CAREER KIT

Preschool Teacher Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become a Preschool Teacher

2026-10 edition

Inside: at-a-glance summary · step-by-step path · costs & requirements · 90-day action plan · documents checklist · exams · interview questions · resume bullets · common mistakes · 13-week tracker · resources

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SECTION 1

At a glance

Requirements depend on where you want to teach. Many private child care centers hire preschool teachers with a high school diploma plus a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or some early childhood coursework; Head Start requires at least an associate degree; and public school pre-K usually requires a bachelor's degree and a state early childhood teaching license. You can be working in a classroom within months while you build toward higher credentials.

Timeline	3 months–4 years (CDA in months; associate 2 years; bachelor's 4 years)
Typical cost	$500–$60,000+ depending on credential (CDA is the cheapest route)
Education	High school diploma plus CDA or early childhood coursework; associate degree typical; bachelor's for public pre-K
License	Varies by setting and state: none or CDA for many centers; state teaching license for public school pre-K
Median pay	$38,140 per year ($18.34 per hour)
Job outlook	+4% (2025–35), about as fast as average; about 66,700 openings a year

SECTION 2

Step-by-step path

1. Decide where you want to teach

Time: 1 week

Requirements are very different across settings. Private child care centers follow state child care licensing rules, which often set low minimums for lead teachers. Head Start has federal education requirements. Public school pre-K programs usually require a bachelor's degree and a state teaching license covering early childhood. Pick your target setting first so you train for the right credential.

2. Look up your state's rules

Time: 1 week

Your state child care licensing agency sets qualifications for teachers in licensed centers, and your state department of education sets rules for public pre-K. Some states require a specific credential, a set number of early childhood college credits, or prior child care experience. Write down exactly what a lead teacher needs in your state.

3. Get hands-on experience with young children

Time: 3–12 months (can overlap with training)

Many preschool teachers start as assistant teachers, aides, or child care workers. Experience counts toward credentials: the CDA requires 480 hours of work with children in the setting you apply for. Paid jobs at centers often have few entry requirements beyond a background check and health and safety training.

4. Earn a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential

Time: 3–12 months · Cost: $525 assessment fee online, plus training costs

The CDA, awarded by the Council for Professional Recognition, is the most widely recognized entry-level early childhood credential. For the Preschool CDA you need a high school diploma or GED (or enrollment in a high school early childhood program), 120 hours of early childhood training with at least 10 hours in each of eight subject areas, and 480 hours of work with children ages 3–5 within 3 years of applying. You then build a professional portfolio, pass the CDA exam at a Pearson VUE center, and complete a verification visit.

5. Earn an associate or bachelor's degree in early childhood education

Time: 2–4 years · Cost: $3,000–$60,000+ total tuition

An associate degree in early childhood education is the typical entry-level education BLS lists and meets the minimum for Head Start teachers. A bachelor's degree opens public school pre-K jobs and lead roles; Head Start must have at least half of its preschool teachers nationwide with a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or a related field. Some community colleges award college credit for a completed CDA; ask before you enroll.

6. Get a state teaching license if you want public pre-K

Time: 1–2 years beyond the degree if not built in · Cost: $130–$400 in exam and license fees

Public school preschool teachers must be licensed to teach early childhood education, often covering preschool through grade 3. Requirements vary by state but generally include a bachelor's degree, a state-approved preparation program with student teaching, and passing exams such as the Praxis Early Childhood Education (5025) test in states that use it.

7. Apply for preschool teacher jobs

Time: 2–8 weeks

Look at child care centers, faith-based preschools, Head Start and Early Head Start programs, public school pre-K, and university lab schools. Bring your CDA or transcripts, proof of background clearance, CPR and first aid certificates, and a short portfolio of activities you have planned. Programs accredited by NAEYC often have stronger staff qualification standards and can be good places to grow.

8. Keep your credentials current

Time: Ongoing

A CDA is valid for 3 years and must be renewed before it expires; the renewal fee is $250. Most states require annual training hours for child care staff and continuing education for licensed teachers. Moving from CDA to associate to bachelor's degree is the main path to higher pay.

