



The Kindergarten Year

Montessori early childhood and the three-year cycle of Primary

In Montessori Primary communities the children are referred to as 1st years, 2nd years, and 3rd years. The children are on a journey that is designed to take three years.

The newest two and a half- to three-year-old children are considered 1st years. 1st years have never been in Primary before. Children who complete that first year and return for a second year are considered 2nd years and they usually turn four sometime during the school year. Children who have either completed two years in Primary or who are turning five are considered 3rd years.

Depending on local licensing requirements, as well as when birthdays fall, the majority of children who turn five on or after October 1st are considered to be in kindergarten.

Montessori education allows children to build on their knowledge.

Instead of a linear educational plane that moves from a “low level” to a “high level” of understanding, we view the learning experience as a spiral that circles forward and back upon itself, creating growth of new understanding based on experiences of previous understanding. This requires time and repetition and should be guided by a Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education (MACTE)- trained teacher.

Let’s look at one classroom material as an example.



A 2nd year student who started the 100s board in his 1st year. Here he is using the linear counting chains 1-7 and learning how to count by 2s, 3s, 4s, etc. He still does the 100s board a few times a week and is now helping other children.

When a child uses [the 100s board](#) for the very first time, basic levels of understanding of the concepts of 1–10, 11–20, and groups of ten from 1 to 100 are still developing. Often, just organizing one hundred physical pieces is the most challenging aspect of this work. A child may work on this material twenty times before a basic level of mastery with the hardware is achieved. Through repetition of counting, the child is solidifying a basic level of comprehension of unit numbers, tens, and hundreds with by sight and through vocabulary. Some children do not get to this work in their first year. For those who do, this same work will become more of a challenge in the second year because the child is now moving toward a firm grasp of the concept of 1 to 100 and the organization of the written chart of one hundred units grouped in tens, ten times. Now the child, as early as four or four and a half, is counting, organizing, verbalizing, and manipulating one to one hundred. *This child might be ready for the [Pythagoras board](#).*

At the same time, this same 2nd-year child is also using the bead chains (pictured left) to count to 1,000. The child is also using the bank game number cards and place value units, 10s and 100s and 1000s to build 4 digit numbers. Some children who are still in their 2nd year are able to do a 45 card layout of place value from 1 to 1,000.

A Montessori kindergartener may be able to do the following:

Count to 1000 using 1000 beads on a chain. Physically manipulate 1–1000 in proper place value sequences. Lay out the 100s board for younger children who are new to the work. Write numbers and equations with a pencil.

Given the child's interest in and mastery of basic math concepts, a Montessori guide has an opportunity to introduce operations with four digit numbers, squaring and cubing numbers, and the transfer of concrete math to paper, sometimes resulting in a kindergartener being able to take a piece of paper and write out:

$$4,568 + 3,431 =$$

The kindergartener knows to create the first number on the floor with the proper concrete representation of 4,568 using glass beads and wooden place value objects. The child will then "add" 3,431 by bringing over those concrete pieces as well, and then recount them to find a total. The final product can be writing the following on a piece of paper:

$$4,568$$

$$+3,431$$

$$7,999$$

As you can see from this example, the connections and understanding that can occur over the course of three years with just a few math materials are profound. This level of skill and understanding far surpass the STEM and state standards for your average kindergartener anywhere in the U.S.

This is just a glimpse at what is possible for an average child who spends all three years in a Primary program. Not all children will take it this far in math. Some children might progress heavily in language and art instead. Others might master geography and landforms. Some may surpass their friends with grace, maturity, and emotional and social intelligence. And that is natural. We follow the child.

When five curriculum areas are explored week after week, month after month, for three full years during the 3-6 plane of development, the child has an opportunity to master concepts that are skipped over or rushed in traditional settings. The linear approach to learning that begins in Pre-K 3 in traditional settings is not only not reflective of how children learn, but the lack of depth with which basic concepts are investigated in early childhood and early elementary school is concerning.

The mathematical example above is academic in nature, but the benefit of the third year extends far and wide.



Below, a 2nd year friend gives two 1st years a tour of the classroom

In the beginning of the first year, a child is new and there can be anxiety and physical challenge. The older children help her out and slowly but surely, she rises above each challenge and she begins to master some things. Yet she is still small and is driven by a fair amount of impulse. When she returns for the second year, everything is familiar so she does not experience anxiety about school. Instead, she is excited to use her favorite works, is challenged by new works, and starts building deeper connections with friends. For those who return for kindergarten, school is full of joy.

In the third year, children know the rules. They know the beat and tempo of the day. Their teachers ask them for help. They model good behavior and proper use of materials for the littler ones. They know they are leaders and their confidence soars. They have answers. They are physically strong. They get lessons other children don't get and they settle into a rhythm.

There is a wealth of research about how Montessori children score better on tests and have more confidence and zest for challenge, and this body of data is growing. Not to mention Montessori children have had practice being peacemakers. They've been talking out frustrations and problems, apologizing sincerely when things have gone wrong, giving people second chances, speaking up for what is right, and taking personal responsibility even when no one is looking. Compassion, patience, and understanding are common. Problem solving and creative thinking happen spontaneously throughout each day. This is what you can expect in 1st grade from your Montessori child who spent three years in Primary.

Children who have created a deep relationship with their teachers and friends get to grow through many challenges without the stress and change of starting over with new people each year. At school, friends and loved ones are always there. School is a safe, predictable place where you are known, you are seen, and you are a part of a community. You are loved and you are treated fairly. You learn that when you work hard and take care of yourself, others, and your environment, success is the norm. This strong beginning sets the stage for the child's relationship with learning and school.

The greatest development is achieved during the first years of life, and therefore it is then that the greatest care should be taken. If this is done, then the child does not become a burden; he will reveal himself as the greatest marvel of nature.

-Maria Montessori

The entire model is the foundation for not only the academic progress that puts Montessori children ahead when they get older, but their social and emotional progress as human beings. This is all achieved in a stress-free environment. Among young people nationwide, depression and anxiety have been steadily growing since the 1950s, and now children have more depression and anxiety than was recorded during the Great Depression and the Cold War. In traditional school settings we have taken away playtime, compromised their budding internal locus of control, and rushed them with tests and checklists through the most formative years of their lives.

If you are in a private school you must consider tuition. If you are in an area where lottery results could set the course of your child's entire elementary and middle school experience, you must consider securing your space for the long haul. However, when it is possible to remain in your Montessori 3 to 6 community for all three years and you decide to do that, be confident it is a great choice. You can count on observing explosion after explosion of confidence, new skills, new understanding, and mastery in areas we often don't realize are possible for kindergarteners. This early foundation will reap benefits through grade school, high school, college, and beyond.

A group of 1st years in their beginning days of Primary, learning how to stand peacefully before the group assembles to enter the classroom after playtime.

