

An Introduction to Montessori Preschools



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The Montessori Mystique

Montessori education is over 100 years old, used all over the world, and recognized as a foundation of contemporary early childhood education. Yet it remains shrouded in mystery. What *is* the Montessori Method? What *exactly* goes on in those classrooms?

Some hear rumors that Montessori preschools are overly strict and rigid—while others hear that Montessori classrooms are too open and permissive. Information can be confusing, conflicting and (frankly) inaccurate.

“Montessori” refers to a model or style of education named after its creator, Maria Montessori. Montessori schools are simply schools that use the equipment, teaching approach and classroom structure Dr. Montessori first wrote about more than 100 years ago.

There is no single governing association to which Montessori schools belong. No single set of rules that all must follow. Montessori schools are not franchises or branches of a larger organization. No two Montessori schools are exactly alike. There are, however, a set of critically important features that characterize all quality Montessori programs:

Features of a Quality Montessori Program:

Montessori Schools Follow the Philosophy of Child Development Articulated by Maria Montessori.

Children learn in a mixed-age environment representing a 3-year age spread.

Programs are lead by certified Montessori-trained adults.

Classrooms are child-centered, not teacher-centered. Emphasis is on individual learning, not group learning.

Teachers create a prepared learning environment, facilitate access to the materials, and record observations about each child’s development.

Montessori schools provide children with a full range of proven, tested materials in four primary areas: language, math, practical life, and sensorial.

The classrooms are clean, uncluttered and well-organized. Children have unfettered access to the materials.

Classrooms are filled with happy, kind children who are busily engaged in self-chosen activities. Classrooms are calm and peaceful.



Quality Montessori schools are places where children are respected, nurtured and cared for, and family communication is highly valued.



The Montessori Philosophy of Child Development

While Dr. Montessori's theory of child development is the topic of entire books, the basic concepts can be summed up as follows:

From birth to age six, children learn in a highly unique way. Unlike adults, children effortlessly “absorb” information through experiences.

Their absorbent minds naturally incorporate experiences directly into their characters and personalities for life.

During the first six years, children have natural inner directives that guide normal development. They inherently know what they need to learn and when they are ready to learn it.

During this time period, they learn primarily through their senses and are naturally wired to acquire language and develop mental order.

Young children have a love of order and purposeful activity. They want to be valued, competent contributors.

The desire to be independent is the single greatest drive of a young child. “Let me do it myself!”

Young children develop best when given freedom of choice within a structured, prepared environment that allows them to follow their inner learning drives.



Children have the ability, over time, to profoundly shift their “fundamental being” from inattentive and disordered to focused, calm and peaceful. They acquire this self-discipline and independence through deep concentration on a physical activity of the child’s own choice. (This process was given the unfortunate term “normalization”—one that carries pejorative today that it lacked 100 years ago.)

The greatest impediments to child development during this phase are adults. Dr. Montessori liked to say, “Leave the child alone!”



The Curriculum

The primary Montessori curriculum (ages 2.5-6) is divided into four main areas and several secondary areas.

1. PRACTICAL LIFE WORK (a.k.a. Everyday Living Skills)
2. SENSORIAL EXPLORATION
3. LANGUAGE ARTS
4. MATH

Most Montessori preschools also cover the following secondary areas:

- GEOGRAPHY
- WORLD CULTURES
- SCIENCE

It is common to see the following enrichment subjects offered:

- MUSIC
- ART
- A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

At some Montessori preschools, you may also find:

- COMPUTER PROGRAMS
- YOGA
- SUZUKI
- THEATER
- COOKING

Enrichment programs may be offered as part of the standard curriculum, but are more frequently offered as optional after-school programs for an additional fee.



The Practical Life Curriculum

Sometimes referred to as “everyday living exercises,” these materials and activities capitalize on a young child’s natural desire to learn real-life skills and to become a capable, independent community member. In fact, Dr. Montessori believed that the desire for independence is the single greatest drive of a young child.

