



What About Montessori "Kindergarten"?



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The Question:

I really don't know what to do! This August our daughter is eligible for kindergarten in our public school and in our church school. Of course, there is the kindergarten year at her Montessori school. There is no elementary program to follow after next year and I feel that this year should be the year to move her to a new school where she will be with a group of friends from the beginning.

Something inside keeps me from committing to any program. Then again, I'm having a hard time saying "yes" to this third year in her Montessori school.

What can you tell me to help sort this all out?

Tamara

When I first read this question I started laughing! I thought, Tamara, I can tell you more than you want to know!

But I know this feeling of indecision myself.

My daughter, Dana, has a late September birthday. I tried to get an exception from the school district for her to enter public school as she turned five in September, but they made no exceptions. Our Montessori school became our best option, when I considered what Dana would need at age five, and older.

As a parent, I'm so glad that I was forced to make that decision early. It made our lives easier because we had a clear plan through elementary school.

What Is "Kindergarten"?

Friedrich Froebel: The father of kindergarten or the "children's garden" coined the term in Germany in 1840.

- Froebel's kindergarten was for children from ages 2 to 7 years old.
- This age mix helped children grow and learn as they taught each other and helped each other.
- Froebel saw that children of this age have unique learning needs and that those needs change some time in a child's sixth year.
- Usually by a child's 7th birthday, Froebel saw that the child had different learning needs and was eager to go to school and leave the environment of the "children's garden".
- Froebel also designed a series of free-choice activities he called "gifts"; wooden geometric materials, cutting and sewing activities (and more), as well as gardening and housekeeping activities.

For more about Froebel, see *Inventing Kindergarten* by Norman Brosterman.

Today's Definition of Kindergarten: When we think of kindergarten today, the word normally refers to programs for children five-years of age designed to get a child "ready" for school. There are exact cut-off dates for entry.

The Third Year In Montessori Primary (3 to 6 years)

Children move through different *stages of development*, each stage having specific characteristics. Each stage or plane of development is approximately 6 years in length and is made of two 3-year sub stages, with normal statistical variations. For some children that means they are in the first plane of development until they are seven-years-old.

The older child, in this second plane of development, desires to get out and see the larger world by walking to friends' houses, taking the bus to school, riding bicycles around the neighborhood, going to museums, spending the night with other family members and friends, and more.

But until this observable change, which usually follows the loss of the first

baby tooth and the emergence of the first adult teeth, *younger children's learning needs are based on time-sensitive or critical periods of development.*

What we see in our 3 to 6-year-olds is what I learned from a botanist friend of mine many years ago;

- First year *sleep*.
- Second year *creep*.
- Third year *leap*.

With the five-year-old, we see a year of consolidation and completion.

- The child usually bursts into writing and reading (again with statistical variations).
- Academic skills blossom as the child works with numbers and quantities using the decimal system materials, the golden bead material, the stamp game, and more, along with materials to solidify addition, subtraction, multiplication and division math facts.
- Most importantly what we see LEAP in this third year is...**leadership**.

The five-year-old assumes leadership.

- Acts as big brother/big sister to the younger children.
- Explains the rules of the classroom.
- Learns patience.
- Takes over jobs previously done by the last year's five-year-olds.
- "The changing of the guard".

These leadership opportunities that a five- to six-year-old experiences in this third year in a Montessori primary classroom are precious and perhaps priceless.

There may not be another time until high school or college that these leadership skills can be developed in such a profound way.

Academically, socially, emotionally and physically, the third year in a Montessori primary classroom is *not kindergarten*. It is not "getting ready for school". ***It is, as Montessori environments strive to be, a "help to life".***

The Montessori experience is much broader and deeper than today's kindergarten.

Developmentally this last year of being in the first plane of development is rich in learning experiences at so many levels for the five to six-year-old in a Montessori primary classroom.

At the end of this third year, as the child shifts to a new developmental plane of the older child from 6 to 12 years, the child leaves the primary classroom developmentally ready to make new friends and to go to a new school or classroom.

As a parent, when we give our child this third-year in a Montessori environment, *we can feel confident* that our child's consolidation of learning has been given the time to sleep, creep, leap and burst into bloom.