

Hanging in with Montessori in Tough Times

by Tim Seldin

The economy is in the dumps, you're worried about money, and you've got a child in Montessori. It's reenrollment time, and, like millions of parents just like you, you're going to have to decide what to do next year. Now what?

If you've hit the wall and simply cannot afford next year's tuition, you might want to check to see if the school can lend you a hand. You might also ask the children's grandparents to see if they are in a position to help. More and more often, grandparents play a major role in helping their children with tuition.

But for many of us, the issue may not be so much if we can afford to continue to pay the cost of tuition; instead, we may have concern about what the future may bring and a sense that now may be the time to move on.

It's no secret that I'm a died-in-the-wool, true-blue Montessori fan, but you've got to make an important decision. So how can I help?

I can encourage you to ask yourself three questions:

The first is: Why did you choose Montessori for your children in the first place, and has your thought process changed over time?

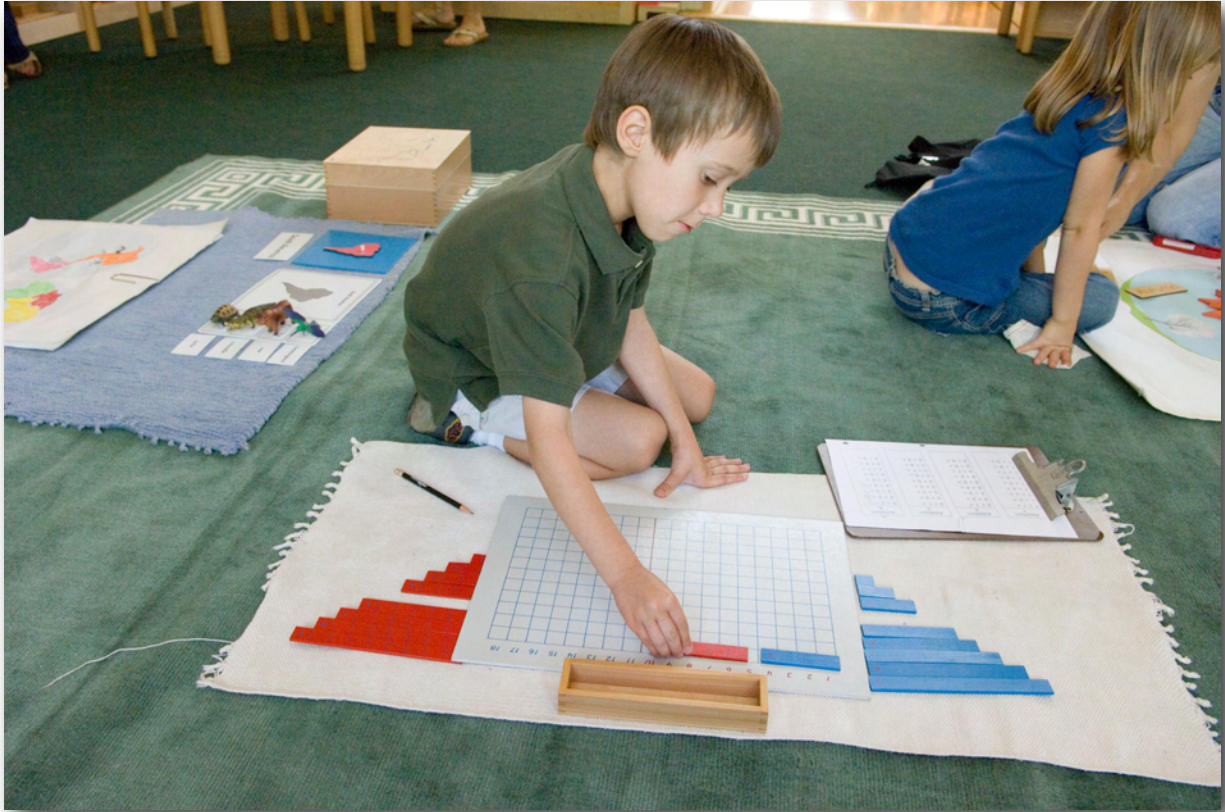


My second question for you is: What have you been hoping to see your children take away from their years in Montessori, and how important are those outcomes?

And finally, I encourage you to ask yourself: How important do you feel the next few years in your children's education will be? How might they benefit if you are willing and able to stay the course, and what may be lost if you can't?

Benjamin Franklin wrote that an investment in education pays the best dividends. Centuries later, most people would still agree with him.

Every year is precious, and however our children are treated and taught by us at home, in school, and on the playground by their peers, will have tremendous influence on their future.



In the last issue of *Tomorrow's Child* (Fall, 2008), Sharon Caldwell was fairly critical of conventional schools, and her words led at least one reader to object.

But the issue, as I see it, is not between public schools or private, but between the beliefs, practices, and outcomes that have become the norm in most schools (public and private), as compared to those held by a range of child-centered schools, public and private, that offer a range of substantially different educational experiences and tend to lead to a different sort of adult. Within that wide range of educational alternatives—private, charter, and public—one finds Montessori schools, Waldorf schools, Friends schools, Jesuit schools, and many more.

There is clear evidence, based on both hard data and tens of thousands of anecdotal experiences, that the children who attend these schools that seem so different actually do exceptionally well. Why might that be?

There is pretty clear evidence, despite the impression held by many nervous parents, that Montessori gives children the skills that they need to excel.