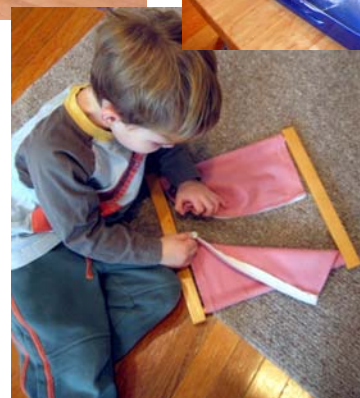
By giving children experiences with real-life materials, we help them gain skills and confidence that eventually blossom into pride and self-worth. Even small children can learn to pour their own water and zip their own

coats. At first, water slops all over the floor and coats go on backwards. But given the opportunity to try and try again, children eventually master these basics and beam with pride!



Montessori classrooms are stocked with fine motor activities that teach practical skills. Shelves are often lined with small activity-filled trays. One tray may hold a pouring exercise in which a child pours water through a funnel into a set of test tubes. Another tray may hold a marble transferring game in which a child learns to use a set of tongs to transfer marbles onto a decorative grid. Other trays may hold materials that offer the chance to spoon grains, use a turkey baster, assemble a flashlight, use clothespins, serve tea, tie a bow, weave a mat, button a shirt, use a screwdriver, clean a mirror, use chopsticks, squeeze an eye dropper, or gently clean the leaves of a plant. The list is nearly endless!

These fine motor activities not only teach real life skills, they also prepare children for writing. They strengthen pincer grasp, build hand muscles and hone hand-eye coordination needed for handwriting.



In addition to fine motor skills, children have access to large motor activities: sweeping, mopping, dusting, folding laundry, vacuuming, washing surfaces, preparing snacks and setting tables (all using safe, child-friendly materials).





Social Skills:

Learning to work and play together in a community is a goal of any preschool and a critical life skill. Montessori schools strive to be close-knit communities where people work and learn together in an atmosphere of warmth, safety and kindness.

Daily courtesy lessons offer children the skills to interact in mutually respectful ways. Children learn how to shake hands, respect others' work, graciously decline an invitation, politely interrupt a conversation (when necessary), wait patiently, work quietly, take turns speaking, and share materials. Life skills that also fall within this category include learning to answer a telephone, extend an invitation, and sneeze and cough politely (and safely!).

Conflict resolution is one of the most important life skills practiced at this level. Montessori schools employ a social competency curriculum that uses tools and strategies to help children resolve conflicts. Many Montessori schools use a "peace table" where children are encouraged to go when they are at odds about something. Others use a "peace rose" to help children take turns speaking and listening. Teachers offer a process in which each participant can be heard and a solution or compromise reached. Children begin to understand that it is necessary to use honest communication, receptive listening skills, patience, and good will to resolve problems productively.

The Sensorial Curriculum

Dr. Montessori was one of the first educators to observe what modern neuroscience empirically shows: young children learn through their senses. From birth, children absorb information through touching, tasting, smelling, listening and seeing the world around them. A young child's senses are more highly attuned to detail than are an adult's—she can sense subtle differences in texture, flavor, scent, weight, pressure or temperature that escape the notice of most grown-ups.

In response to this observation, Dr. Montessori created a series of sensory learning materials that form the core of all Montessori classrooms to this day. Each set of materials isolates a single sensory experience, offering an engaging puzzle-like activity.

Sensorial materials are colorful, fun and inviting. Children spend hours absorbed in stimulating interactions with all kinds of materials that can truly be appreciated only by visiting a Montessori classroom.





The Language Curriculum

Exposure to reading and writing skills should happen as soon as a child expresses interest—usually around age 3. The challenge is offering information and materials that are developmentally appropriate. To this end, Dr. Montessori created tools to allow early readers to take off as soon as they express interest.

Montessori language programs are primarily phonics-based: reading is taught through the introduction of individual letter sounds that are later combined to make words. Letters are not referred to by their names—instead, we refer to letters by the sounds they make. This eliminates the confusion that occurs when the name of a letter differs from the letter's sound. Our alphabet is “ahh, bah, kuh, dah, eh, fah, gah...!”

Because children love hands-on activities, the room is usually filled with “language objects.” These 3D miniatures are used for all kinds of sound games. When children are beginning to learn letter sounds, the objects can be grouped and sorted according to initial or final sounds. Blends (e.g., “br,” “fl” or “st”) and digraphs (“ch—,” “th—,” and “sh—”) are also taught by matching objects to these letter combinations.

