

Ask the expert Q&A

Barbara Isaacs explains how and why a MEAB accredited nursery can be the best choice for your child and **Sally Goddard Blythe** answers a question on the benefits of nursery attendance for 2 year olds.

Q When searching on your website for a nursery school for my child I noticed that many settings were accredited. Could you please explain what it means and if it is an important factor in the quality of a Montessori nursery?

As you may be aware the Montessori name has never been copyrighted or protected, therefore in theory it is possible for anyone to open a nursery and give it a name that includes 'Montessori'. In practice this is less possible these days because the Local Authority consultants and regulatory body Ofsted will want to see that any nursery or school which calls itself Montessori does have Montessori-qualified staff and follows Montessori philosophy and pedagogy. Over the years many of these professionals have become familiar with Montessori settings and have used The Guide to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in Montessori Settings (Montessori St Nicholas, 2008/2012) to direct them when interpreting Montessori practice in relation the EYFS Statutory Framework (Department for Education, 2012).

Many Montessori providers have recognised that participating in a quality assurance scheme – such as the Montessori Evaluation and Accreditation Board (MEAB) scheme that was established by the Montessori St Nicholas Charity (MSN) in 2008 – makes a public declaration of commitment to an on-going process of improvement. It reflects Montessori's own view that Montessori teachers need to 'follow the child'. To be able to 'follow the child' Montessori practitioners need to:

- engage in regular observations

and in adjusting their planning and organisation of the learning environment to meet the individual needs of each child attending their settings;

- ensure that the environment is well organised and purposeful and that they understand the benefits of each activity available to the children both inside and outside the classroom; and
- be aware of the individual potential of each child and actively contribute to that potential.

These are the principles at the heart of the MEAB scheme as promoted by MSN. The settings engaged in the accreditation process may not be the best Montessori nursery school in the area, but they have committed to continued improvement and quality of provision. It means they are reflecting on their practice and striving to do their best for the children attending their setting.

When deciding on a nursery, consider what experiences you would like your child to have. If they include opportunities for independence and developing initiative, to learn in a calm, harmonious, polite and purposeful environment, to be him or herself and grow in self-awareness and self-discipline, then do make a visit and judge for yourself if a MEAB-accredited nursery or school is indeed the place for your child.

Q How beneficial is it for 2 year olds to attend a nursery?

An overview of several studies which have investigated the benefits of nursery education at different ages indicates that above the age of three years children benefit cognitively and emotionally from nursery education provided



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that the care provided is high quality. The findings are less clear below the age of three with some indicating that children gain cognitively but are at increased risk of being stressed by separation and may pay a price emotionally.

Positive reports from parents of two year olds attending nursery include: gaining independence; being comfortable to be left with adults they trust other than their parents; getting used to adapting to a routine and being able to pick up on routines quickly; being exposed to a wide variety of toys and facilities; doing lots of messy art activities; learning to eat independently; and support with disciplines such as tidying up after activities, which make it easier to instil these at home. Social gains include learning to play around and alongside others, confidence in a group, making friends and language development.

Nursery is a place for learning through play – with the body – through physical activity and social interaction: learning through examination, investigation and exploration about the physical properties of objects and the environment; discovering "what" objects are made of and "how" they work; learning language through conversation, singing and activity games and most importantly becoming competent and confident owners and users of their body.

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