

# Why Montessori?

By Anu Karna, EdD

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I KNEW I WOULD BE PICKY ABOUT where my child started his schooling. Perhaps it was a bit premature, but I began searching for schools when I had just entered my second trimester of pregnancy. After calling over 30 public and private schools within a 50-mile radius of my home, and then visiting more than 15 of them, I chose Lexington Montessori School (LMS). The school search was stressful, to say the least, but well worth all my efforts.

However, when I tell friends and acquaintances about my son's fantastic school, I discover that Montessori is not well understood. My audience stiffens, and I hear them insist that Montessori is stressful, strict, and/or unstructured. There appear to be two threads of thinking about the Montessori philosophy. One view is that the Montessori environment is chaotic: "It's too much to expect children to choose their own work for hours at a time. They would get overwhelmed and lost," and "Montessori teachers don't even sit down or have a lesson plan for the class. The kids don't have any format to follow and won't know what to learn." The other view is that Montessori is too rigid: "Making simple things like taking off your coat or eating your lunch into a job to learn is too much for a child. Children need unstructured time to relax. Don't you think it's too much pressure?" and "I want my kid to be able just to play and unwind, have down time, and not have to feel like he's got

to be learning constantly. It would be stressful!"

## A Cure for the Common Stress

These two viewpoints trouble me, as they are so distant from the core of Montessori. Montessori is not only created to be stress-free but encourages a child to grow stress-free. For example, dropping off a child at school can be quite traumatic, especially the first few times. At LMS, teachers accompany children from their parents' car into the school—not so we parents can remain in our warm vehicles and make a quick exit to work, but so the children can make their own way into school. This sort of action would seem beyond the responsibility of a traditional school. Leave it to Montessori educators to have thought this far into the child's world, to consider the emotional impact of a child seeing her parent turn away during a hectic morning dropoff, and to find the perfect solution of encouraging the child to own the act of walking away after waving goodbye. It is not just that LMS teachers want the best for the child. It is the essence of the Montessori curriculum that dictates that walking oneself into school is actually a work that the child must own (and will benefit from emotionally).

It may be odd to call walking yourself into school "work." However, calling it so puts the significance of that event into perspective. As a child, it is work to cognitively digest and be at

# from a Parent's Answers Perspective



Photography by Susan Edwards

*Eager to start the school day*



Circle time: The power of community

ease with leaving a parent or parents to go to school. Although, by referring to this as work, this is perhaps where a misconception develops. Our world believes work to be stress-filled, complicated, and difficult. Montessori views work as tasks that range from self-care, to self-motivation, to self-development.

Another parent echoed the “stress” concern, that a child in a Montessori environment must be stressed because of Montessori’s “all about choices” approach. However, I believe the Montessori philosophy of choice, within a structured environment, is what provides some of the key ingredients to facing the world without stress. Armed with the ability to think thoroughly, know their strengths and weaknesses, and strategically solve

problems, Montessori children may be *less* stressed in times of trial, and may even enjoy working through the challenges they face.

As parents, we try to limit the amount of stress we share with or allow to rub off on our children. I recall an instance where a parent rushed into the LMS Montessori toddler classroom in the morning, quickly unzipping his child’s jacket and telling the child that there was no time to change into indoor shoes, lest he be late for class. At the time, I empathized with his worry: Class was beginning soon, and the child would not be ready for circle time. It occurred to me later that I had unconsciously missed the importance of this morning ritual. Changing from outdoor to indoor shoes gives children a chance

to make their classroom a home environment, by caring for themselves and practicing Practical Life skills. In actuality, the toddler child who was trying to put on his indoor shoes had already started his class work—for the child’s work in that stage of his Montessori life consists of learning to take off his jacket, hang it up properly, take outdoor shoes off, and learn to put on indoor ones. These are all part of the Montessori toddler curriculum. Though the parent was rightfully stressed for time, the child was not late to class at all, but rather already engrossed in the heart of the curriculum.

If we parents continuously shield our children from time pressures and other pressures in our world, then stress may truly be a foreign feeling to

them. However, we ideally would not shelter our children forever but instead raise them so they can survive independently of us. For the child who is developing autonomy, the realm of anxiety or fear is certainly not an unknown. And for those who see Montessori as too chaotic or too unstructured, this chaos would only add to their anxiety or fear. In reality, the choices in a Montessori classroom do not weigh a child down. Yes, Montessori is choice-based. But it is not an academic version of a toy store, where a child becomes overstimulated by the seemingly infinite choices and, as a result, never develops focus or direction. In a Montessori classroom, choice frames the child's activity in the classroom. The child gets to choose her task or work to master. The child decides when he has mastered the work, is cognitively exhausted by it for the day, and/or wants to try something else.