Once a child masters each letter's sound, he or she is ready to begin making—or “encoding”—words. (Too often, reading programs skip this important step by rushing a child onto the more difficult task of reading—or “decoding”—printed words.) To this end, Montessori classrooms are stocked with a variety of “moveable alphabets.” These collections of wooden letters (sorted into boxed kits), give little hands an easy way to make words and express ideas when they aren't yet ready to control a pencil.

Vocabulary

Because young minds work like sponges, Montessori classrooms are “vocabulary rich.” When teaching the names of shapes, for instance, Montessori teachers don't stop at *circle*, *square* and *triangle*. We identify shapes such as *quatrefoils*, *polygons*, *ellipses*, *curvilinear triangles* and *trapezoids*. New vocabulary is absorbed through puzzles, games, art and picture matching. Vocabulary that seems a bit difficult for an adult to acquire is actually quite easy for a child to acquire!

The Math Curriculum



Two and three-year-olds indirectly explore math concepts through sensorial experiences such as matching, sorting, forming patterns and building shapes.



Around age four, a mathematical “awakening” occurs when a child begins to ask questions about quantity. “How much is this?” “How many may I have?” When a child reaches this developmental milestone, he or she is ready to begin the true math curriculum.

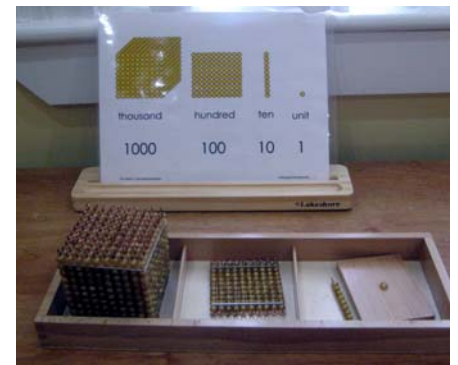


Children who are taught math through rote memorization of facts often struggle when asked to translate concepts into everyday life. Dr. Montessori addressed this issue by creating

a set of hands-on materials that make abstract concepts concrete and accessible to young children. Preschool children in Montessori classrooms are given fun, engaging opportunities to literally see, touch and experience what is going on behind mathematical processes.



Dr. Montessori observed that once a child can count from 1-9, she can just as easily count from 10-90 (by tens), 100-900 (by 100s) and 1,000-9,000 (by 1,000s). To this end, she created the Golden Bead Materials and corresponding Numeral Cards that give young children an opportunity to work with and understand our base-ten system. For example, the “Bank Game” is played in which children learn how to trade ten “unit” beads for a single “ten-bead bar.”



She also developed ingenious tools that give very young children concrete experiences with the processes of squaring, cubing, multiplying, dividing, adding and subtracting numbers. It seems hard to believe that a 5-year-old can square the number 7 or calculate $4,123 + 2,074$. Spend five minutes in a Montessori classroom exploring the math materials, however, and you’ll understand just how easy and fun it can be.

Montessori preschoolers are never given direct instruction of math facts. You won’t meet a young Montessori graduate who can recite multiplication tables or squaring facts. (At least I’ve never met one!) Instead, graduates have played with squaring and cubing chains, binomial cubes and decimal system beads enough to absorb the concepts—so when squaring, cubing and other abstract concepts are introduced at a later time in their lives, they have a concrete frame of reference.



The Enrichment Curriculum

Geography

Through songs, puzzles, pictures, stories, and hand-on activities with physical models, children learn about the earth. At the preschool level, emphasis is placed on the world's continents and basic land and water forms.

Nearly all Montessori primary classrooms are stocked with “Puzzle Maps”—a set of carefully crafted wooden puzzles that offer children fun, engaging ways to become familiar with world geography. Basic land and water forms—like islands, gulfs, capes, bays, and peninsulas—are introduced through puzzles, photographs and physical models. Children especially love pouring water into the 3D land and water models!



