

# Montessori or Traditional Kindergarten

## A PARENT'S DECISION FOR THE FIVE YEAR-OLD

by Aline D. Wolf

If you are the parent of a four year-old presently in a Montessori class, you are probably delighted with your child's progress and are looking forward to her continuation of Montessori next year when she is five. Most parents who choose Montessori for their pre-schooler not only want her to complete this cycle of pre-school learning but they want her to continue Montessori at the elementary level if it is available.

It is possible, however, that you are one of the smaller number of parents who look upon Montessori as a preparation for traditional kindergarten. A Montessori school, these parents feel, is a place where a very young child can be taken care of until he is old enough for conventional school. Each year some parents withdraw their five year-olds from Montessori just as they are beginning to unfold as young leaders, beginning readers and budding mathematicians. When the transfer is made at this point the children actually miss the most fruitful part of the Montessori experience.

There is no doubt that some circumstances almost force parents to withdraw their five year-olds from Montessori schools. A sudden financial crisis, impossible transportation arrangements, a personality conflict with an individual Montessori teacher or a child's special problem which might be helped by a more structured environment, all indicate that a change should be made.

When compelling reasons, similar to these, do **not** exist, you have the freedom to observe both programs carefully and try to evaluate the influence which each might have on your child. You should not hesitate to ask to observe in either the traditional or the Montessori school. The exercise of this legitimate right of parents is the only way you can get the first-hand information necessary for making a wise decision.

It will be helpful to begin by observing your own four year-old in the Montessori classroom during the spring months. Is he comfortable and happy? How does he interact with other children? Does he choose his own activities? How long can he concentrate? What math exercises can he do? What reading or language activities has he begun?

Next you should visit the kindergarten that you are considering for your child. Do the children enjoy learning? How long do they concentrate? What math and reading exercises are available as the next step to what your child is doing now? What art, music and nature activities are in the class? Are there opportunities for independent work and for leadership?

The next step in this sequence is to re-visit the Montessori school. This time, rather than watching your own child, look at the classroom as a whole and particularly at what the five year-olds are doing. How do they compare with the five year-olds in the conventional school? What are they doing in math and reading? Are they leaders? Are they self-confident? Is the classroom a happy place for learning? What music, nature and creative activities are in progress?

After this series of observations you should give careful thought to the long-range as well as the immediate advantages of one program over another. The "right now" benefits of choosing a traditional program, such as the relief from tuition and transportation responsibilities, are often very obvious to parents. The long-range benefits of another year of Montessori are sometimes more subtle and difficult to recognize. Unwittingly some parents give up substantial long-term benefits for motives that are not always educationally sound. An analysis of these reasons may be helpful to you.

*"We feel that the best learning happens when the younger children can watch older children. Debbie really benefited from her past two years in Montessori. But next year, she won't have any older ones to learn from. She's apt to pick up baby habits again."*

Imitating older children is only one aspect of learning in a mixed age group. The book, **Children Teach Children** by Garnter, Kohler and Riessman (Harper and Row) gives many statistics which show that when an older child helps a younger child, it is actually the older child who benefits most from the experience.

Because the teacher in a Montessori classroom is not constantly directing group activities, there are many opportunities for the five year-olds to help the younger ones. Besides reinforcing their academic knowledge, this experience enhances their self-esteem and develops their self-confidence—two qualities which enable them to try new things in later learning. To deprive the five year-old of this experience is to deprive her of her year of leadership. When she was younger, she was unconsciously looking forward to the time when she would be one of "the older ones." If, instead, she is put into a kindergarten where she is again at the bottom of the ladder, this cycle of maturing is interrupted. Perhaps the loss is most unfortunate for the "only child" or for a child who is the youngest in the family because such a child does not have the opportunity to lead younger children at home.

*At our neighborhood school all the kids meet their friends in kindergarten. If I wait until first grade to put Jonathan in this school, he's going to have a hard time getting in with the group."*

The problem of adapting to a new group is one that parents worry about more than the children do. It is not unusual to find parents questioning the teacher about this situation weeks after the child and his classmates have forgotten that he is new.

Addressing himself specifically to this problem, Joseph S. Silverman, M.D., a psychiatrist interested in young children wrote, "Confronting an already formed peer group in elementary school is of course a challenge for any child. The transition from a Montessori kindergarten to a traditional school first grade, however, is handled with ease by most children. That they do so suggests to me that the challenge to their coping capacities is actually fortuitous. For, after all, we find in most situations that to protect a child from a challenge he can meet is to retard his maturation."

*"Harry did beautifully in Montessori for two years, but I think he's had enough of it now. We can save the tuition money for his college education."*

This is a natural inclination even when there is no serious financial problem. Where, however, will the money be better invested? Will his education be guaranteed more by the fact the he becomes interested and excited about learning or by the fact that you have money in the bank? If he becomes bored, he may decide against further education long before the college years. Since many scholarships are available to good students, perhaps an interest in learning is the best guarantee of a college education.

*"All her friends are going to our neighborhood school. Susan wants to go with them. She says she doesn't like her old school any more."*

When a child tells you she dislikes school you should try to determine her motivation for saying so. Either she is really unhappy in her present classroom or she is saying this because she wants you to let her do something else. Observing her in the classroom (if possible, without letting her know) is your best way to judge. If she seems totally restless, bored, withdrawn, angry or disruptive, you must seriously consider what she is telling you. But if she seems comfortable, busy and absorbed most of the time, with just the normal amount of mischief and daydreaming, then you can assume she is happy.

Saying she wants to go with other kids is a normal and frequent reaction of youngsters whose friends are discussing their approaching entrance into kindergarten. For many of them it will be their first school experience and their excitement naturally affects your child. If you and your spouse react as individuals who are confident in your own judgment, you will not panic at this childhood remark. Instead you will convey to your child your own enthusiasm for all the things she is doing in **her** school.

*"I think Montessori was fine for Tim when he was younger, but he knows most of the things in the Montessori classroom by now. I think he's tired of it and he needs a fresh start in kindergarten."*

It is almost impossible to imagine a four year-old finishing and tiring of the academic materials. The Golden Beads which illustrate the Decimal System could, for example, be used for such difficult maneuvers as square root and long division. In reading, as in math, because the necessary materials are at hand, a youngster can go as far as his interest and ability will take him.

For example, in a Montessori classroom a five-year old can gain an early understanding of many difficult concepts which are the usual stumbling blocks in grade school. Long before he is faced with such **abstract** terms as *Peninsula, History, Verb, Unit* or *Fraction*, he meets them in simple concrete materials which are fun to manipulate. He can build a peninsula, put pictures on a Time Line of history, act out verbs, "carry one" in addition by going to the Bank and changing ten Units into one Ten Bar, put two fractional quarters together to make one-half, etc.

The opportunity to learn to read at his own pace is perhaps the most important advantage for the five year-old in the Montessori classroom. He receives individual help as he works with the reading materials and is neither pressured to keep up with other youngsters, nor bored by having to wait for others to catch up with him. As he masters the phonetic skills, the Reading Corner invites him to spend comfortable hours with books he selects himself, thus fostering his desire to read. Many children begin reading and math at four but the most exciting work is done when they are five. If you transfer your child before this year of fruition, you will probably lose the best return on your financial investment in pre-school education.

When selecting a school for your child the important thing to remember is that you and your spouse, as parents, are the only people who should make this decision. You should not feel pressured by remarks from neighbors, from in-laws or particularly from your own child. You, his parents, best understand his needs. You have the maturity to judge the available programs. You have the wisdom to choose the school that offers the best opportunities for your five year-old.