

# Why Montessori for over five's?

A Montessori primary education is increasingly being recognized as equipping older children for the challenges of the 21st century. **Wendy Compson**, head of Cherry Trees Montessori and Preparatory School looks at some of the benefits of a Montessori primary education and answers some of the questions parents ask.



PHOTOS: CHERRY TREES MONTESSORI

One of the joys of the Montessori environment is that the children are not constrained to a schedule. They are free and independent to further their studies in areas of particular interest. They are also empowered to manage a weekly schedule choosing when to complete activities in accordance with their natural rhythm of work. The child is introduced to a topic as a whole and then encouraged to carry out independent study on the different aspects of that topic.

As an example, each summer the topic of herbs is studied at Cherry Trees. We begin with the plant kingdom where we look at the whole area of classification. Once the child has established where herbs feature in the plant kingdom, they then grow and identify different species, research their history, establish which parts of the world these herbs first grew in, find references in the Bible, and measure and record their height and spread on a database looking at their mean, median, mode and range. A great deal of writing takes place and the children end up with knowledge to take with them for the rest of their lives.

While the children are working with herbs we visit a local herbalist where she encourages the children to use their new found identification skills. Last year we spent a day in the Chelsea Physic Garden studying the classification beds. Here, the children were introduced to the many medicinal uses of plants as well as their toxic properties. After showing him their classification tree, the education officer said he felt students studying biology at GCSE and 'A' level did not have the wonderful background knowledge that

these Montessori primary children had gained from an education offering them freedom, independence and access to relevant information without rigid time and curriculum restraints.

## So if this is the case, why are parents still hesitant?

There is an awful lot of pressure on parents when making decisions about the education of their children. Many parents considering an unorthodox path of education have told me they feel a sense of dread when the subject of schools is raised at dinner parties with friends or on coffee breaks with colleagues. They seem to come under fire from a barrage of stern but well-meaning advice about what's best for their child. Often the negative opinions rarely come as a result of a negative experience, but often because of a shortage of facts and lack of understanding.

## Montessori is fine now, but without the constant testing and fixed curriculum, how will they perform against their peers in the traditional system?

This is perhaps one of the most common concerns and I'm pleased to say, the most ill-founded. Children in Montessori schools not only reach the government attainment targets, but frequently out-perform them, and often by a considerable margin. It is not only academically that Montessori children are advancing at a faster rate than their peers, but also socially. The very nature of the Montessori methodology - the way it encourages independence and builds confidence - means that pupils develop social skills that equip them to excel in situations

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where many other children of their age would struggle. This brings me onto another familiar question.

## We've heard that the children are given free rein in the classroom. How can a lack of routine and discipline prepare them for later life? How will they fit in when they do join a more traditional system?

To parents who ask me this, I firstly explain that Montessori is not about giving children a free rein, it's about providing them with space to learn and develop tools with which they can manage their own learning. As for lack of discipline, the beauty of development within a Montessori system is that the child learns the art of self-discipline. Learning doesn't become a chore that has to be endured and managed by parents; it is something that the child actually takes both pride and pleasure in. Learning within this system doesn't limit the child's ability to excel in later life; it in fact removes the constraints that inhibit progress in the traditional system. This system, through necessity and routine, teaches children to learn, record and reproduce information often prioritising this over the child's natural desire to learn.

The desire to learn is one of a child's most precious and fragile qualities and a Montessori education recognises that the stronger this desire, the greater the results. It nurtures this by creating a relaxed and happy classroom environment in which children learn through stimulation and understanding and develop a love of learning and skills for life. ■

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