World Cultures

Dr. Montessori lived through two world wars. These experiences influenced her work, leading her to believe that early education had a significant role to play in world peace. To that end, she advocated a curriculum rich in lessons of cultural diversity. In the majority of Montessori classrooms, children learn about world cultures by sampling a large selection of diverse holidays. It is not unusual for a group of preschoolers to learn about Ramadan, Diwali, Thanksgiving, Rosh Hashanah, Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, Chinese New Year, Los Posadas, Easter, and Cinco de Mayo...just to name a few. Parents are often asked to volunteer in planning celebrations and projects that reflect their families' heritages. Most Montessori classrooms have a miniature set of world flags that help children make a connection to the places they are learning about in geography and the people they are meeting in their world culture experiences.



Science

Like a children's museum, most Montessori preschools are stocked with dozens of hands-on science activities appropriate for children ages 3-6. Science units at this level usually include the study of plants, animals, rocks, water, magnetism, color & light, and the solar system.



Music

Music plays a special role in Montessori education. Song is integrated throughout the curriculum. Children often learn vocabulary—like the names of the continents—through song. The content of the music curriculum varies widely from school to school. Many schools engage in a lot of group singing. Others place more emphasis on listening skills, rhythm, movement, sound games, and exploration of sound (vibration).



Art

Art is used throughout the Montessori curriculum. For instance, when learning letter sounds, children often choose to make beautifully decorated "sound books" that illustrate the sounds of the letters. As children work with the math materials, they may choose to create counting books using stamps, stickers or hand drawn illustrations. Geography, world cultures, and science activities often involve art projects. The list goes on and on.

Some Montessori schools choose to offer activities and lessons in art appreciation. Reproductions of classic paintings may adorn the walls, children may hear stories of famous artists and the sensorial area may include opportunities to match and sort miniature reproductions of famous artworks.



whether children have the opportunity to use art materials in creative, open-ended ways. The answer varies from school to school. In my opinion, structured art projects are a wonderful way to support learning in other areas of the curriculum—however, it is equally important for children to have the opportunity to work in an open-ended, creative fashion with a variety of art materials. Many Montessori schools have art centers where paint, glue, paper, colored pencils, markers and a variety of other materials are available for open-ended use.



Foreign Languages

Many Montessori preschools provide foreign language study. Some integrate it into the general curriculum. Others offer language study as an enrichment option for an addition fee.

Teacher Training

Because there is no single governing body that regulates Montessori schools, it is important to ask each school about the training of its teachers. Most Montessori schools require their teachers to hold teaching certificates from specific Montessori teacher training centers. There are several excellent teacher-training programs throughout the world including Association Montessori Internationale (AMI), American Montessori Society (AMS), The Pan American Montessori Society, and the North American Montessori Center (NAMC).

Montessori teacher training programs generally take a full year of study and often require practical work in the field. Many Montessori teachers hold undergraduate and/or graduate degrees in education. Just as often, however, teachers come to the profession after working in other fields. It is not uncommon for parents of Montessori students to seek teacher training after watching their own children blossom in a Montessori classroom.



Frequently Asked Questions

How did Montessori begin?

The method is named for its creator, Dr. Maria Montessori. Born in Ancona, Italy in 1870, Maria was the first Italian woman to earn a medical degree. After several years of practicing medicine and teaching at the University of Rome, Dr. Montessori found her calling in the field of education. Through years of observation and research in human development, education and anthropology, Dr. Montessori developed the ideas and materials that form the educational method that still bears her name.



In 1906, Dr. Montessori gave up her prestigious academic career to put her methodology into practice. She accepted a position as the chief medical officer of a revolutionary urban renewal project in Rome's poorest slum, San Lorenzo. Its children—left on the streets alone while their parents worked long hours—were typically malnourished, ill and illiterate. Using both public and private resource, Dr. Montessori created the now famous Casa dei Bambini ("The Children's House") where Rome's most vulnerable children were cared for and educated.

To the surprise of many, these neglected children flourished physically, socially and academically. As word of success spread, the Montessori method was adopted across Europe and embraced by all socioeconomic groups. Since opening The Children's House in 1907, Dr. Montessori's theories and materials have stood the test of time and earned three Nobel Prize nominations. Today there are over 4,000 Montessori schools in the United States and thousands more in countries all over the world.

How are Montessori preschools different from traditional preschools?