We can all understand why some parents will be tempted to take their children out of private school in tough economic times. Historically, most will give it some thought, and then decide to stay. Why? One reason parents have expressed in the past, and are expressing again today, is the importance of keeping things as stable in their children's lives as possible in times of great stress. But in the case of Montessori schools, there is

yet another factor to consider: how can we best prepare our children for the future? Today, the global economy has changed. The great opportunities are shifting to enterprises and fields based much more on innovation and information. The schools that most people think of as being 'traditional' are actually not very old historically. They emerged in North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in response to waves of immigration from non-English speaking cultures and the growing move from an agrarian economy to one that was increasingly urban and industrial. The large public school districts developed in the big cities and only later spread out to the suburbs after the second world war.

The traditional American school was, for centuries the one-room school house, which had multi-age class groups and teachers, who tended to remain with the same groups of children for several years.

Because children were immersed in the everyday life and work of their family and community, they tended to have much more direct, hands-on experience with practical mechanics, everyday tools, daily chores, and the cycles of the seasons from planting to harvest. The things children were expected to learn in those much smaller and more simple schools placed greater emphasis on cultural literacy, history, geography, the lives of famous people, great inventions, and great poetry and literature.

Can you see the parallels between the one-room school house of American past to Montessori?

The large schools that we all know today were consciously designed to educate the masses according to plans and a course of

study developed in the school district's central offices. And, ironically, for much of the 1900s, the organizational model that inspired policy and procedure was the approach to mass production and depersonalization of the American factory and corporation. Students were considered the 'raw material,' the school was thought of as a 'factory,' and teachers were thought of as the 'work force.' The tension between labor and management is still present to this day in most school systems.

So, as Sharon Caldwell suggested in the the *Tomorrow's Child* Fall 2008 issue, most objective analysts agree that conventional schools were designed to produce complacent workers, or, in middle class communities, people who are good at working within the system, following the rules, and responding to the demands and expectations of their supervisors.



In an information-age economy, we need and reward people who see things in new and different ways. There is far less need for the workers who just put in their time and go along with the current corporate party line. It is obvious that corporations are far less committed to loyal employees. But what may not be obvious is that the best jobs are increasingly going to the people who are incredibly intelligent, creative, and forward thinking. It is a high-octane blend of people skills, the ability to organize and coordinate projects, and innovation that wins elections (think about the incredibly well-organized grassroots campaign run by President Elect Obama) or that builds successful businesses (think about Google Founders Sergie Brin and Larry Page, AOL founder Steve Case, or Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, all of whom credit their success in large part to their Montessori education).

We know that Montessori works! I am constantly amazed that year after year so many parents express the same concerns, as if Montessori were a new, untested experiment. There are tens of thousands of Montessori schools around the world, and they have produced outstanding graduates for more than one hundred years.

Montessori has historically been the choice of parents, who do not value conformity but rather the cultivation of their children's curiosity and creativity.

In my case, I wanted my children to be fascinated by books, interesting people, and new ideas. I wanted to ensure that they felt their education was a gift, not a burden. I did not want to encourage them to accept what their teachers taught without question. I did not value obedience over kindness, respect, and courtesy. What are your own goals?



Montessori's Basic Principles

- Children are not born lazy. Schools need not use external controls and manipulation to influence, control, and shape their intellectual life.
- Children learn best when they are encouraged to choose work freely, rather than simply do what they are told from one task to another.
- Children learn best in schools that treat them with kindness, honor, and respect. Curiosity develops best when children do not see school as a burden and a set of imposed assignments and guidelines

- Children learn best when they really can see and grasp the big picture

Outcomes of Montessori Education

Intrinsic Motivation: Children who go through Montessori tend to develop an innate desire to engage in an activity for enjoyment and satisfaction.

Internalized Ground Rules & Ability to Work with External Authority: Montessori students normally follow internalized ground rules, whether or not people in authority are watching.

Creativity and Originality of Thought: While Montessori students are typically confident about their own knowledge and skill, they also respect the creative process of others and are willing to exchange ideas, information, talents, and credit with their peers.

Social Responsibility: Montessori children tend to be quite aware that their words and actions impact the welfare of others. They normally are great leaders and team players, making positive contributions to their community.

Autonomy: Montessori children tend to be self-directed, composed, and morally independent.

Confidence and Competence: Children who attend Montessori schools tend to become confident and competent. As adults, they normally become quite successful. At the same time, they tend to retain the ability to learn from their mistakes and remain reflective and open-minded.

Spiritual Awareness: Montessori students are often exceptionally compassionate, empathetic, and sensitive to the natural world and the human condition.

Academic Preparation: On an academic level, Montessori provides students with skills that allow them to become independently functioning adults and life-long learners. As students master one level of academic skills, they are able to go further and apply themselves to increasingly challenging materials across various academic disciplines. They learn how to integrate new concepts, analyze data, and think critically.

In conclusion ... I hope that this article will help you, the parents of Montessori children, with this important decision that you must make every year.

The final choice is, of course, yours, and you must do what is right for your family. By having your children in Montessori, you have given them a great gift. By keeping them in Montessori, you will not only continue to give them the gift of lifelong learning, you will help all of us by providing the next generation of leaders who understand how to take initiatives to change the world for the better. As Albert Einstein once remarked: "You can never solve a problem on the level on which it was created."