



**THE MONTESSORI MATERIALS GIVE THE CHILD CONCRETE SENSORIAL IMPRESSIONS OF ABSTRACT CONCEPTS, SUCH AS LONG DIVISION, THAT BECOME THE FOUNDATION FOR A LIFETIME OF UNDERSTANDING.**

derstand most of what they are being taught. As Howard Gardner, leading educational psychologist and advocate of school reform, wrote: "Many schools have fallen into a pattern of giving kids exercises and drills that result in their getting answers on tests that look like understanding. Most students, from as young as those in Kindergarten to students in some of the finest colleges in America, do not understand what they've studied, in the most basic sense of the term. They lack the capacity to take knowledge learned in one setting and apply it appropriately in a different setting."

Montessori is focused on teaching for understanding. In an Early Childhood Montessori classroom, three- and four-year-olds receive the benefit of two years of sensorial preparation for academic skills by working with the

concrete Montessori learning materials. This concrete sensorial experience gradually allows the child to form a mental picture of concepts, such as: How big is a thousand? How many hundreds make up a thousand? and What is really going on when we borrow or carry numbers in mathematical operations?

The value of the sensorial experiences that the younger children have had in Montessori has often been underestimated by parents and educators. Research is very clear that young children learn by observing and manipulating their environment, not through textbooks and workbook exercises. The Montessori materials give the child concrete sensorial impressions of abstract concepts, such as long division, that become the foundation for a lifetime of understanding.

But won't my five-year-old spend her Kindergarten year taking care of younger children instead of doing her own work?

No, not at all! When older children work with younger students, they tend to learn more from the experience than their 'students.' Experiences that facilitate development of a child's independence are often very limited in traditional schools.

Five-year-olds are normally the leaders and role models in the Primary Montessori classroom. They help to set the tone and serve as examples of appropriate behavior for the class. They often help younger children with their work, actually teaching lessons or correcting errors.

Most five-year-olds have been waiting for the longest time to be one of the 'big kids.' The experience of playing the leadership role does wonders to reinforce the five-year-old's sense of autonomy and self-confidence.

Five-year-olds are beginning to reflect upon the world. They pay closer attention, notice more details, ask more questions, and begin to explain the world in their own terms. The Kindergarten year is a time when the child begins to integrate everything she learned in the first few years.

Academic progress is not our ultimate goal. Our real hope is that they will feel good about themselves and enjoy learning. Mastering basic skills is a side goal.

The key concept is readiness. If a child is developmentally not ready to go on, he or she is neither left behind nor made to feel like a failure. Our goal is not ensuring that children develop at a predetermined rate, but to ensure that whatever they do, they do well and feel good about themselves as learners. ■



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