1. Montessori schools mix age groups—traditional preschools generally place children in same-age classes.
2. In Montessori schools, children usually remain with the same group of teachers and in the same classroom for up to three years—in traditional preschools, children usually transition to new classrooms and teachers each year.
3. Montessori preschool programs usually meet 5 days a week in order to create a consistent routine—traditional preschools rarely meet 5 days a week.
4. In traditional preschools, the teacher is the hub of the classroom. Information and feedback pass through her to the children. A Montessori teacher is not the center of the classroom—she is more like a guide. Children learn directly from using the materials. Montessori teachers give great thought and time to carefully preparing and structuring the space so that children can work independently in a constructive way. In addition, Montessori teachers briefly demonstrate new materials, observe children very closely (but unobtrusively), and track student progress.



5. In a Montessori school, students spend a significant amount of time working on individually selected materials at their own paces—in traditional preschools, the class spends significantly more time working as a group on a single project or activity.
6. The materials offered to children at Montessori preschools are considered advanced by traditional preschool standards—yet these materials are never introduced until a child shows curiosity and developmental readiness. Instilling a love for learning is by far the most important goal.
7. The Montessori preschool atmosphere is usually calm and quiet during work periods. Children are absorbed in their own work. This type of calm, quiet atmosphere happens less often when children participate in group activities in which they may become bored or frustrated.
8. The Montessori classroom is intentionally uncluttered and well-organized so that children feel a sense of control over and understanding of the space. Décor is generally neutral so as not to be distracting or overly stimulating. When possible, Montessori preschools resemble true “homes” or “children’s houses.”
9. Montessori classrooms usually have a marked circle on the floor and marked lines in the hallways to help children get organized during transition times.



How do Montessori schools differ from one another?

Like any preschool, a Montessori school is influenced by the personality, experience and approach of its director and teachers. Any educational model can be used in an overly restrictive fashion if implemented in a rigid way. And even the best Montessori materials can be ineffective if insufficient structure, guidance or direction is given. When selecting a school—Montessori or traditional—you should feel comfortable with the teachers. Look for the right “fit.”

Schools also differ in the balance of group learning to individual work time. The Montessori model emphasizes independent work time and individualized curriculum—quality Montessori programs will always have a long stretch of independent work time. Some schools will also have group learning times (like recess, snack or music time). Others will not.

For the most part, Montessori programs meet five days a week in order to create a regular schedule. Some schools offer a 3-day program for its youngest students, but usually require a 5-day schedule once a child turns four.

Other ways Montessori schools differ from one another include tuition, hours, after-school care, home/school communications, and parent education opportunities to name a few.





Are all of the materials in the classroom Montessori materials? What about toys, blocks, and other pretend materials?

The answer will vary from school to school. Most Montessori preschools begin the year with a selection of traditional toys, blocks, games and other “non-Montessori” items. As the Montessori materials are introduced, they slowly replace the toys on the shelves. Children are almost always more interested in the Montessori activities and quickly forget about the toys.



Some schools offer a limited supply of blocks, trains, doll houses, and building toys throughout the year during specific times during the day. For instance, a school may have a toy area that is offered during recess time on rainy days.

As a general rule, you won’t find “pretend” or “fantasy” toys in Montessori classrooms. Ask any three-year-old if he would like to pretend to vacuum a floor with a toy vacuum or use a real vacuum to clean crumbs! Pretend plastic teacups and make-believe cookies pale in comparison to china cups filled with water and real cookies they serve to their friends.



Keep in mind that the original Montessori materials were created 100 years ago. Many of these materials are just as valuable and engaging today as they were back then. Today’s child, however, is accustomed to a level of sensory input that was unimaginable 100 years ago. In addition, technology and other advances in education offer new materials that may be consistent with the method. Many schools choose to supplement the basic Montessori materials with newer items and technology. When visiting different schools, ask about the classroom materials.

Are Montessori schools structured or unstructured? I hear conflicting things.

When traditional educators call a program “structured,” they generally mean it is teacher-directed with planned group activities and a limited amount of choice. “Unstructured” programs are thought of as child-directed with a large amount of choice. This is, in my opinion, a flawed definition of “structured” because it suggests that choice and structure are mutually exclusive.



