

Childpeace Montessori Elementary Curriculum and Philosophy

The 3-Year Commitment

Montessori classes are mixed-age, and organized such that a child typically spends three years in the same classroom. Subsequently, a third of the class graduates each June and a third of the class is new each September. This ensures that your child's guide knows him/her deeply and can tailor the curriculum to each person's learning style and interests. It also provides the class with a stable culture and a community of "elders". On your enrollment contract each year, we ask that you seriously consider your commitment to your child's 3-year experience in the classroom. The end of the "Third Year", when a child is typically 9 years old, is a natural time to consider matriculating or staying with Childpeace for the Upper Elementary block.

A General Outline of Montessori Elementary Curriculum

A Sense of Purpose

Montessori education arose from detailed observations of children at different stages of their development. Its essence is to create an environment that allows children to exercise to the fullest those strengths and interests most prominent at each particular stage of life. An adult guides and inspires children to use this rich environment, which has been specially prepared to encourage self-directed learning.

The elementary program, then, is based on developmental needs common to 6-12 year old children and is also highly individualized. Our goal is to help the child become an independent, inquiring, and confident person. We see each child as a whole person, not a vessel into which we pour measured amounts of knowledge. By working to understand and support the developmental characteristics of the age level and the unique personality of each child, we follow Dr. Maria Montessori's plea to "follow the child."

One consequence of this attitude is a curriculum which is open-ended and essentially creative. Children work with concepts they have learned by developing their own projects, both large and small, rather than by feeding back the information in test and workbook form. Children who work at school with autonomy and dignity usually learn with more significant and long-lasting results than children who work primarily to meet the daily demands of an external system. It is the comment of almost every observer of Montessori elementary programs that the children seem especially busy and productive despite (or perhaps because of) the lack of external rewards and punishments so popular now in most schools. Since the teacher knows each child well and keeps detailed records of their work, testing is rare. Test-taking may be taught as a skill, but it is not a means by which children regularly "prove" their learning to others.

Our curriculum for the elementary child-- Dr. Montessori called it a "Cosmic Education"-- emphasizes the interconnectedness of the many things children observe and learn. It avoids, as much as possible, artificial division of knowledge and experience into distinct pigeon-holes. Connections excite children, stimulate their imagination, and give them a sense that they already know a great deal and can easily master new topics. The Montessori child feels that it's all accessible-- this infinite, fascinating world of things and ideas. Above all, they are not

dependent on a teacher for all their information; they learn both the habit and methods of finding out more on their own.

The Montessori elementary curriculum helps children appreciate the wonder and beauty of the natural world and also the historic accomplishments of humanity. From this, they can develop a sense of their own place in the Universe, their individual responsibility, and their potential to enhance both the natural and cultural environments in which they live. Their studies of nature and people emphasize the tremendous diversity that abounds in the world, which ultimately leads also to an attitude of tolerance and respect.

In Harmony with the Child's Needs and Tendencies

The characteristics of children from six to twelve years of age are, of course, very different from those of the preschool child, and they invite an approach which is at once very different from and yet consistent with that used in the Montessori preschool.

The elementary teacher introduces an area of study with a presentation of key information or material and then guides the children while they develop individual or small group projects to explore varied facets of the subject. Unlike the preschool children-- whose need is to experience, name, and classify the immediate world around them through the use of their senses, elementary children want to explore a much larger universe through the use of imagination and reason. They stretch to imagine the nearly unimaginably big, the extremely ancient. Their curiosity is directed not just at the basic facts, but at the "why" and "how."

The elementary work frequently involves research, discussion, and large-scale projects. We do a lot more science and social studies at first and second grade ages than most schools, not in order to "accelerate" their education, but rather because it would starve their intellect not to.

Dr. Montessori wrote that at this age, "the closed school can no longer be sufficient" for the children. We thus incorporate the experience of "going out" as a regular occurrence for the children, whether it be a simple walk in the neighborhood to gather types of seeds or an excursion by bus to see products imported and exported. This is an important part of what makes learning "real" and meaningful to children.

Inner-directed Learning

In the Montessori elementary classroom, the children are given opportunities to learn to set their own goals, budget their own time, and appraise their own results. They are "self-starters" who work because of interest and enthusiasm rather than external incentives and sanctions. Secondary school teachers generally describe Montessori graduates as a joy to teach for these very reasons.

