

future unpleasantness. Parents need not despair for several reasons. The experience factor alone not only gives the school less anxiety about the event, it also imposes a greater moral obligation to ensure it goes well. Additionally, parents unfamiliar with Montessori can take simple precautions to limit the guesswork.

Enrollment is a weighty decision for parents, because it marks the start point and initial trajectory for the rest of their child's life. "Do-overs" are impossible, because a child is only three years of age (or four, or five) once—but the attempt to re-start is often painful, is usually viewed as a sign of failure, and almost

Big School Small Parent

by John Moncure, Ph.D.

always involves a step back in progress. How can a parent who wants authentic Montessori for her child avoid making what she would one day decide had been a mistake?

Finding the Right School

Three factors can help parents make that all-important enrollment (or re-enrollment, for that matter) decision.

The most important question is this: Is the school *authentic*? Easier asked than answered as, unfortunately, no single definition to the term exists. Fortunately, a range of good definitions give form to the concept. Some schools have a Montessori 'corner,' or a Montessori 'day,' or perhaps have folded some Montessori methods into their routine; these schools are actually proto-Montessori because—while they are better than no Montessori at all—

the advantage of the synergies that make the whole greater than the sum of its parts does not exist to the degree you would find in an authentic Montessori program. If you hear these terms when you ask about the program, this is probably what you have found.

Other schools could, in theory, be placed on an orthodoxy continuum from, on one end, strictest adherence to what Dr. Maria Montessori did and did not do to, on the other, a more heterodox approach, extending her principles beyond her own experience—extending her approach to situations she perhaps had not envisioned (internet, for example). These schools would all call themselves 'authentic' and would be so according to a layman's definition; unfortunately, the schools themselves might not characterize each other with the same broad view. Almost all Montessori schools are independent, while many are affiliated with one 'school of thought' or another, and they will tend to adhere to their own version as the 'correct' one. Fortunately, along the entire orthodoxy spectrum, the practice of Montessori in the classroom—from your child's perspective—is far smaller than the philosophical differences between the schools. Thus, generally speaking, the differences are not so important to parents faced with only two or three Montessori options in their community. A certificate from an accredited Montessori teacher preparation center is a good bellwether that the classroom is authentic, but it is no guarantee. Parents have every right, indeed obligation, to ask questions about program and certificates, and most schools are quite proud of their faculty's credentials and will be glad you asked.

The second measure should be how the school 'feels.' Since authentic Montessori schools exist in a range of approaches to Montessori, this factor is exceptionally important, because the classroom directress and administrators will be the adult figures and role models for your child for many hours a day. If school officials treat you (and other parents whose children are enrolled) the way you wish to be treated, and if they seem to treat your child the way you wish your child to be treated, then the approach to Montessori is probably good for you.



Parents searching for a school can be intimidated by the polish and prestige of a well-run Montessori school or beguiled by the homey charm of cozy classrooms and young children busily engaged in their work. For many, it will be the first—sometimes only—time they make that first decision to enroll their precious little one in a school. For the school, depending on its size, enrollment decisions may happen a dozen times to a hundred times each year or more. Thus, from an experiential perspective, at the beginning, the parent-school relationship is unequal. If both parties recognize the difference in perception and perspective as they come together, the relationship can grow to one of mutual respect and support between partners in helping the child reach his potential. But, if not, that first bargain can sow seeds of

Part of the 'feel-good' factor will be how the school addresses your questions and concerns at enrollment time. Parents new to this subject often ask me, "How do I know if it's right?" The answer is simple: Trust your instincts. If it feels right, it probably is. To some degree, it is a self-fulfilling prophesy, but my observation is that caring, inquisitive parents usually have more wisdom than they dare let themselves believe.

The strongest, and rarest, measure of authenticity also levels the playing field. Accreditation subjects a school to scrutiny by an objective body, an organization that places its reputation on the line every time it endorses a school as authentic and recognizes it with a certificate of accreditation. It means not only that the school withstood scrutiny of experienced Montessori practitioners from the accrediting body, it also offers an avenue outside the school to resolve questions and disputes. If a Montessori school is not accredited, a parent unhappy over tuition, policy, or any other decision made by the school has recourse only to the school's board of directors (for private, not-for-profit), owners (for private, for-profit), or school board (for public schools). While these recourses can certainly provide satisfaction, their ability for objectivity is compromised by lack of Montessori training, profit motive, or simple emotional proximity to the school.

An accrediting body serves all members of the school community, because it suffers none of these compromising factors. Not only may it suggest to a school administration that a particular interpretation of a policy is unfair, it could also explain to a parent exactly why a policy makes sense. Although the school has operated in a certain way for years, a new parent does not necessarily understand the origin of, or reasons for, a policy. If the administration responds to a question defensively, the parent could easily jump to the conclusion that the policy is in error. Likewise, a Board member may need assistance from an outside body to avoid confrontation by gaining a broader understanding (or, having gained the under-

standing, enter the discussion with a broader base of knowledge). The accrediting body can serve as an objective, honest broker.

Accrediting bodies, of course, also have limitations. First, it is inconceivable that an accrediting body would address any matter brought to it by a school not accredited by them. Second, the ability of an accrediting body to sanction a school is limited. A number of Montessori organizations exist to assist Montessori schools by providing codes of ethics, initial and continuing teacher education, research, professional journals and the like, but very little is prescriptive. Influence comes generally in three levels of intensity: inquiry and, if necessary, advice; un-programmed visits to determine the facts; and removal of accreditation. Each accrediting body follows different procedures for such matters. In any case, the accrediting body would be unlikely to move too quickly through these three intensities because of the long-term damage it could do to a school, and it would most likely follow the three 'intensities' in sequence to arrive at a solution for all at the least expense.

Many of the organizations that recognize teacher education programs also accredit schools. This system not only provides that highest level of a 'seal of approval,' it also provides continuity between the education received by the classroom directress and the accreditation process.

Enrollment

The enrollment contract in a Montessori school serves the same purpose as in any other form of agreement. It binds each party to certain performance and gives an expectation to the other party of that performance; in the case of a school, at the simplest level, it obliges the school to provide a place for the child and binds the parent to send the child. Just as 'earnest money' serves when buying a house, a deposit cements the agreement. The deposit should be returned if the school is unable to enroll the child, and the school should keep it if the parents

decide to turn elsewhere for their child's education.

Since many schools, particularly small ones, make staff hiring and retention decisions based on very small margins for error, you may find that the school requires more than a token deposit as a retainer. It may require a substantial portion of the tuition, as well, and this may be non-refundable, as well. This will be especially likely in the elementary years, where a place in a classroom, once committed, frequently cannot be filled with another child at a later date. Parents of elementary-school-age children are less likely to change schools once the year has begun than parents of younger children. If this is your situation, you need to weigh your degree of certainty of your enrollment decision against the penalty for changing your mind. If you are not sure, delay enrolling (or re-enrolling), pick a decision-date-of-no-return and, if the financial penalty is formidable, stick with your decision. If your concerns have some basis, the school will probably have spaces available at the last minute, should you decide it is the best option, because other parents will have similar doubts and decide against enrolling.

Looking for a good Montessori school? Check first if it is authentic; then see how it feels. If those two match, you have probably found the right place for your child. If, in addition, the school is accredited, you also have added assurance to support your research and instincts, and to take that important first step to provide your child with the best possible start.

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