

The Three Year Commitment

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My son is just a couple months away from starting at his Montessori preschool. In preparation for this very exciting event, I spent some time the other day filling out paperwork and reading the school handbook. One of the documents I had to sign was a statement of my commitment to keep my son in the primary (3-6yrs) program for the full three-year cycle. At first I was surprised by such a document— I hadn't ever heard of an explicit agreement like this from parents before. But, I was also very glad to see it.

The Montessori primary program is designed as a three-year cycle. Much of the material and exercises in the first year or two not only help the child achieve a direct, immediate goal (such as dressing and cleaning after themselves, or learning the sounds of each letter of the alphabet), but also serve an indirect purpose of laying the foundation for future work and learning. For example, the math material is a series of exercises that guides the child starting with the most concrete and basic introduction to numbers and quantity. Over the following three years the lessons build upon themselves, adding layers of abstractness and an increasing understanding of mathematical concepts, until the child is eventually able to add, subtract, multiply, and divide — with a deeply ingrained understanding of what those operations mean — using only pencil, paper, and his or her head.

There is also a social component. The mixed-age grouping is not accidental. Each child benefits from being exposed to those who are older, and younger, than they are. The younger children have role models to look up to from the very first day of class. They quickly learn how to behave and what is acceptable from watching the older children. They also see the older children working on the more advanced material, which piques their interest and curiosity. The older children, in turn, benefit from being mentors to the younger ones. One of the best ways to internalize knowledge is to explain it to others, and often an older child will help teach certain concepts to a younger child. The oldest children in the classroom naturally take on a position of

leadership, which has been modeled for them by the children before them. This opportunity to lead can be a huge pay-off for many children and helps them build confidence and self-esteem.

Unfortunately, many parents will begin their child in a Montessori school at age 3, but then after completing the first 2 years they pull the child from the classroom and enroll them in the Kindergarten of their future elementary school. These children still reap benefits from their Montessori education, but they are robbed of that precious third year– the opportunity to complete the full cycle of activity with the classroom materials and curriculum, and the chance to be the leaders that they themselves had looked up to those previous years. They laid a foundation for something that was never completed. It can also have negative effects on the classroom dynamic if there are only a few 5 and 6 year old children who remain in the classroom as those oldest children to lead and serve as role models.

A Montessori education, even if limited, still has great benefits. Returning to the math example, I personally feel that the golden bead material alone (an early set of lessons in the math curriculum) would help many of us greatly increase our understanding of numbers and mathematical operations. However, without that third year, their education will be incomplete. Some of the efforts of the child and teacher, that indirect preparation, will have been wasted. Imagine the child's education as a house– the first year builds a solid foundation, and the second and third years erect the walls and, finally, the roof to top it off. The foundation is still useful on its own, but the house becomes a home, and much more significant, if one is allowed to build it to completion. As parents, we should do everything possible to give our children the full Montessori experience.