The expectations that society (e.g., the State of Oregon) holds for their academic achievement are, nevertheless, of natural interest to the elementary-age child. They want to begin to participate in society's rules, and so we let them know what is required of children their age. Experience teaches us patience and respect for individual differences in learning, but there are occasional cases where a child has not acquired a certain necessary skill or knowledge of which

he is capable. We then enlist that child's cooperation in a planned effort to catch up as quickly as possible to the recognized standard. The fact is, however, that most children in Montessori are well ahead of the basic public school requirements after several years. This gives them opportunity to explore broadly in the many aspects of our curriculum that are not "required" work.

Cosmic Education

Cosmic Education was the way in which Dr. Montessori exposed the older child to an imaginative and reasoning exploration of the universe and its components, and introduced the child to one's place and responsibility in society. Through what's known in the elementary Montessori terminology as the five Great lessons, the doors are opened to the drama of the universe. First, its coming into being; second, its furnishing with plant and animals; then third, the coming on earth of human beings. Human beings are understood as having special gifts unique to them: intellect (the power to reason, think, know, and understand) and love (the power to *will* and choose the good of others; to serve). These are the qualities we bring to the child's awareness and we awaken the child's desire to use them.

The first three Great Lessons set a pattern of rule and order for the child. In the first, we have **The creation of the universe**: the reaction of chemical elements and the substance of matter (liquid, air, and the appearance of our world). In the second lesson, we have **the coming of life**: the furnishings of our world with plants and animals, and a way for each kind of life to behave differently, but in a way that existence continues. Then in sequence we have **the coming of the human being**: the last great actor to appear on this stage. With the coming of the human being, we move on to the other two great lessons. These two great lessons draw the attention of the child to the two great achievements of people, **the language of communication** and **the language of invention**. History, as the story of the human being and our achievements, is at the center of *Cosmic Education*.

Dr. Montessori called the child "cosmic agent". She said that the child between the ages of 6 and 12 needs to be given a cosmic viewpoint. Cosmic Education is not a scheme or a method of education, divided into subjects of a curriculum with pre-set time limits for study. It is the sowing of seeds to ignite the child's interest in the inter-connectedness and inter-dependence of all life.

Going Out

Children in the Montessori Elementary classroom are actively encouraged to develop personal interest research projects. Montessori elementary education has a unique emphasis on encouraging children to go outside of the classroom to access information and/or resources for information. It is not possible to bring the totality of society and its work to the confines of the elementary classroom as we were able to bring the qualities of the world into the confines of the Children's House. In addition to the classroom resources, the children are presented with the option of organizing a "going out." Going out is essentially a small group or individual, interest based field trip to some location outside the classroom.

This could be as simple as a trip to the public library to find more books on a topic - or more specific, such as interviewing a local expert in the community.

At the lower elementary level, we tend to focus on giving students the tools they will need to go out. Skills such as phone etiquette and map reading are a part of the student's preparation. As these skills develop, the scope of the going-out experiences tends to widen. First and second year students may mainly focus on planning trips to the library to gather additional resource material. Older students visit a variety of locations throughout the community in search of experts, museums, natural habitats, organizations and so forth that will contribute to their area of interest. All students in the elementary program, younger elementary students as well, are welcome to arrange going outs as their interest and confidence allows.

"The experience of Going Out into society to find answers to questions is a physical one, but it has an important impact on the child both emotionally and spiritually. An essential part of the child's experience as she grows is that of receiving greater insight into her own place in this world. This cannot be achieved without getting out into the world and doing so independently. Far more important than the actual information sought is the experience of interacting with people in the world and all that that entails.

"Dr. Montessori said that if a culture doesn't raise or elevate humans, it doesn't respond to the urgent needs of the times. She continued by saying that any culture which doesn't value individuality and doesn't bring about a harmony in relationships between humans should be considered out of date. It's odd then, that these new "advancements" in society [email, T.V. channel options, internet] do seem to be edging us towards increased isolation and thus a decrease in opportunities to practice these relationships. When the child carries out a Going Out experience, she not only learns about the mysteries and mechanisms of culture, she prepares for her fast-approaching entrance into the society of the world. Everything about a Montessori environment, especially Going Out, prepares the child for a successful experience in her society." (Annabeth Jensen, *Going Out for world Peace*, Odyssey Montessori School)

Parent volunteers are needed to escort the children on these outings. At the beginning of the school year, your child's guide will let you know when volunteer training will be available.

