



A Commonsense Guide to Choosing a Montessori School

“I know I want a Montessori school for my daughter, but what if I choose the wrong one? I’ve heard that there are amazing Montessori schools and I’ve heard that there are many imitations and knock-offs! I don’t want to make a mistake and then have to look for another school.”

I often hear comments like this from parents who start researching Montessori education for their children. There is so much information out there! The more they discover about Montessori, the harder it is to choose a school.

The Sad Truth about Montessori

It’s tricky to know just exactly what constitutes an authentic Montessori program. There is no copyright on the term “Montessori”. That means anyone can open a school and call it “Montessori” without implementing an authentic program.

Why is this important?

A true Montessori program has highly trained teachers, specific learning materials and a carefully planned curriculum that will help your child:

- Learn cooperative social skills
- Develop self control
- Learn to take initiative
- Develop an analytical mindset
- And, most importantly, develop a lifelong joy, love and excitement for learning

Do you want these outcomes for your child? If so, you will need to find an authentic Montessori program.

7 Traits of an Authentic Montessori School

In my years of experience as a teacher and administrator I have become an expert at identifying authentic Montessori programs. Here are the 7 things that I look for to make this determination:

1. **Teacher Training:** Quality Montessori schools have teachers who have been trained by the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) or the American Montessori Society (AMS). Ask to see the teachers' graduate diplomas to verify their training.
2. **Teacher Tenure:** Ask how long each teacher and his or her assistant have been working at the school. High turnover in staff will damage your child and the program itself.
3. **Length of Class Time:** Authentic Montessori programs have a 3 hour uninterrupted session each morning. During this 3 hour work period, your child will receive lessons from her teacher and is never interrupted to join all-class exercises over her own self-chosen activities.
4. **Individualized Curriculum:** A true Montessori program supports the individual development of your child. This is very different from a one-size-fits-all curriculum that suggests all children are ready to do the same thing at the same time because they are a particular age. In an authentic Montessori classroom the curriculum conforms to your child instead of your child having to conform to the curriculum.
5. **Calm and Peaceful Classrooms:** A good Montessori classroom will appear to be calm and peaceful. You will see many children deep in concentration as they choose an activity and work with it for a good long time. Other children are moving in the classroom as they choose an activity and sit down to work, but the movement in the classroom is slow and purposeful.

6. A Beautiful Classroom Environment: You will see an exquisitely prepared classroom environment with materials laid out by subject on long, low shelves. The materials will be clean, beautiful and alluring to the child. You will see a lot of materials made of wood and glass and natural fibers. You will rarely, if ever, see plastic.

There will be real activities for your child to do: dull knives to slice apples, miniature graters to shred cheese, flour, salt, sugar, yeast and water to make and bake bread, glass vases and fresh flowers to practice flower arranging, polish and small applicators to shine brass, silver, wood and mirrors.

You will see handmade reading materials - never textbooks. You will see the most amazing mathematics materials that concretize concepts to facilitate understanding in learning instead of mindless memorization - never work sheets or work books.

Lastly, you will see the full complement of Montessori materials that will allow your child to learn academic subjects in Language, Mathematics, Science and Music.

7. Multi Age Classrooms: Authentic Montessori classrooms group children together into 3 year age spans. This means that a third of the children in a class will be 3 years old, a third will be 4, and a third will be 5 turning 6. A bona fide Montessori school will ALWAYS have kindergarten included in this age grouping with 3 and 4 year old children and will never separate kindergarten children into a different class.

The reason? Older kindergarten age children model respectful behaviors and advanced work that the younger children will eventually one day experience. Younger children certainly benefit from this mentoring - but also the older children, irrespective of personality, are afforded an opportunity of leadership.

How to Use This Information?

Knowledge is power - and now that you are armed with this specific information, be proactive and ask direct questions when researching schools for your child. Be wary of schools that won't answer the questions directly.

The bottom line: if you want your child to receive the amazing benefits of Montessori, you have to be a discerning parent!