SECTION 3

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
CDA assessment fee (online application)	$525	$525	Council for Professional Recognition fee for the Preschool CDA; covers exam and verification visit
CDA 120-hour training	$0	$1,500	Typical range, varies by provider/state; some employers and state scholarship programs pay for it
Associate degree in early childhood education	$3,000	$20,000	Typical range, varies by school/state; in-district community college is the low end
Bachelor's degree in early childhood education	$15,000	$60,000	Typical range, varies by school/state; total tuition at public universities
Praxis Early Childhood Education (5025)	$130	$130	ETS fee; only needed in states that use this test for licensure
CPR and pediatric first aid certification	$50	$150	Typical range, varies by provider
Background check and fingerprinting	$0	$100	Typical range, varies by state; employers often pay
CDA renewal (every 3 years)	$250	$250	Council renewal fee
Total	**$18,955**	**$82,655**	

Requirements

Education	Varies by setting. Many licensed centers accept a high school diploma plus a CDA or early childhood coursework. BLS lists an associate degree as typical entry-level education. Public schools generally require a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or a related field.
Head Start	Head Start center-based teachers must have at least an associate degree, and at least 50% of Head Start preschool teachers nationwide must have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or a related field.
License or credential	Public school preschool teachers need a state early childhood teaching license. Some states require a professional credential such as the CDA for lead teachers in centers. Requirements vary by state.
Background check	Child care and school employees must clear criminal background checks, usually fingerprint-based, plus child abuse registry checks in many states.
Health and safety training	Licensed programs typically require CPR and pediatric first aid, plus state-mandated health and safety training. Some also require a TB test or physical.
Experience	A few states require prior child care experience for lead teachers. The CDA requires 480 hours of work with children in your credential setting.
Skills	Patience, creativity, physical stamina, clear communication with families, and knowledge of how young children learn through play.

SECTION 4

90-Day Action Plan

Tick each box as you finish the task. Do the phases in order; it is fine if a phase takes a little longer.

Phase 1: Get into a classroom

Days 1–30

Goal: Learn your state's rules and start earning experience hours.

- ☐ Look up your state child care licensing rules for lead and assistant teachers
- ☐ Decide on your target setting: private center, Head Start, or public pre-K
- ☐ Apply for assistant teacher or aide jobs at 5–10 local centers
- ☐ Complete CPR and pediatric first aid certification
- ☐ Start fingerprinting and background clearance
- ☐ Start a log of hours worked with children ages 3–5

Phase 2: Start your CDA

Days 31–60

Goal: Begin the 120 training hours and build your portfolio.

- ☐ Choose a CDA training provider and ask your employer or state about scholarships
- ☐ Buy or download the Preschool CDA Competency Standards book
- ☐ Complete at least 40 training hours across the eight subject areas
- ☐ Start collecting portfolio items: resource collection, reflective statements, family questionnaires
- ☐ Ask your director to observe you and give feedback
- ☐ Plan and document three play-based activities you led

Phase 3: Finish credentials and move up

Days 61–90

Goal: Get on track to apply for the CDA and a lead teacher role.

- [ ] Finish your training hours and confirm your 480 experience hours
- [ ] Submit your CDA application and pay the assessment fee
- [ ] Schedule the CDA exam at Pearson VUE when you receive approval
- [ ] Talk to a community college about credit for your CDA toward an associate degree
- [ ] Update your resume with your training, hours, and activities
- [ ] Apply for lead teacher roles and practice the interview questions in this kit

SECTION 5

Documents checklist

Gather these early. Keep originals in one folder and scans in the cloud.

- ☐ High school diploma or GED
- ☐ College transcripts (if any)
- ☐ CDA training certificates or transcripts showing 120 hours
- ☐ Log of experience hours signed by your supervisor
- ☐ CDA professional portfolio
- ☐ CPR and pediatric first aid cards
- ☐ Background check and fingerprint clearance
- ☐ TB test or health statement if required by your state
- ☐ Resume and two or three references
- ☐ Government-issued photo ID

SECTION 6

Exams & how to prepare

CDA Exam (Council for Professional Recognition)

What it is: Computer-based multiple-choice exam taken at a Pearson VUE testing center after your CDA application is approved. It is one part of the CDA assessment, alongside your professional portfolio and a verification visit by a CDA Professional Development Specialist.