Please be sure your child has a Multnomah County Library Card as we often make trips to the library to check out materials. We have a safe place for the children to store their library cards at school.

Core Subjects

It is worth noting that while the division of the world into these separate "subjects" is perhaps a convenient way to write about our work at school, it is not the way children experience it. As noted above, we emphasize the interconnectedness of the many things we study. To take perhaps the simplest kind of example: a child's arithmetic problems will often deal with real questions arising in his own study of, say, history of geography, rather than some fairly irrelevant problem drawn from a text.

Mathematics and Geometry

Maria Montessori described the “mathematical mind” as a universal human attribute. The materials and methods of the Montessori classroom reinforce the child’s tendency to count, compare, compute, and measure. The child begins in preschool a progression from concrete experience to abstraction. The concrete materials are appealing to children, ingeniously designed for revealing principles and concepts, and are made to be experienced and manipulated. Through both physical and mental activity with this material, the child acquires a profound basis for mathematics.

During the elementary years, a sequence of lessons brings the child naturally and gradually to the point of understanding abstract mathematical operations. The structure of the decimal system, the operations of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, and other key concepts follow this same pattern. Once they have a firm understanding of the concepts, children move toward memorization, keeping track of their own progress and work both in teams and individually. By using the Montessori math material, most children experience many concepts traditionally taught much later, including fractions, squared and cubed numbers, multiples, and factors, for example.

The Montessori geometry materials offer children an open-ended field of exploration. These materials and the lessons which accompany them permit children to discover important principles and relationships. When, later in their education, they learn the formal rules of geometry, it’s like meeting old friends again. A student may learn nomenclature for the types and parts of polygons, circles, angles, and lines. New knowledge is always applied to the environment (e.g., finding right triangles in the floor, walls, and furniture) and often extends to the creation of a piece of handwork as well. With the principles of geometric equivalence, the child acquires a key which unlocks a whole field of creative work and which prepares him for the study of area.

Language

The child in preschool loves words and is busy absorbing language. Enriched vocabulary, poetry and prose-reading, and word play are all part of the environment. Young children delight in learning to make the symbols which represent their speech and to interpret those made by others. Thus the keys to writing and reading are acquired with the joy of discovery.

The elementary child, exercising her powers of reasoning and curiosity, learns the fascinating history of language from the distant past to the present. We show that language continually changes, that it reflects history and the interlocking subjects of the classroom. The children are conscious of language wherever they go.

Grammar is made accessible to young children with the aid of colorful materials which employ symbols familiar from preschool work. In etymology, word study (synonyms, affixes, compound words, word families, etc.), analysis of sentence structure and of the parts of speech, the children find many activities in which to apply their vocabulary and their creativity with language. At the same time, they become more conscious of its structure. Discoveries in grammar, word study, and etymology quite naturally give rise to topical spelling lists; thus the children’s spelling drill and dictation is assisted by their knowledge of the words’ origins,

meanings, and functions. (Examples overheard in class: “That’s one of those superlative adjectives, so it must end in ‘est,’ not ‘ist””; “That’s one of those words we talked about the Greeks inventing, so the ‘f’ sound is probably spelled ‘ph.’”)

Reading, writing, and spelling skills blossom, not only through these activities, but through the work in all subjects. Writing develops in connection with exploration, research, and experimentation, as children want to share what they have discovered. Creative writing allows all children to acquire very early in life a valuable tool for self-expression. Reading becomes the most important means to satisfy their interests. Witnessing older children reading and writing spontaneously, the younger ones are highly motivated to perfect those language skills which still need work. With carefully structured presentations and appealing follow-up work, the teacher and child work together to accomplish that goal. This basic skill-building in reading and writing is done individually or in very small groups. In general, early language work in Montessori is something exciting, not a chore or an opportunity for failure.

Having acquired both the mechanics of language and a sense of its history and spirit, the child then experiences poetry, prose, drama, dialogue, discussion, debate, and research, in oral as well as written forms. The teacher carefully selects a treasury of special books for the classroom. The children learn to have very focused readings and discussions. Reading aloud to the children is a daily practice.

