



Is Montessori school the right education for your child?

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Often considered a modern alternative to mainstream schooling, Montessori is actually over a century old and continuing to experience steady growth in Australia. Research has shown that Montessori educated children are, on average, ahead in various areas of development, but how do you know if it's right for your child?

Samantha says she and her husband decided Montessori was right for them as soon as they saw the classrooms. "From the outside, we thought we must have been making an inspection during a holiday. When we entered the classroom though, we saw it was full of twenty five kids aged three to six, all doing their own activity in hushed tones," she explains. "They were totally engrossed in what they were doing. And we loved the muted, calm environment of the classrooms."

Kay Boulden, government and community liaison for Montessori, says that their classrooms provide freedom of choice for students, within their limits. "Children learn best when they follow their own interests and have the time to concentrate deeply on something that captures their imagination," she says. "Kids work at an individual pace with time to work through different ideas and activities."

Educational and developmental psychologist, Alina Kirievsky, says that the Montessori approach emphasises process rather than the end result, and encourages decision-making and independence. "This would suit children that need individualised learning," she says. "A child who does not like to compete with others, who may be feeling anxious about performance, have delays in certain areas and strengths in the others, or a child that needs a slower pace to learn."

Natalie says the Montessori system was wonderfully accommodating to her children, allowing each child to choose activities that they leaned towards and enjoyed at preschool. "The system enables the child to lead, but then also guides him or her to the components that have to be covered and allows them to progress at their own pace. I felt this was ideal for the preschool stage," she explains.

Kay says that all classrooms have a rich array in materials from a wide range of subject areas, as well as life skills components, as most Montessori schools also have animals that students care for, as well as their own vegetable garden. "Students learn to cut up and prepare their own food and make each other lunch, which teaches responsibility and independence," she says. "My children also learnt skills like stitching buttons on cloth, polishing and simple ironing which they may not have done at other preschools," Natalie says.

Another difference to mainstream schooling is the teacher's role in the classroom. "Our teachers don't do whole class teaching," Kay explains. "Instead they do one on one or small group presentations on particular activities, allowing students to learn through self discovery."

Kay says that as a result of this, children always perceive themselves as successful learners, giving them a positive attitude towards education. "The focus is on internal rewards. Because they are given the space to work through activities that interest them, they don't fail," she explains. "Nor is there any overt praise - simply acknowledgement and happiness that they had achieved what they were working towards."

Due to Montessori's non-competitive environment, comparative reporting is also not part of the assessment process, with the focus instead on observation, discussion and portfolio work, an approach that Samantha is happy with. "I love that kids are not relentlessly tested, though their progress is very carefully logged to ensure they are meeting milestones," she says.

While it may be a strange sight for some parents to see a room full of young children working quietly, Kay explains this is about the rights and responsibilities of students built into Montessori's classroom culture. "Students learn they have a right to learn the best way for them, but have a responsibility not to take that same right away from other students," she explains. "Even the most physically rambunctious students learn that there is a time and place."

Natalie says the only disadvantage she has found is that because it is a three year program, her child will enter mainstream schooling in first grade. "This means the child enters cold and has to make new friends in a group who have been together since kindy," she says. "Or if the child goes into kindy, they are often over-equipped with skills, and may be older than others in the class."

Kay says while the transition to mainstream schooling may come with challenges for some students, the Montessori teachers do their best to prepare them, with students leaving the Montessori program as self-directed learners with a strong grasp of literacy and numeracy. "They go forward into schooling with a clear message of 'Help me do it myself'," she says.

Alina recommends parents ask focused questions when considering a school for their child, such as what kind of support they will receive if struggling in learning, if they will be extended if they are gifted and talented, and if there is a good music and language program - something that research has shown is important. "Also consider social aspects such as the school's approach to discipline and bullying, and how the school helps children build resilience and develop self-esteem," she says.

Samantha says she loves that her children learn conceptually at Montessori, taking their learning in directions that are largely self-determined, encouraging them to become life-long learners. "They are given space and time to find their passion," she says. "Given how fast our world is changing, if we can equip our kids to become passionate learners, then we've given them a great gift."

This story was found at: <http://www.essentialkids.com.au/younger-kids/kids-education/is-montessori-school-the-right-education-for-your-child-20140507-37wlt.html>