How to prepare: Review the CDA Competency Standards book for your setting (the Preschool edition) and your 120 hours of training; 2–4 weeks.

Praxis Early Childhood Education (5025)

What it is: ETS test of early childhood content and teaching knowledge, used by some states for public school early childhood licensure. Fee is $130 and testing time is 2 hours.

How to prepare: 4–8 weeks using the ETS study companion and a practice test.

State early childhood licensing exams

What it is: States that do not use Praxis have their own early childhood or PreK–3 tests. Only required for public school licensure.

How to prepare: Use your state's official test preparation guide.

SECTION 7

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to work with preschool children?

Tip: Share a specific experience and show you understand how much young children learn through play.

2. What does a good day in a preschool classroom look like to you?

Tip: Walk through a daily routine: arrival, circle time, centers, outdoor play, meals, rest, and transitions.

3. How do you handle a child who bites or hits?

Tip: Describe keeping everyone safe first, calm redirection, teaching words for feelings, and telling families the same day.

4. How do you support a child crying at drop-off?

Tip: Mention a consistent goodbye routine, comfort, and partnering with the parent.

5. How do you plan activities for children at different developmental levels?

Tip: Explain observing children and offering open-ended materials with easier and harder options.

6. How do you communicate with families?

Tip: Daily notes or an app, short positive messages, and calm conversations about concerns.

7. What would you do if you suspected a child was being abused?

Tip: Say you are a mandated reporter and would follow the program's reporting procedure and state law.

8. How do you keep children safe during transitions and outdoor play?

Tip: Talk about head counts, positioning, and active supervision.

9. How do you include a child with special needs?

Tip: Mention working with the family and any early intervention or IEP team, and adapting activities.

10. How do you build early literacy and math skills?

Tip: Give examples: read-alouds, rhymes, counting during play, and sorting games.

11. Tell us about a conflict with a coworker and how you handled it.

Tip: Show you raised it privately, listened, and focused on the children.

12. What are your plans for further education?

Tip: Mention your CDA timeline or degree plans; programs value teachers who will grow.

SECTION 8

Resume bullet examples

Adapt these to what you actually did. Use numbers wherever you can.

- Supported a lead teacher in a licensed classroom of 16 children ages 3–4
- Planned and led daily circle time, read-alouds, and small-group art and science activities
- Completed 120 hours of CDA training across all eight CDA subject areas
- Logged 480+ hours of work with preschool children toward the CDA credential
- Maintained required staff-to-child ratios and completed daily health and safety checks
- Wrote daily notes to families and helped prepare for parent-teacher conferences
- Observed and documented child development using the program's assessment tool
- Holds current CPR and pediatric first aid certification

SECTION 9

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Paying for a degree before checking what your target setting and state actually require
2. Taking CDA training from a provider the Council does not accept, such as an individual consultant or a conference
3. Letting your 480 experience hours fall outside the 3-year window
4. Letting your CDA expire instead of renewing it before the 3-year deadline
5. Not keeping signed records of training and experience hours
6. Ignoring employer and state scholarships that pay for CDA training or degrees
7. Assuming a center job and a public pre-K job have the same requirements

SECTION 10

13-week progress tracker

Fill this in by hand each week.

Week	Focus	Done?	Notes
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			

SECTION 11

Resources, salary & disclaimer

Resources

- **Council for Professional Recognition (CDA)**

https://www.cdacouncil.org/en/educator-pathways/preschool/

- **NAEYC: National Association for the Education of Young Children**

https://www.naeyc.org

- **ETS Praxis: Early Childhood Education (5025)**

https://praxis.ets.org/test/5025.html

- **BLS: Preschool Teachers**

https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/preschool-teachers.htm

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Less than $28,990	**$38,140 per year ($18.34 per hour)**	More than $61,390

Outlook: BLS projects 4% employment growth from 2025 to 2035, about as fast as the average for all occupations, with about 66,700 openings each year, mostly to replace workers who leave the occupation. There were about 583,200 preschool teacher jobs in 2025. Public school pre-K teachers with a state license generally earn more than teachers in private child care centers.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, May 2025 wage data; projections 2025–35 — https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/preschool-teachers.htm

Disclaimer. Requirements vary by state and change over time. Verify with the official sources listed. This guide is not legal or career advice.