History

The history of life, both before and after the arrival of humankind, is inextricably linked to other subjects such as geology, geography, and biology. Thus it might be said that history is the framework for all fields of study in Montessori. Even in mathematics and language, we tell children stories of the great discoveries and inventions by which our predecessors built the powerful tools of language and number. Children love stories of the past, and in Montessori elementary we use stories to spark the children’s interest in all areas.

Natural history materials, such as an elaborate time line of life, show children the dramatic and colorful spectacle of life forms and their development. Human history is presented from a perspective of the basic human needs (food, shelter, protection, transport, spiritual expression, etc.) and the variety of ways in which different peoples have been able to meet them. This framework guides their research and reveals both the unique attributes of different cultures and the universality of all. The study of history reveals many fascinating connections and interdependencies, not only among various peoples, but between people and the changing physical environment.

Geography

We begin with theories on the origin of the Universe, in which principles of physical science are revealed, and then proceed to examine the forces which have acted over the ages to shape the world we inhabit. Children explore volcanism, the work of water, wind and air, and the basic physical properties of matter. We employ demonstrations, field activities, and experiments the children learn to perform on their own.

The relationships of earth, sun, seasons, zones of climate, etc., are also studied along with economic and political geography. Each topic offers a number of possible side trips which a student may follow. A basic principle here and throughout the Montessori elementary program is that we give first the “big picture”-- answers to the fundamental why’s and how’s-- and only then work toward the more particular, the more local.

Biology

Children are fascinated by plants and animals. It is not unusual for our preschool children already to have learned the names of many of the flowers, trees, birds, and mammals that surround them in the world, as well as the parts of flowers and the very beginnings of biological classification.

In the elementary, the emphasis is on understanding plant and animal behavior and physiology. The basic needs of plants and animals (e.g. water, food, defense, reproduction) provide the framework for investigating the unique varieties from the point of view of adaptation, both to contemporary environments and throughout time. Children’s observation and discussion of differences build up the stores of experience with which they further their understanding of biological classification.

Spanish

Our goal in the **EL** classes is to incorporate Spanish into the daily life of the class, and to offer opportunities to learn Spanish during the Montessori work hours. Whenever possible, we hire Spanish-speaking assistants for the elementary classes and they speak to the children only in Spanish. For classes without a Spanish-speaking assistant, we have a Spanish teacher in the class for certain hours each week to give Spanish lessons (in small-group, Montessori-style). Our goal is that each child has the opportunity to hear and learn Spanish during their work day, and to practice Spanish during the class work time. The level of a child’s interest in the language experience will determine the extent and intensity of their language work. Written Spanish is introduced at the elementary level.

Art

In Montessori education, we see art work as an important form of self-expression and a part of the daily life of the class. A teacher’s approach is to give basic lessons to small groups of children in the mechanics of using a media, then to have the supplies available on the shelf for the child to use during the work time. Children often access the art supplies to illustrate and decorate their work in other curriculum areas. Media commonly presented during the year include watercolors, chalks, pastels, clay, colored pencil, collage.

Since art, like any other work, is not limited to short “art class” periods and projects, children’s creativity has a chance to truly grow and bloom as a part of everyday activity. Music and art history and appreciation are also included as a part of the children’s study of human culture and can lead to “going out” to attend a performance or visit a gallery.

Childpeace attempts to hire skilled artists as assistants and support staff in order that children may access precise instruction on a wider variety of mediums and styles to enhance their work.

Music

Music is as much a part of the classroom environment as pictures on the wall. The work with ear training with both the diatonic and chromatic scales begins in the preschool. In the elementary we build upon these experiences, taking children into the beginnings of reading and writing music. Beautiful singing is a part of every day in the classroom.

Drama

Drama is a very noticeable part of a Montessori classroom. It is a special love of many children this age, and serves a number of purposes. Making an original play or skit about something they have recently learned is one way in which children truly make knowledge their own. It can also be the occasion for learning to write dialogue, or how to stage or perform in a play. Students also may research and create character performances as part of their study of history, especially in February and March, Black History and Women's History Months.

Physical Education

We are aware that the growing elementary student needs to have outlets for his/her increasing energy. Every EL guide at Childpeace has had some education in flexibility and strength training for children. Each guide is responsible for incorporating this into the school week, and it is typically done as part of the 45 minutes of recess time (e.g. stretches, laps, exercises). Staff members teach activities as diverse as yoga, soccer, and basketball at different times during the year. Guides also use our play areas for class group games centered on building community and teamwork. Always our emphasis is on skill-building, to develop consciousness and control of movement, to enhance personal confidence, and to teach the techniques and values of teamwork and cooperation.

