**An interesting article which is both thought provoking and worthy of reading……**

**Toddlers prepare for their first big interview**

By Helier Cheung BBC News, Hong Kong

Getting into good schools or universities is tough in many parts of the world, but in Hong Kong the pressure begins earlier. Often parents try to get children into a good kindergarten - and before that, into a good nursery. So there are now classes preparing toddlers for that all-important nursery interview.

Yoyo Chan is preparing for an important interview that could help her succeed in life. She is one-and-a-half years old.

At two she will start nursery, but competition is fierce in Hong Kong, and some of the most prestigious nurseries are selective. Her parents want her to be well-prepared for her first big test in life.

The best nurseries and kindergartens are seen as a gateway into the best primary schools - which in turn, parents believe, pave the way to the best secondary schools and universities.

So the most renowned of them can receive more than 1,000 applications for just a few dozen places. As a result, enterprising tuition companies are now offering interview training for toddlers.

At interview class, Yoyo is asked to greet the tutor and introduce herself. The tutor then asks her to complete a number of tasks, including building a house with bricks, drawing a picture, sticking two felt eyes in the right position on a felt face, and identifying pieces of fruit.

A little shy to begin with, Yoyo quickly warms up and appears to enjoy the tasks and playing with the toys.

"These classes and interviews can be hard work," says her mother, Emma. "But I do want her to be prepared. Most parents want their child to have a good start."

One nursery Emma is keen on had more than 100 interviewees for just nine places, so she'll do whatever she can to increase her daughter's chances of success.

Yoyo's younger brother, still a baby, will begin interview classes in a few months, she says - when he's about eight months old.

At one tuition company, the Hong Kong Young Talents Association (HKYTA), a series of 12 training sessions costs HK$4,480 ($580; £390) - that's nearly a quarter of the median monthly household income.

"We try to teach children through musical activities, while adapting the activities to what the interviews will cover," HKYTA tutor Teresa Fahy says.

But to make things more complicated - and more nerve-wracking for parents - different nurseries and kindergartens are looking for different things.

It's common for the interviewers to observe how children play with toys. This gives an idea of their fine motor skills, and how they interact with other children.

How they take part in group activities such as singing or moving to music will also be carefully examined. And interviewers will talk to the children to see how well they express themselves, and whether they make eye contact.

Some, but not all, will also ask children to identify colours or shapes, or to explain scenes in a picture book.

"Interview questions are getting harder and harder," says Fahy. "Kindergartens may ask children complex questions like, 'What are your eyes for?' or 'What type of egg is this?'

"They may also test a child's manners by offering them sweets at the end of the interview. The child has to take one and say, 'Thank you'. Taking too many sweets is seen as greedy, while declining the sweets is considered impolite."

Many parents focus on teaching their child how to name colours and objects - but some interviewers may not be impressed by this.

"I'm not looking for that kind of knowledge, these are things that we'll teach after they've started with us," says one teacher at a renowned bilingual kindergarten, who I will call Jenny (she asked to remain anonymous).

In fact, though the parents may not realise it, many interviewers watch the parents more closely than the child, Jenny suggests.

"You want to know what kind of parents you're working with. If the parents are very pushy, it's automatically a No from me," she says.

And if parents bring in a portfolio listing the playgroups and classes their toddler has attended, and the places they have been on holiday - as some do - she doesn't look at it.

Interview classes for toddlers may be helpful, according to another pre-school teacher, if they may make the child less nervous on the big day.

But Leung Wai-fan, principal of King Shing Kindergarten, says it can be obvious when a child has been coached.

"We can tell if a child is natural or not. It's easy to teach a child what to say, but they won't necessarily understand what they're saying.

"A child may have learned to recite a certain line - but if you ask them about something else, they suddenly become shy."

Confident children, who answer questions put to them, will generally score more highly. Being shy is a disadvantage, even at one-and-a-half.

**Secrets of toddler success**

"It's best to teach children colours by incorporating it into their play - for example, I use a sock puppet called Mr Red." - Fanny Yee, founder Fanny's Workshops

"My advice to parents is to play with their children, and encourage them to speak to lots of different people, so they're used to interacting with others." - A teacher at a prestigious kindergarten.

Leung knows very well the lengths parents will go to in the hope of securing a kindergarten place. Her school caught the attention of the media last year after some waited outside for two nights to ensure they were first in line for an application form.

She worries that early education has become too commercial, and too demanding - and she looks on uneasily as parents enrol pre-school children in English or Mandarin language classes, pushing them hard to excel.

"That's not how children learn," she says. "We try to tell parents that education should be life-long, not just functional."

It is a view shared by Dr Lam Ho Cheong, assistant professor in early childhood education at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. "On the one hand, you need to develop their ability - on the other hand, you want them to have an interest in learning," he says.

"If you push them too hard when they are young, you could risk losing their interest. For example, the reading skills of Hong Kong children are high compared to other countries - but interest in reading is low."

Some teachers argue that, instead of enrolling their toddlers in classes, parents should simply spend more time with their children.

"I think it's best for parents to spend more time playing with and reading to their children at home," Jenny says.

"I wouldn't suggest parents overload their children with interview classes, because I think how a child feels on the day of the interview can override all the training they've had."

But this year nursery entrance will be particularly tough. More children than usual were born in 2012-2013 because it was the year of the dragon, which is considered to be auspicious. For Hong Kong's dragon children, this is their first big challenge.