

# **LMS IS A SPECIAL PLACE!**

**(Not a pre-school)**

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When strangers inquire of a child “do you go to pre-school?” a Montessori child will almost always answer, “I go to a Montessori School”.

Montessori school is a special place. It is a Children’s House. Dr. Montessori deliberately gave it this name rather than school because her intention was to prepare a natural environment that would meet the basic needs of 3 to 6 year old children, one that was a house for children rather than an institution.

The Montessori Children’s House is a different and unique place. Sure, it is child-friendly and pleasant, but that is about where the similarity between Montessori and pre-schools ends.

The following are some of the distinctive qualities built into the daily life of our Montessori Children’s House which make it unique. I will include some stories from the classroom which illustrate some of these special characteristics.

*1. Our Montessori is not a pre-school because it is based on a very specific educational philosophy.*

The philosophy allows each child to develop at his/her own pace, using his or her own unique abilities. The children are guided by a trained Montessori director whose role is to lead by following each child.

The application of the Montessori philosophy is not some trendy innovation. It is based on years of refinement and is applied with equal benefit to children throughout the world. It has stood the test of time because it is a scientific approach based on the psychological and developmental needs of children, not on someone’s bright idea of what children should like or should respond to.

*2. Our emphasis is on helping children to grow, whereas pre-schools often entertain the children.*

In our Children’s House the children grow and become masters of themselves, they become independent and self-confident. These results are achieved because the children have meaningful things to do.

Dr. Montessori observed, and no doubt you have too, that children want to participate in the family. They want to do the things adults are doing and to help care for themselves. Given a choice, most children prefer real work and tools to other activities. As a result, at LMS we give them meaningful things to do.

In pre-schools children imitate adults largely through pretend play with pretend props. At our school the children imitate adult roles using real things, washing real dishes, using a real broom to sweep up crumbs or real clay to shape artifacts. Toys that look like real objects but do not work as real ones do are frustrating, confusing and may provoke anger or improper use. Real, though appropriately sized tools and utensils help a child to grow,

to have experience, to get feed back and to become skilled. Independence and mastery are achieved through experience and activity. A child can do what the adult is doing.

*3. At LMS we help each child to grow by doing as little as possible for that child when our knowledge and experience tell us that the child can do something for him/her self. (The trained adult is crucial here for it is only through observation and a history with each child that the adult knows when to intervene and when to step back.)*

This probably sounds somewhat counter productive. The popular belief is of course that adults have to help children, but according to Dr. Montessori, to help by doing something for a child is a disservice to that emerging person.

This does not mean that we abandon the children but our help is given through the preparation of the environment, by showing a child how to do something and then by stepping back to allow that child to work on the task. The Montessori materials are arranged and structured to allow for repetition, practice, and feedback. The child is given time to explore with the materials and to make his/her own discoveries. There is no rush, there is little or no adult interference. The child is interested in the process and the activity. Initially at least, the end result is not important.

*4. There are as few as possible interruptions and distractions.*

Class periods at LMS are not broken up by bells and other arbitrary 'periods'. Daily and weekly routines are not interrupted by holidays and celebrations. Pre-schools and schools use such devices to keep interest, but usually these result in scattered behavior, loud voices and wasted days.

The luxury of being able to start, work on at our own pace and complete a task, is very satisfying for adults. It is equally rewarding and necessary for a child to discover this recompense for effort and to experience pleasure in work which is supported by no scheduled interruptions.

*5. Our Montessori classes are un-graded, spanning the full three year developmental cycle from 3 to 6 years.*

This allows the younger children to learn from the older ones and the older ones have the opportunity to teach the younger ones. Children see where they are going and where they have been.

At LMS the children stay in the same group for three years. They gain confidence and independence in not being shifted from room to room and from teacher to teacher.

Likewise, the adult guide stays with the children for the 3 year cycle. He gets to know the children and has ultimately three years worth of knowledge about each child, rather than the mere one year of most teachers. There is no starting to get to know a whole new group of children each school year. The un-graded class and the freedom of movement allowed to the children cuts down on competitiveness. Instead it fosters positive, supportive interactions as children help one another and themselves. Social skills develop naturally.

*6. You may have noticed that at our school there are no rewards, gimmicks or other extrinsic prizes dangled before the children to motivate them.*

Motivation comes from freedom of choice, from attractive and challenging materials to

choose from or from an interest sparked by a lesson or a peer. The satisfaction of completing a task invites repetition.

Children at LMS do not fill-in duplicated papers or other work to take home. They draw because it is interesting, they practice writing letters or numbers to be able to do those things. If they are only coloring to have something to take home, the work loses its purpose and you too probably lose interest after the 35th paper with red scribbles all over it comes home.

### *7. How does it all work?*

I was recently asked, but how do you get the children to do things if they are free to choose to say no to your presentations. Do you make them repeat your lessons or can they get by without doing anything?

This is often a confusing question for people new to or unfamiliar with our approach, and it is a difficult one to respond to simply, but let me try to do so. Firstly, the preparation of the environment, the order, the display of the materials the complete sets and attractive packaging all invite handling.

Secondly, we expect the children here to do things. It is not necessary to “make” them do things if they learn that we expect things of them, and if the choices are made available in an orderly and interesting display.

Thirdly, Dr Montessori placed strong emphasis on respect. Mutual respect between children and adults, between children and children and between children and the materials in the room. What is meant by respect is often ambiguous, so let me be more specific.

You may have observed that the adults at LMS greet your children upon arrival and at dismissal. The adults pay attention to the children by looking at them and by shaking hands as means of communication. The children are entering or leaving their environment. They are in transition. Sincere attention is shown to each child who is moving between the worlds of home and school.

Parents sometimes feel slighted when they do not get attention at this time of day, but our responsibility at those moments is to the child and we indicate this importance by our response to the child.

To help the children grow in their respect for one another and for the environment, we present to them what Dr. Montessori called Lessons of Grace and Courtesy. It is not enough to say “don’t bother your friend who is working” but rather we make lessons and games out of bothering and how not to bother!

I would like to close with another example of something that places LMS above the status of a mere pre-school.

As I am sure you know we have Spanish speaking assistants in both the morning and afternoon classes. These people do not confuse the children by speaking in English and then saying words here and there in Spanish, as you might find in a traditional setting.

Rather they use their language all the time in all their interactions with the children.

Despite the fact that it is a well known that “immersion” is the most successful means of learning a foreign language and although it is a fact that children absorb language by listening to and hearing it, by repetition and in relation to what they are doing, people consistently fail to use or to apply this knowledge. Language is taught as vocabulary, often divorced from experience.

Like so much else that we do at LMS, our approach is unique. Spanish is like everything else in the room. It available to the children when they are ready to ask for a lesson or when they simply want to chat.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize once more that at LMS our goal is not merely to get the children ready for elementary school, but rather it is to prepare them for life experiences. It is a lofty goal and one I hope LMS can be proud of!

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