The study of nutrition and the human body are included in our curriculum.

Cooking/Food Preparation

At all age levels, we offer children developmentally appropriate lessons about food preparation, and present the experience of food as related to interaction with others, enjoyable awareness, and independence. The Montessori guides also use cooking activities as an extension of math (measurement and equivalence) and science (reactions and botany) and social studies (food as reflection of culture). Our cook for the toddlers spends time each day with elementary children who come to the kitchen with cooking plans and projects. It is common for EL classes to plan and implement a special lunch for a holiday event, a special snack or lunch as an extension of studying another culture, and snack preparation for the class' daily snack. At Childpeace we serve vegetarian foods, and emphasize good nutrition with whole grains, organic produce, and foods with limited additives.

Gardening

Gardening activities are connected to the extensive botany curriculum in the classrooms. In addition to plant propagation within the classroom, the EL classes maintain raised beds around the school. We have plans to include a greenhouse in order to grow edible plants.

Extra Activities

Early Morning Care

EMC is provided for working parents who need to drop their child off earlier than the standard arrival time. The hours for Early Morning Care are 7:15-8:30, and takes place in the Lupine Club Room. Breakfast is available for children who arrive by 8:10.

Aftercare -- "Club Rooms"

The afternoon program (3:15-5:45) is available to parents who work and need their children to remain at school for the afternoon. Your child's teacher will see your child to the "Lupine Club Room" (for Lower EI) or the "Club Room" (for Upper EI) at dismissal time, where the after care staff will be waiting. Aftercare staff members plan and implement a variety of afternoon activities and outings for the students, as well as create a home-like space so that children may relax, read, and choose activities from the shelves in the club room. The ratio is typically 8 children per adult.

Upon enrollment, you will be asked to complete a "schedule form" which indicates which day/s your child will attend Aftercare. If you would like to add aftercare during the school year, please find a "Change of Schedule Request Form" by the communication files, complete, and forward it to the aftercare staff. (They have an envelope for parent notes by the entry to the aftercare room.) You will be billed monthly for the number of days you use each week. (Attendance all five days is not required, but you will need to sign up in advance for a regular schedule of days.) Please keep the staff informed of your usual pick-up time and call if there are changes.

Drop-in Care is sometimes available, space permitting. Please leave a note for the after-care or before-care staff at least one day in advance, stating your request. A staff person will call you or leave a written response in your child's communication folder to let you know if your child can be accommodated.

Unplanned Care: If your child has not departed by 3:30 and is not expected in after-care, s/he will be brought to the office to wait while we try to contact you. Unplanned care is billed at a much higher rate because of the difficulties it causes in staffing. This also applies to children in after-care who have not left the building by 6:00 p.m.

Dance

A tap and ballet dance class is offered on Thursday afternoons from September through June, for **CH** and **EL** students as scheduling permits. This activity is optional and is paid for by the parents. Priority may be given to students enrolled in our after-care program. Our dance instructor, Nancy Kern, has been with Childpeace since 1988.

Yoga

Yoga for **EL** students has been offered two mornings per week (Tuesday and Thursday, 8:00-8:30 a.m.). Led by a certified instructor from Yoga in the Pearl, this activity is optional and paid for by parents.

Chess

In 2003, we began an after-school chess club for any interested elementary students. Led by elementary guide Peter Jensen, the chess club meets once a week for 45 minutes. It has been free of charge, with children bringing their own chess sets for use. We are investigating the option of hiring a chess "master" who could help with lessons and connect us to a larger community of chess matches.

After Montessori

Many parents observe the school and say, "it's a great program, but what happens when they leave Montessori at age 12, or perhaps earlier? How will they adjust to more traditional schools?"

We are confident (from the track record of other established Montessori schools) that although children will notice the differences between schools, the self-motivation, self-discipline, and love of learning which children experience and make a part of themselves here will serve them well in whatever environment they find themselves later in life.

There are many varied options in the Portland metro area for children ready to enter a middle school program at 7th grade. In the winter of each year, Childpeace will host a Middle School event to share information about program options to the parents of the upper elementary.