Montessori programs set boundaries and institute structures that help children acquire self-regulation skills. There is a structured set of rules around critical life skills like sharing resources, delaying gratification, managing frustration, negotiating conflict, and building relationships. Without boundaries and structure, children would not be able to work independently in a calm, peaceful manner typical of Montessori classrooms. Montessori might best be described as freedom of choice within structured boundaries.

Why do Montessori classes mix age groups?

In Massachusetts, Montessori preschools generally include children ages 2 years and 9 months through age 6 (i.e., inclusive of the kindergarten year.) Developmentally appropriate work is offered to all children. The group is never separated by age which yields the following benefits:

1. Students not only learn *with* each other, but *from* each other. Younger students experience the daily modeling of older peers who, in turn, blossom with the responsibilities of leadership.
2. Children move through the curriculum at their own paces. There is no pressure to keep up with or slow down for classmates.
3. Mixed age groups allow children to work with the same set of teachers for up to three years.
4. At the beginning of each school year, $\frac{2}{3}$ of the class is comprised of returning students. Only $\frac{1}{3}$ of the students are new each year which makes for much smoother yearly transitions.



I like the idea of a Montessori preschool, but I want my child to play, have fun and learn to socialize. Isn't that really the point of preschool, anyway?

Parents often mean different things when they use the word “socialize.” Some want their children to have a first experience separating from parents. Others want their children to “learn to play” well with peers. Still others simply want their children to have fun.

All are valid. Yet I believe it is a mistake to assume that children learn these social skills through large group play experiences alone. It's not enough to open the doors to the playground. Children need to take with them a framework of inner peace and respectful behaviors.

The Montessori curriculum places specific emphasis on teaching children *how* to negotiate social situations. Grace and courtesy lessons teach respect and kindness. Conflict resolution activities (like the peace table) help children practice this critical skill at an early age. Classrooms are organized to reduce competition and chaos. Children's work (and work space) is given a high level of respect by teachers and peers.



More importantly, Montessori schools are supportive environments that value individual differences and allow children to discover their own highest potential. As Dr. Montessori observed, children naturally want to feel useful and needed. When children see themselves as competent, valued people, they are better equipped to successfully negotiate the playground in a productive, peaceful way.

In 2006, the first empirical outcome study of Montessori preschoolers showed a significant positive impact on long term social behavior.¹ Specifically, Montessori education was associated with a higher level of

¹ A. Lillard and N. Else-Quest, *Evaluating Montessori Education*, Science 113 2362 (2006)

cooperative play, a lower level of ambiguous aggressive play, a positive sense of community and a higher concern for fairness and justice. (Interestingly, Montessori education was also associated with a higher level of writing creativity within the studied populations.)

Finally, Montessori classrooms take the concept of socialization one step further by helping children see themselves as citizens of the world. Activities, stories, games and materials that focus on geography and world cultures are integral to the curriculum.

As for playing and having fun, Montessori schools also have an advantage. Because children pursue their own interests, they naturally seek out materials and activities that bring them joy. Outdoor recess, snack time, field trips, family events, holiday celebrations and rainy day group activities give ample opportunities for traditional group fun.

Why do Montessori programs meet 5 days a week? Isn't that too much for young children?

Montessori teachers have known for years what current research shows: predictability and organization are important for young children. Having a regular, daily routine of attending school helps young children gain both.

A daily class schedule also gives children uninterrupted access to the classroom materials. During sensitive periods, children will be drawn to the same activity over and over until they have processed the experiences. Daily exposure satisfies this developmental need.

A five-day schedule also creates organization and predictability because the preschooler's schedule is in sync with that of older siblings and working parents. Monday through Friday we all go to work or school. On Saturdays and Sundays, we are together at home.

Keep in mind that most Montessori preschools offer half-day programs. Daily morning attendance by a three-year-old until 11:30 AM should not be overly taxing. It allows plenty of time for a child to join his family for lunch and play while still maintaining a nap or rest schedule.



Do Montessori schools have a religious affiliation?

No. The Montessori model is a secular model with no religious roots. The Montessori model, however, is used by some religious organizations for their own schools.



