

Why We Do What We Do

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Re-enrollment season is upon us! By the time you read this, more likely than not, you have already turned in your paperwork for next year. Nevertheless, every year we encounter similar questions about the process and why Children's Garden follows certain practices. We know that we do some things differently from other schools, and that these differences are what make our school what it is. As a staff, we continually reflect on our practices and evaluate whether these practices are defensible traditions or outdated in need of replacement. We frequently reflect on our roots and values, reminding ourselves of why we do what we do.

Our mission is to provide a "nurturing community of children, families, and teachers guided by Montessori philosophy and influenced by Reggio philosophy that educates young children and inspires a life-long love of learning." At our heart, we are a Montessori-Reggio hybrid and our programs are shaped by those philosophies. As educators, we value curiosity, independence, concentration, and collaboration. We believe each child has his/her own path to development that s/he is following and that it is our job as educators to guide and support him/her along that path. Additionally, we believe that the world is an ever-changing, busy place and we strive to provide a sanctuary for children away from the hustle and bustle. We dream of a place where the joys of childhood and quiet discovery are ever present, where children have the time and the space to just be children.

The Toddler Program: For most of our Toddler students, this is their first experience away from home. Our program is structured around the premise that Toddlers require consistency, order, and space to become their own people. Our teachers strive to support their independence by supporting them to do as much for themselves as they are capable, whether that means encouraging them to dress and undress independently, introducing them slowly to the world of toilet learning, or reassuring them as they navigate new social relationships. While many of our students only spend one year in the Toddler Class, those who do return for another half to full year gain a great deal from their second year. They do not just repeat the same class over again. Rather, they deepen their experience by practicing being a role model. Not only do they help the new students to navigate the rules and routines of the classroom, but they also begin to learn the subtle difference between helping and doing for a younger, less experienced peer. Additionally, the oldest children revisit the materials from a different angle, perfecting their mastery and often times making new connections between the activities and their purposes. Finally, the toddler teachers, armed with knowledge of what comes next, are able to introduce these children to future, Primary expectations, easing them gently into their next transition.

The Primary Program and the Three Year Cycle: Because we are a Montessori school and all of our teachers are Montessori trained, we value not only the mixed age class, but cherish the three year cycle of learning. Frequently, parents request that children move from their current

classroom into a different one because “they already spent a year or two in that room.” Parents are concerned that their children will be bored, spending yet another year with “the same materials.” Actually, this is not the case at all!

Some of the Primary curriculum is sequential, meaning that a child will move through different activities at different times. For example, most of the Language Materials are set up to address the needs of each child where they are at that moment. The first year, a child might work primarily with the Sandpaper Letters, tracing the shape, learning the sound, and matching it to objects in the environment. The second year, a child might have mastered the connection between sounds and symbols, and would then work on combining sounds in order to read and write. This might start out as reading simple phonetic words and grow into reading readers. The third year, a child will not only continue to work on reading more difficult texts and writing more developed stories, but also will begin to work on perfecting letter formation, sentence structure, and the parts of speech.

Not all materials are used sequentially. One of my favorite things about the Montessori classroom is how some materials change as the child gains experience with it over time. During the first year in the classroom, the three year old child is exposed to a wide variety of materials and is focused on exploring. For example, she might be drawn to the small objects in the science area and will begin to classify her world by sorting them into categories like living and nonliving, plant and animal, or even the 5 vertebrate classes. The second year, at four, the child will be interested in building her skills. She will return to the science area. Her interest in classification will expand with her ability to focus on work for longer periods of time. She will gravitate more frequently to the three part cards which will help her to identify the different parts of different types of animals. As she sorts and categorizes, she will gradually become more aware of the specific differences between different types of animals. For example, guinea pigs have noses, while birds have beaks, and fish have gills. Finally, the third year, the five year old will step into the same area eager to conduct research and explore her interests. She will take out the same materials, easily sorting the objects or matching the animal part cards, but extending the work to embrace a detailed research project. At this time, she might create a chart with illustrations and words, defining different types of birds, labelling their body parts, and sharing other important facts about what make birds unique.

The Extended Primary: Every year, a few parents approach us to inquire about our Extended Primary program. They are confused by our age cut-offs and wonder how we can say that a child is not old enough to enroll in our XP program, but will still be ready for Kindergarten the following year? The Extended Primary program is a program specifically designed for children in their third year of the Montessori Primary program. As mentioned before, these older children are internally driven to take their work to a higher level as they conduct detailed research and pursue their individual passions. Supported by their experience with materials, they have a dearth of experience to pull from as they delve deeper.

Additionally, five is a big year of growth in the life of a child. Children go through huge changes in development when they turn five. Their way of thinking changes as they transition from the Absorbent Mind, where learning is effortless, to the Reasoning Mind, where complex, critical thinking begins to happen. While our three and four year old students need concrete manipulatives to learn concepts, our five year olds are able to understand abstract information. For example, once a child understands the quantities 0 to 10, they begin to explore the decimal system using the Montessori Bank Materials. They will work with the materials to explore increasingly complex mathematical concepts, but it is not until their brains begin to shift at the magical age of five that they are able to think of these concepts using only the numbers with no concrete objects present.

The Extended Primary is not a Kindergarten Prep program. It is a place for third year students to take their learning to the next level. For this reason, many years ago we changed the name back from Pre-K to its original Extended Primary. As five year olds shift their way of thinking, they turn to each other for collaborative problem-solving. As a social being, the five year olds run rapidly into the complex world of unspoken societal mores. Looking around the busy Primary classroom, you will see three year olds sitting beside each other, working on similar activities. At four, they begin to work together, conscientiously following the rules of their activity. By five, they are ready to negotiate new rules, creating complex activities while establishing their own mini-society within the community of the classroom.