

Why Montessori for the Kindergarten year?

By Tim Seldin with Dr. Elizabeth Coe

It's re-enrollment time again, and in thousands of Montessori schools all over America parents of four-almost-five-year-olds are trying to decide whether or not they should keep their sons and daughters in Montessori for kindergarten or send them off to the local schools.

The advantages of using the local schools often seem obvious, while those of staying in Montessori are often not at all clear. When you can use the local schools for free, why would anyone want to invest thousands of dollars in another year's tuition? It's a fair question and it deserves a careful answer. Obviously there is no one right answer for every child. Often the decision depends on where each family places its priorities and how strongly parents sense that one school or another more closely fits in with their hopes dreams for their children.

Naturally, to some degree the answer is also often connected to the question of family income as well, although we are often amazed at how often families with very modest means who place a high enough priority on their children's education will scrape together the tuition needed to keep them in Montessori.

When a child transfers from Montessori to a new kindergarten, she spends the first few months adjusting to a new class, a new teacher, and a whole new system with different expectations. This, along with the fact that most kindergartens have a much lower set of expectations for five-year-olds than most Montessori programs, severely cuts into the learning that could occur during this crucial year of their lives.

Montessori is an approach to working with children that is carefully based on what we've learned about child development from several decades of research. Although sometimes misunderstood, the Montessori approach has been acclaimed as the most developmentally appropriate model currently available by some of America's top experts on early childhood and elementary education. As a "developmental" approach, Montessori is based on a realistic understanding of children's cognitive, neurological and emotional development.

One important difference between what Montessori offers the five-year-old and what is offered by many of today's kindergarten programs has to do with how it helps the young child to learn how to learn. A great deal of research shows that quite often students in traditional programs don't really understand most of what they are being taught. Harvard Psychologist and author of *The Unschooled Mind*, Howard Gardner, goes so far as to suggest that, "Many schools have fallen into a pattern of giving kids exercises and drills that result in their getting answers on tests that look like understanding."

But several decades of research into how children learn have shown that most students, from as young as those in kindergarten to students in some of the finest colleges in America do not, as Gardner puts it, "understand what they've studied, in the most basic sense of the term. They lack the capacity to take knowledge learned in one setting and apply it appropriately in a different setting. Study after study has found that, by and large, even the best students in the best schools

can't do that." (On Teaching For Understanding: A Conversation with Howard Gardner, by Ron Brandt, Educational Leadership Magazine, ASCD, 1994.)

Montessori is focused on teaching for understanding. In a primary classroom, three and four-year-olds receive the benefit of two years of sensorial preparation for academic skills by working with the concrete Montessori learning materials. This concrete sensorial experience gradually allows the child to form a mental picture of concepts like "how big is a thousand, how many hundreds make up a thousand", and what is really going on when we borrow or carry numbers in mathematical operations.

The value of the sensorial experiences that the younger children have had in Montessori is often under-estimated. Research is very clear that this is how the young child learns, by observing and manipulating his environment. The Montessori materials give the child a concrete sensorial impression of an abstract concept, such as long division, that is the potential foundation for a lifetime understanding of the idea in abstraction. Because Montessori teachers are developmentally trained, they normally know how to present information in an appropriate way.

What often happens in schools is that teachers are not developmentally trained and children are essentially filling in workbook pages with little understanding and do a great deal of rote learning. Superficially, it may appear that they have learned a lot, but the reality is most often that what they have learned was not meaningful to the child. A few months down the road, little of what they "learned" will be retained and it will be rare for them to be able to use their knowledge and skills in new situations. More and more educational researchers are beginning to focus on whether students, whether young or adult, really understand or have simply memorized correct answers.

In a few cases, kindergarten Montessori children may not look as if they are not as advanced as a child in a very academically accelerated program, but what they do know they usually know very well. Their understanding of the decimal system, place value, mathematical operations, and similar information is usually very sound. With reinforcement as they grow older, it becomes internalized and a permanent part of whom they are. When they leave Montessori before they have had the time to internalize these early concrete experiences, their early learning often evaporates because it is neither reinforced nor commonly understood.

In a class with such a wide age range of children, won't my five-year-old spend the year taking care of younger children instead of doing his or her own work? The five year olds in Montessori classes often help the younger children with their work, actually teaching lessons or correcting errors. Many Montessori educators believe that this concern felt by some parents is very misguided.

Anyone who has ever had to teach a skill to someone else may recall that the very process of explaining a new concept or helping someone practice a new skill leads the teacher to learn as much, if not more, than the pupil. This is supported by research. When one child tutors another, the tutor normally learns more from the experience than the person being tutored. Experiences that facilitate development of independence and autonomy are often very limited in traditional schools.

By the end of age five, Montessori students will often develop academic skills that may be beyond those of advanced students. Academic progress is not our ultimate goal. Our real hope is that they will feel good about themselves and enjoy learning. Mastering basic skills is a side goal.

Montessori children are generally doing very well academically by the end of kindergarten, although that is not our ultimate objective. The program offers them enriched lessons in math, reading, and language, and if they are ready, they normally develop excellent skills. The key concept is readiness. If a child is developmentally not ready to go on, he or she is neither left behind nor made to feel like a failure. Our goal is not ensuring that children develop at a predetermined rate, but to ensure that whatever they do, they do well and master. Most Montessori children master a tremendous amount of information and skills, and even in the cases where children may not have made as much progress as we would have wished, they usually have done a good job with their work, wherever they have progressed at any given point, and feel good about themselves as learners.

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