to have more than one child, this becomes even more crucial because if sending your child to a $1,600 (per month) preschool is already a stretch on your finances, then imagine multiplying that by 2 or 3!

This is also why we prefer to go with *government-supported preschools*, since their fees are capped, which will allow us enough room to pay for our second kid. After all, there are still other necessities we need to pay for â?? food, clothes, healthcare, books and more!

Do I qualify for subsidies if Iâ??m self-employed?

To help parents with the cost of early childhood education, the government has extended subsidies to working mothers i.e. $300 a month off your childâ??s preschool fees if youâ??re a Singaporean. With the rise of gig workers in todayâ??s economy, the good news is that **self-employed mothers can also qualify for the working mother subsidy**, as long as you **work a minimum of 56 hours per month.**

Freelancers, work-from-home mothers and folks who run your own businesses, take note!

You will need to go through a legal process in order to qualify:

- Step 1: Fix an appointment with a law firm and say you wish to do a declaration of self-employed work for the purpose of applying for a childcare subsidy. *(Note that only firms with at least 10 years in service will have a Commissioner of Oaths.)*

- Step 2: Fill up forms at the law firm and make a declaration in front of their Commissioner of Oaths.

- Step 3: The law firm will endorse and return the documents on the spot. Bring these to the childcare centre and submit them together with your childâ??s registration application.

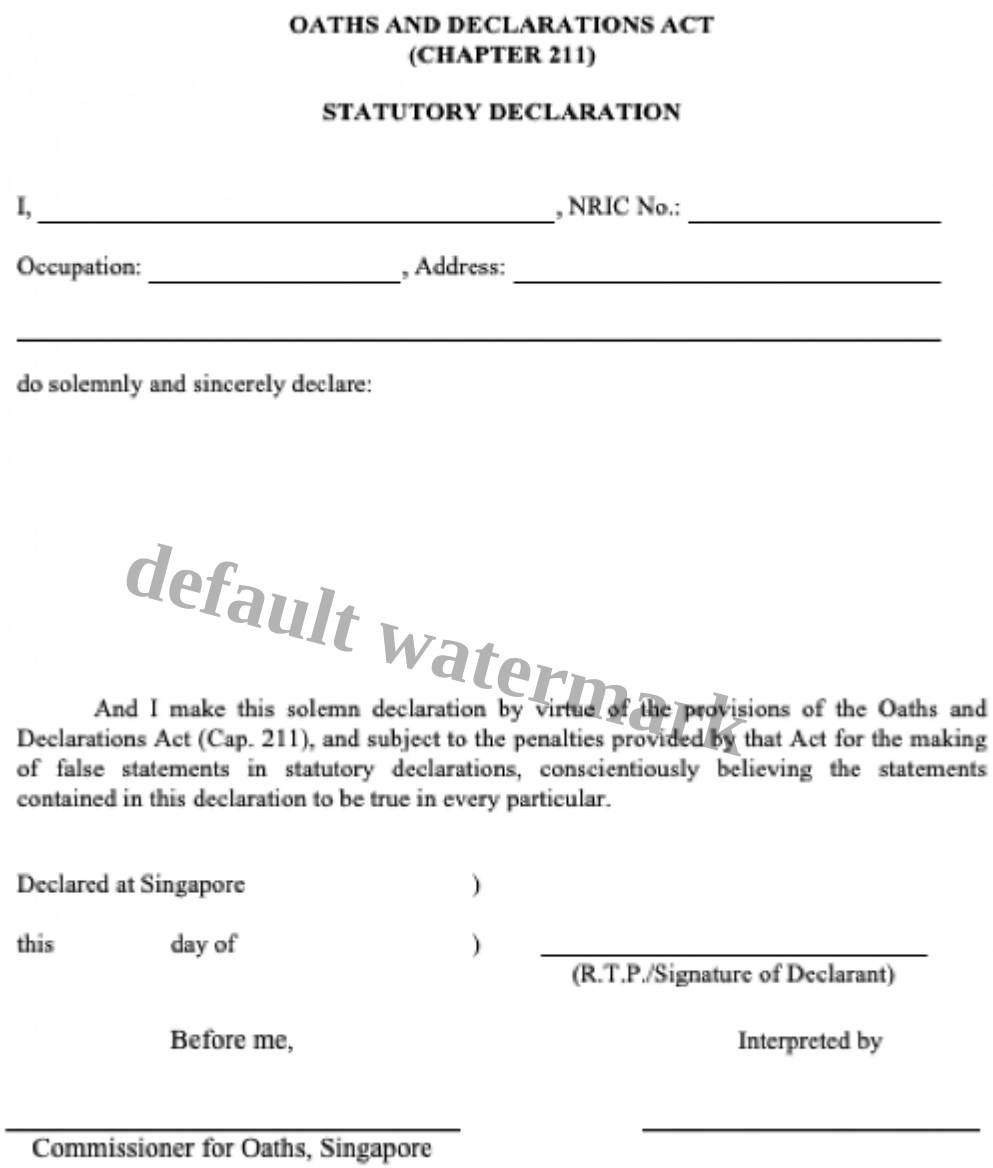
Cost: approx. $25 *(charges may vary between law firms)*

Prior to February 2016, women could simply walk into the Supreme Court to do this declaration, but they no longer offer this for non-Supreme Court proceedings. All requests will now need to be handled by a law firm. Iâ??ve verified this personally when I made a trip down to check directly with the Commissioner of Oaths at the Supreme Court (accurate as of August 2019).

For those who are curious, you may download a copy of the statutory declaration form here from the Supreme Court website. You could write something like this: *I am self-employed in ____ line of business and work ___ number of hours per month.*

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Take the oath at a private law firm and youâ??re good to go!



OATHS AND DECLARATIONS ACT
(CHAPTER 211)

STATUTORY DECLARATION

I, _____, NRIC No.: _____

Occupation: _____, Address: _____

_____

do solemnly and sincerely declare:

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And I make this solemn declaration by virtue of the provisions of the Oaths and Declarations Act (Cap. 211), and subject to the penalties provided by that Act for the making of false statements in statutory declarations, conscientiously believing the statements contained in this declaration to be true in every particular.

Declared at Singapore)

this day of) _____
(R.T.P./Signature of Declarant)

Before me, Interpreted by

_____ _____
Commissioner for Oaths, Singapore

Click on image to view.

TLDR Summary

If you choose a government-supported preschool *like* *My First Skool*, **fees work out to be approximately $6,000 a year for one child.** Those who prefer to enrol in private preschools can expect to set aside at least $20,000, which works out to be at least $100,000 spent from PG till K2. Woah!

Multiply your costs by the number of kids you have (or intend to have). Then factor in enrichment lessons, extracurricular activities, transport, healthcare, food and any other necessities for your child. Thatâ??s what youâ??ll need to budget for.
For a more accurate estimate, do call up the centre(s) youâ??re interested in to find out the costs. This is because the monthly fees vary even between centres under the same brand, due to different operating costs such as location rental, etc. And donâ??t forget to visit the preschool before you

register your child!
This post was made possible by My First Skool. All opinions and research findings are that of my own.
Category

1. Family

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