

WHY DO MONTESSORI SCHOOLS GROUP CHILDREN TOGETHER IN SUCH LARGE MULTI-AGE CLASSES?

A typical Montessori class is made up of 25 to 35 children, more or less evenly divided between boys and girls, covering a three-year age span. This practice has been a hallmark of the Montessori approach for almost 100 years. Classes are normally taught by a certified Montessori educator teaching with one or more assistants or by two Montessori teachers. Classes tend to be stable communities, with only the oldest third moving on to the next level each year. With two-thirds of the children returning each fall, Montessori encourages a very different level of relationship between children and their peers, as well as between children and their teachers.

The levels usually found in a Montessori school correspond to the developmental stages of childhood: Infant (birth through 18 months); Toddler (18 mos. to age 3); Early Childhood (age 3 to 6); Lower Elementary (age 6 to 8); Upper Elementary (age 9 to 11); Middle School (age 12 to 14); and Secondary (age 15 to 18). At each level, the program and curriculum are logical and highly consistent extensions of what has come before.

Many preschools are proud of their very small group sizes, and parents often wonder why Montessori classes are so much larger.

Schools that place children together into small groups assume that the teacher is the source of instruction; a very limited resource even in a small class. These schools reason that as the number of children decreases, the time that teachers have to spend with each child increases. Ideally, we would have a on-on-one tutorial situation.

But the best 'teacher' of a three year old is often another child who is just a little bit older and has mastered a skill. This process is good for both the tutor and the younger child. In the Montessori approach, the teacher is not the primary focus.

Montessori encourages children to learn from each other. By having enough children in each age group, all students will find others at, above, and below their present level of development. This also makes Montessori schools economically more viable. Allowing schools to attract teachers with far greater training and experience.

Some parents worry that by having younger children in the same class as older ones, one age group or the other will be shortchanged. The fear that the younger children will absorb the teachers' time and attention, or that the importance of covering the kindergarten curriculum for the five year olds will prevent them from giving the three and four year olds the emotional support and

stimulation that they need. My experience has convinced me that both concerns are misguided and I can't imagine teaching in any other way.

There are several distinct advantages to the Montessori classroom model.

In a well-run and established Montessori class children are typically far more independent and self-disciplined. One factor that makes this possible is that each teacher's class of students doesn't leave at the end of the school year.

Children normally enter at age three and stay for a full three-year cycle, when they move on to the first year of the Montessori 6-9 year old class. With two thirds of the students returning each September, the classroom culture is surprisingly stable.

Each child is a unique individual, not two are the same. Even with the smallest teacher-pupil ratios, each will have her own interests, abilities, strengths and weaknesses. Each child learns at her own pace and will be ready for any given lesson in her own time, not on the teacher's schedule of lessons.

Each child has her own learning style. Montessori teachers treat each child as an individual, customizing lessons to fit her needs and expressions.