Imagine the pressure a child may feel if she is repeatedly told that time is up and she must stop her current activity, however interesting it may be, because the next activity is about to start. In a traditional curriculum, it often seems that a student is just about to truly understand the topic at hand—for example, a geometric proof—when the unit ends or the next chapter begins and it's on to linear equations. So much for falling in love with proofs! Furthermore, can you empathize with the fear that a child may have when he has an unfriendly interaction on the playground if he is not aware of tactics he can use for conflict resolution? Choice-based learning and conflict resolution are just two aspects of the Montessori curriculum that prepare children for life and its joys and challenges. As a parent, I want my child to face life with less stress, anxiety, and fear, and Montessori helps him do just that.

### Dreaming Big

I have a whole host of dreams for my child. When we as parents dream of the best way to raise our children, we dream big. We dream about things beyond our own experiences. We think of how to help our children be

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successful—more successful than we ourselves have been. We think of how to make our children's lives easier—far easier than ours. We want more for our children than we have had, desiring a society and world for them that are better than the ones we grew up in. And we compromise and would willingly take steps back in our lives so that our children might move forward.

This dream begs the question, What can I do for my child? What do I want my child to bring to the table? My short answer is that I want my child to be able to know the person that he is. More precisely, I want him to be able to have the confidence to do what he can on his own, and have the confidence to ask others when he needs assistance. He should be able to think critically, to care for himself, to care for those around him, and to care for the world we live in and the planet we live on. He should be aware of his views and opinions and aware of the perspectives of others. He should always love learning, whether it is mathematics, poetry, anthropology, or technology.

Does this sound familiar? These

components are the core of the Montessori philosophy. These holistic dreams are what convinced me that LMS is for my children. Sure, the longer answer may reveal dreams about one's child winning the Nobel Prize. However, the bottom line is that we want our children to be happy, and even a Nobel Prize would be irrelevant if peering through a crystal ball showed that a child led an unhappy life as a consequence.

The weight of reaching these expectations is partially on the parent who dreams to such heights. Nevertheless, we all know environment plays a role in child development—and hence some weight lies with the environment in which the child spends her school days. Our society has come to love terms like *child-centered learning*, *independent thinking*, and *cognitive development*. These terms are used to describe many types of academic settings. They are increasingly becoming a requirement for everything from child-care centers to schools for gifted children—and rightfully so, as I believe these terms represent proven ingredients for a “successful” child or citizen.

### Deciding on Montessori

I believe in the intangible value of the intrinsic love of learning that Montessori nurtures. I want my child to be able to learn with confidence and develop a passion for learning so that he will be able to learn whatever skill he needs to survive in any situation he faces. Furthermore, he will know when to act independently and when to engage others for help.


To foster all these characteristics isn't a simple task. It circles back to the comments that I find baffling about Montessori. When a person asks me whether my child needs unstructured time, not too much pressure, time just to relax and play and not feel like he is pushed to learn, my answer is “Yes, exactly.” That's exactly right. Maria

Montessori believed that "play is the work of the child." For children, playing (a self-motivated, happy activity) is the most fruitful part of their day. The Montessori philosophy goes to great lengths to instill the characteristics that will see my child through adversity and better his chances of success in achieving his greatest dreams, and mine. Through the Montessori approach, he develops the love of learning (which I define as loving to discover the unknown as much as enjoying the known) and love of the world that he lives in, learns to love and care for himself, and understands how to share responsibility for the world's progress. All these must be fostered in a place where the child sees that she is a small part of a bigger world and, at the same time, can have a tremendous impact on that bigger world. No other philosophy of learning brings such a connection to the heart of its learning process.

An observation at LMS validated these thoughts. I watched as my child took a stroll around his classroom. I fought my impulse to ask him to explore particular stations that interested me. I also wondered impatiently why he stayed absorbed at one station for many minutes but reminded myself that he would decide when he had cognitively exhausted that station. I also noticed, when rest time was announced, he inadvertently became more restless and wanted to escape his naptime. Throughout my visit, my instinct was to interrupt and dictate to my child, and (to put it bluntly) to *teach* him. But as he moved through the classroom, my anxiety vanished. He demonstrated ownership of his time. He seemed fully aware of himself and his interests. The teachers in the class stuck to sharing observations and conversations. They only interrupted the children to gently encourage different ways of thinking. They asked for opinions and views to reflect the individuality of each child.

At rest time, the teachers asked the children to find their names and attach them to the "rest wall" with Velcro. That one simple task prepared the children for the transition, allowing them to own the next step. My son put his name up on the wall, gave me an affectionate hug, and concluded, "You know, Mommy, I think I will sleep

today and not just rest because I was playing all morning." Among the obvious validations about the Montessori philosophy that I felt in his words, I loved hearing the number of "I's" in that sentence. I have bet on him to be the best he can be, empowered by the most reliable Montessori tools his teachers and I can offer him.



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