

Parents & A

Clare Healy Walls and **Sally Goddard Blythe** answer your questions on Montessori Primary, handwriting and boys in the classroom.

Q How will I know how well my child is doing in a Montessori Primary (6-12) classroom as I have heard they don't do tests and assessments? How are children prepared for exams to get into an independent secondary school?

Montessori primary (6-12) schools have tests and assessments but the difference is that the results are not published, even to parents. Children have ongoing opportunities to test themselves but in a Montessori school the teachers create an environment where children enjoy learning for its own sake. They do not focus on praise or test results. A good Montessori teacher observes and takes action to fill gaps in the child's knowledge. Many Montessori teachers help parents to know what a child is doing, including displays of work or occasional use of standard tests, but children present to their parents only when they feel ready. Pressure removes the joy of work and then what is the point of a Montessori school? Parents must have trust in the Montessori Method and in the child, while teachers should support parents by updating them at least twice a year.

Examinations require a skill. The children have been taking in knowledge for some years so now the teacher simply has to guide them in learning how to present this in examination format. By allowing free choice about doing tests or mock examinations and by helping the child to learn to self assess, the teacher will manage to keep the Montessori approach to learning but also prepare good examination candidates.

Q My 8 year old son seems to be bright, has a good spoken vocabulary and is reading well, but he is unable to write more than a few words, and his handwriting is terrible. What can we do?

Writing problems can arise for at least two reasons: 1) difficulty in controlling the pencil stemming from problems with motor control; 2) difficulty in sequencing ideas and being able to express them using the motor system.

Boys tend to be later at developing the fine motor skills needed for writing. If all concentration is focused on the mechanics of writing it can interfere with the ability to think and write at the same time, hence a discrepancy between oral ability, reading and written performance.

Separating handwriting as a skill (penmanship) from creative writing or copying of content can help to develop the mechanics of writing first, for example by:

- Encouraging boys to copy the shapes and contours of large letters as a "drawing" skill in the early years.
- Getting boys to draw and talk about their ideas before writing them down.
- Providing paper with double narrow lines as guidelines for letter formation. Letters must be kept inside the two lines, with the exception of short-tall letters such as t and p, and tall-tall letters such as h,d,b,l,k etc. which extend above or below the lines.
- Encouraging your son to "tell" the story he wants to write first. You can then write the main points down for him, which he copies out.
- Occasionally children with



PHOTO: IVERNA GARDENS MONTESSORI NURSERY, KENSINGTON

writing problems have retained an infant reflex (ATNR), which interferes with hand-eye coordination. Special exercises designed to inhibit the reflex can improve the mechanics of writing.

Q I have just been to look around a Montessori school with my rather boisterous 2 year old son and I'm concerned whether there would be enough in the classroom to keep him engaged. I can see how a little girl could be kept occupied for hours with the threading, pouring and polishing exercises on the practical life shelves but I didn't see much for my son who gets bored easily. Please can you advise me as to whether the Montessori environment is right for my child?

Montessori was a pioneer of outdoor learning before it became the mantra of the Early Years Foundation Stage. You also need to look at what is on offer in the outside classroom, where your son can develop practical skills using whole body movements. Activities such as transporting leaves and soil, digging, planning and watering the vegetable patch or washing tricycles should engage his interest, help him

settle in the nursery and develop autonomy, initiative and joy of completing tasks he has chosen by himself.

Your son may also enjoy puzzles and construction activities; once again there are many opportunities to develop these interests and engage in floor activities and learn how the classroom works.

A well-run Montessori classroom will provide a wide range of activities supporting children from all cultures and both genders. Their practice is based on observing children and planning for their interests and abilities. Today's Montessori practitioners are fully aware of the differences in children and prepare the classroom with the individual in mind – this is what "following the child" means.

Clare Healy Walls is a Montessori teacher and trainer and has written about Montessori for all age groups.

Sally Goddard Blythe is Director of The Institute for Neuro-Physiological Psychology (INPP), Chester.

If you have a question you would like answered by one of our panel please email amanda@montessori.org.uk