

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A MONTESSORI SCHOOL

It can be difficult to choose a Montessori school. As the name “Montessori” was never copyrighted, it is hard to know if what is being offered by a school is really Montessori.

Here are some things we can look out for:

1. A beautifully prepared classroom environment

Montessori classrooms are beautifully prepared with low furniture that is proportional to the size of the children. Objects in the classroom are made of mostly natural and beautiful materials like wood, fabric, glass, etc. There are also aesthetic materials like plants and art at the child’s eye level. The environment is usually spacious, allowing for movement, and bright with a lot of light and ventilation. Materials are orderly and arranged on shelves that are accessible to the children. The prepared environment often includes access to nature.

2. Concrete hands-on Montessori materials at the ready

The Montessori materials will be available for the children to work with at any time, laid out on their shelves. For example, in a classroom of 3- to 6-year-old children, we’ll see recognizable materials like a pink tower, a brown stair, etc. They will be clean and beautifully presented, maybe in trays and baskets, and without any missing pieces. These concrete learning materials mean that the children learn by doing, exploring, and making discoveries with their hands.

3. A variety of workspaces

Instead of the desks in a line usually found in traditional classrooms, Montessori classrooms offer the children several different options for work, and they can choose freely throughout the day where they would like to work. There are individual tables, larger tables for small and large groups, rugs on the floor that allow the child to stretch out, comfortable chairs or armchairs for reading, and sometimes you might find a beanbag or a bed to allow for a rest or a brain break. There are also indoor and outdoor workspaces.

4. Mixed-age group classes

In a true Montessori school, children of different ages are usually in the same class, commonly in a three-year span. We will see 3- to 6-year-old children together, 6- to 9-year-old children together, and 9- to 12-year-old children together (sometimes there is a 6–12 class). In a mixed-age group, older children are available to help younger children while consolidating their own learning, and the younger children love looking up to and learning from the older ones.

5. Uninterrupted work period

It is ideal to have an uninterrupted work period for the children, ideally around 3 hours long, when the children are free to choose what they want to do in that time. They might, for example, choose a math work; their friend next to them might be choosing some language work; and maybe there are two children sitting next to them who are working together on a project. This allows children to get into deep concentration and exploration, without being disturbed to attend a group lesson every 30 minutes as in non-Montessori schools.

6. Happy, independent children

It is also worth ascertaining whether the children are happy and independent at school. Ideally, arrange an observation during school hours to see this in action. There will be interactions between children in the form of conversation, collaboration, or side-by-side work, during which you should observe sparks of joy.

7. No (or minimal) tests

We don't need to use standardized testing in a Montessori classroom because the teacher knows each child's development based on observation and the lessons they have been given. We can ask the school whether or not they use testing because some schools give tests required for government regulations. In this case, we hope there is very little additional testing done and that the tests could be given as a worksheet without any competition and without sharing the results.

8. Montessori-trained teachers

We can also ask if the teachers have Montessori qualifications. Junnifa and Simone both followed the AMI training program because it is the organization that Dr. Montessori's family set up to maintain the quality and integrity of the training.

9. Children treated with respect

We can look to see whether the adults are calm, graceful, and courteous in their interactions with the children. For example, the children are treated with respect, and there is mutual respect between the child and the adult. The adult shows respect by guiding the children to find out answers for themselves and together with their peers.

10. Natural, child-led learning

Instead of the teacher standing at the front of the classroom telling the children what they need to learn, the children are free to explore the environment and make discoveries for themselves. We see natural learning as opposed to forced learning. Because of this, you will usually observe a variety of activities available and in use. The children will not all be doing the same thing or working on the same subject or using workbooks.