

# WHY MONTESSORI FOR THE KINDERGARTEN YEAR?

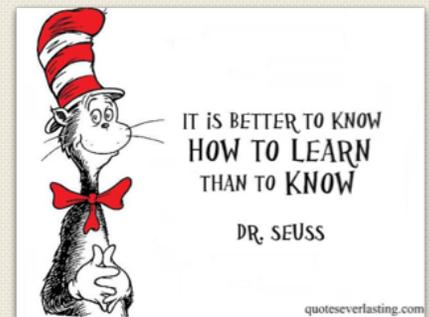
Every year at re-enrollment time, parents of four-almost-five-year-olds are trying to decide whether or not they should keep their children at Walden for kindergarten or send them off to the local schools. The advantages of using the local schools often seem obvious, while those of staying in Montessori are often not at all clear. 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 and dreams for their children.

Montessori is an approach to working with children that is carefully based on what we've learned about children's cognitive, neurological and emotional development from several decades of research. The Montessori approach has been acclaimed as the most developmentally appropriate model currently available by top experts on early childhood and elementary education from around the world.. 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, severely cuts into the learning that could occur during this crucial year of their lives.

One significant difference between Montessori and the local schools has to do with how Montessori helps the young child to **learn how to learn**. Many schools have fallen into a pattern of giving children exercises and drills that result in their getting answers on tests that look like understanding, however; these students do not really understand what they've studied. 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. The Montessori materials give children concrete sensorial impression of abstract concepts that become the foundation for a lifetime understanding.

The mixed age classroom is another benefit to the Montessori kindergarten year. The book, "Children Teach Children" by Garnter, Kohler and Riessman (Harper and Row) gives many statistics which show that when an older child helps a younger child, it is actually the older child who benefits most from the experience. Because the teacher in a Montessori classroom is not constantly directing group activities, there are many opportunities for the five year-olds to help the younger ones. Besides reinforcing their academic knowledge, this experience enhances their self-esteem and develops their self-confidence—two qualities which enable them to try new things in later learning. To deprive the five year-old of this experience is to deprive her of her year of leadership. When she was younger, she was unconsciously looking forward to the time when she would be one of "the older ones." If, instead, she is put into a kindergarten where she is again at the bottom of the ladder, this cycle of maturing is interrupted. Perhaps the loss is most unfortunate for the "only child" or for a child who is the youngest in the family because such a child does not have the opportunity to lead younger children at home. Experiences that facilitate development of independence and autonomy are often very limited in traditional schools.

The opportunity to learn to read at his own pace is perhaps the most important advantage for the five year-old in the Montessori classroom. He receives individual help as he works with the language materials and is neither pressured to keep up with other children, nor bored by having to wait for others to catch up with him. As he masters the phonetic skills, the leveled readers invite him to choose books that are "just right", thus fostering his desire to read. Many children begin reading and math at four but the most exciting work is done when they are five. If you transfer your child before the kindergarten year, you will probably lose the best return on your financial investment in pre-school education.



Finally, If you are still undecided, spend a morning observing in your child's classroom and compare it with a morning in a kindergarten class in the other school you are considering. Sit quietly and take mental notes. The differences may be subtle, but most likely they will be significant. We believe that the positive differences in a Montessori classroom will help your child to meet with future successes as they continue their educational journey and we hope you agree.