How do Montessori schools handle discipline and behavior issues?

In general, Montessori teachers look at discipline in terms of acquiring self-control. The very nature of the Montessori method promotes inner discipline as it inspires a love of learning and generates positive feelings of self-worth in each child.

Montessori schools typically have fewer behavior issues because students work individually and are permitted to select work that interests them. We rarely have the challenge of trying to keep the attention of 20 preschoolers focused on a single teacher for more than a few minutes at a time. (And let's face it...boredom is usually at the root of behavior issues!)

Finally, our mixed age grouping is conducive to good behavior. New students are helped by returning students to learn the ropes right from the start. Discipline develops naturally through the guidance of older students. The desire to imitate the positive behaviors of a five-year old is a strong influence on a three-year-old.

This is not to suggest that adult intervention is never needed. How the intervention is handled will vary from school to school. This is an important question to ask the director at each school you visit. Look for an overall tenor that is in keeping with your family's values. Trust your gut. If the school feels too strict or too permissive when you visit, you are probably right.

Is kindergarten part of the program?

The primary curriculum is designed to continue through age 6. Many parents choose to leave their children in a Montessori preschool for 3 full years. This important final year allows the child to complete the language and math curricula at which point his or her skills will likely far exceed the academic expectations set for kindergartens at local public schools.

That said, many school districts in our area have wonderful kindergarten programs. Assuming a child meets the age requirements of the town in which he or she lives, there is usually little reason to avoid a public school kindergarten experience. Montessori teachers are happy to suggest activities that can be done at home to encourage further independent work, if desired, once the child moves on.

In cases where a child's birthday places him at the youngest end of a class group, or a child would benefit developmentally from an additional preschool year, Montessori preschools offer a real benefit. In such cases, children who remain for a "growing year" continue to work in a familiar environment with familiar teachers on new and challenging materials. At the end of the year, the family and teachers can mutually decide whether that child should go on to a public kindergarten or 1st grade class. The option remains open.





I have a four-year-old. Can she enter a Montessori preschool at this age?

The answer will vary from school to school. It is ideal to start a Montessori program by age three. At that age, children are most easily introduced to the materials and school structure. Children who begin early and spend three full years in the program garner the most benefits in terms of acquired knowledge, an internal sense of order, and a love of learning. That said, many schools see no harm in admitting older children with no prior Montessori experience. If you are considering this, be sure to ask the director how your child will be integrated into the class and exposed to the foundation materials that are necessary for age-appropriate work.

Does my child need to be toilet trained to start the program?

Again, the answer will vary from school to school. While it's far easier for schools to restrict admission to toilet-trained children, it isn't (in my opinion) wise or fair. Starting preschool is stressful enough for parents and children. Adding toilet training to the mix can be overwhelming. Montessori school is a great place to help a child learn independence and imitate older peers.

Is Montessori appropriate for children with special needs?

Montessori preschools can be wonderful places for children with special needs such as sensory integration or language-based issues. The appropriateness of any particular school, however, will depend on several factors including the nature of the disability. If this is an issue for your family, speak openly with each school's director about your child's needs. You want to be certain that the school will be a welcoming and appropriate place for your child.



How do I know if I've found a "real" Montessori school?

Unfortunately, there is no way to limit the use of the term "Montessori"—it is not a legally protected term. Furthermore, there is no governing association that oversees all Montessori schools. When searching for a school, it's important to have a basic understanding of Montessori principles.

Visit prospective schools and observe the classrooms. Ask the teachers to explain the materials and what a typical day looks like. Ask to what degree, if any, the school diverges from "traditional" Montessori practices. If so, ask why.

Where can I learn more?

Parents are welcome to e-mail questions to me at jenn.MCHW@gmail.com.

Please visit my school's web site, www.TheChildrensHouseofWellesley.com.

You can research the topic online at the following sites:

www.montessoriconnections.com

www.montessori.org

www.montessori.edu

The Montessori Way: An Education for Life by Tim Seldin & Paul Epstein Ph.D. is a particularly good resource for parents new to Montessori schools.

Teach Me to do it Myself: Montessori Activities for You and Your Child by Maja Pitamic offers activities you can do at home.

