

India's pre-school isn't child's

VARUN Bhartiya was confident that he had answered every question correctly for his school admissions interview. He had practised for weeks: He knew his name, his father's job, his mother's job.

So his mother was stunned when the prestigious private New Delhi school sent its icy rejection, declaring. "Your child was unable to perform according to the level of the school. Please do not make any further inquiries."

Varun, at the age of three, had flunked his nursery-school entrance test, his first academic setback in a viciously competitive education system.

In India, where the world's fastest-growing middle class is undergoing profound changes in its professional and social expectations, toddler stress has become the latest manifestation of the frenetic race to get ahead.

Parents are imposing unprecedented demands on their children to jump-start their education at earlier ages, hoping to help the youngsters cash in on lucrative futures in the country's newly liberalised marketplace.

"The middle class's aspirations are growing so rapidly they have realised that the only real ladder to rising economically and socially is through education," said Shakti Sinha, director of education for the New Delhi city schools.

Overachieving parents now begin grooming children as young as two-and-a-half for the battery of entrance interviews for admission to the city's most elite private nursery schools.

Once a child is in school, the stress only increases. A recent government-sponsored study found that 86% of private schools surveyed assigned an average of four to 11 books to toddlers between

the ages of two and three.

As the youngsters reach first and second grade, they will tote a 9-pound load of books between school and home each day.

The trend has so alarmed the country's educators that the government next year will increase age limits on children entering nurseries and pre-schools.

Last fall the government recommended — but did not mandate — elimination of entrance tests for pre-schoolers, less stringent classroom schedules for toddlers and limits on the book-loads youngsters should carry home each day.

The middle-class hunger for better education also is fuelling an explosion in the number of private schools in a country where many parents are frustrated with government-funded schools' overcrowded classrooms, absentee teachers and poor curricula.

In the last decade the number of private schools in New Delhi has doubled to some 600 — about 40% of the total schools in the city, according to government officials.

But educators worry that while the middle class, which can afford private tuition, buys better education for its children, most Indian youngsters are subjected to government schools that are underfunded and overburdened by burgeoning student population.

Today India has the largest population of illiterates in the world, and nearly half the country's children between six and 14 do not go

to school at all, according to U.N. statistics.

But in the middle class, which includes anywhere from 150 million to 250 million of India's 900 million people, elite schooling is also taking on Western overtones as a measure of family social status.

Many teachers and psychologists say parents use their children's educational achievements as a way to further their own ambitions.

"For a society in transition, the school your child gets into is often a place for picking up the right contacts to gain entry into the right circles," said Avdesh Sharma, a New Delhi psychiatrist who has specialised in counseling the increasingly anxiety-ridden urban middle class.

In October, across New Delhi and other major Indian cities, parents began the marathon process of applying to pre-schools, with some moms and dads sending applications to as many as 20 schools. At many of the schools, 800 youngsters vied for as few as 60 nursery-school seats.

Parents hope their children are selected for the round of interviews that begin in December for the next academic year. The interview process can be gruelling and humiliating for both child and parent.

"One little boy just would not enter the room," said Vibha Kapoor, who has taught primary classes as one of New Delhi's best pri-

rivalry lay

vate schools for nine years and now sits on one nursery school's admissions board."He started crying and shouting he was so terrified. But the sorriest sight was the parents who insisted on pushing him inside, and the school attendant who kept pulling him. He was kicking and screaming, trying to resist both parties."

Kapoor has also watched countless fights between parents outraged over the tantrums of their recalcitrant offspring. "Parents immediately start blaming each other and fight right there in the room," she said.

"Why did you not prepare the child properly?" the father would ask the mother, and she would retort, "Well, what have you done yourself?" Once, in front of my own eyes, the man slapped his wife. That's how tense the parents get."

Rashmi Bhartiya, 29, mother of three-year-old Varun, was appalled by her first interview experience at Delhi's Green Fields School. "Children were crying, they refused to go into the rooms, the parents started slapping their children when they misbehaved," Bhartiya said. "I just prayed that Varun would behave well."

The interview began easily enough. Varun marched into the room and sailed through his first three animal identifications. When he misidentified a tiger as a lion, the teacher barked, "No, it is not a lion. You don't know what it is."

The boy was so put off that he

refused to recite a nursery rhyme for the teacher and stalked out of the room.

But children are not judged on performance alone.

Four-year-old Namita was refused admission to two popular private nursery schools last year because the psychological profiles of her parents came up short. Mohita Mitla, Namita's mother, and her husband, who is an accountant, were given questionnaires and sent to separate rooms to write down their answers.

"The questions had to do with what we as parents would do if the child comes home and says the teacher at school scolded him," said Mitla, 26, who added that she also was interrogated about the role of a mother in a child's life.

Child psychologists say their business rms picked up as a result of the mental and physical stress placed on more children at younger ages.

"There is a notion that the child who starts earlier would be a winner later," said psychiatrist Sharrria. "But in psychoanalysis, we see the consequences. Children become cranky, have stomach aches, school phobia, school refusal. The child is forced to do things that are against the maturation process, and they can't cope."

During a seminar on pre-school education for New Delhi principals, pediatrician Anil Gulati painted a grim picture of a pre-schooler's typical day.

The schedule, Gulati wrote, begins at 6:30 am, when the child is roused from bed: "Gets ready, no time for potty, no time for breakfast, pushed into bus or rickshaw, travels through polluted roads and comes home at 2:30 pm."

The toddler then "has lunch, sits for homework, no play, has dinner watches television and goes off sleep." — *Guardian Weekly*, 8 Jan 1995.