



WATERDOWN MONTESSORI SCHOOL

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NEWSLETTER JANUARY 2010

From the Principal's Desk

Happy New Year, and welcome back to school! The January newsletter is a short one, but there are several important events that need mentioning. Details may be found elsewhere in this newsletter.

On **Monday, January 25**, Trevor Eissler will be speaking at Dundas Valley Montessori School. His topic is **Montessori Education: Prepared for Life**. Every parent should attend!

Trevor Eissler is the author of **Montessori Madness: A Parent to Parent Argument for Montessori Education**.

I read this book during the holidays, and was very impressed. I began choosing passages to share with you, but had to give up when I realized that I was marking almost every other page! Instead, I have copied most of chapter 5: "A Home. A School", with the hope that it will pique your interest and leave you wanting more.

We are actually all familiar with Montessori teaching, whether we know it or not.

The years from birth until kindergarten are everyone's experience with Montessori-style education. Take bike-riding for example. Let's look at snapshots of the process of learning to ride. A child may receive a tricycle by the age of two or three. The parent will help him sit on it, place his hands on the handlebars, and show him how to step on the pedals. The child will lurch a little forward or backward, but the parent now steps back and watches. Over the next year or two the child becomes better and better at riding the tricycle. He becomes more daring. He can ride down slopes at breakneck speed, feet pumping so fast they're a blur. He can ride uphill, putting a lot of effort into each stroke. He can ride backwards and turn, even at the same time. He can put objects on the tricycle and carry them from place to place. Through all this he rides when he wants to, and for as long as he wants to. However, there are restrictions such as not riding in the busy street. Wide latitude for exploration is bounded by firm safety limitations.

At some point over the years, he'll get a bicycle with training wheels and lose interest in the tricycle. Then he'll notice that the older children don't have training wheels and he'll start asking his parents to take them off. Once the wheels are off, he'll need a few pushes, he'll fall down a few times, and he'll get a bloody lip and a bloody nose, but he'll soon ride effortlessly. There is no syllabus and no schedule, just the external input of providing a tricycle, a bicycle, some other kids to observe, a couple of pushes, and the safety rules of wearing a helmet and not riding in the street. The parent gets out of the way so the child can do it by himself. Children need no urging from parents to want to ride a bicycle. They are eager to do so, and to be able to do so without help.

Toddlers similarly learn to walk and talk solely when they decide to do so. Preschoolers confound us with their individualized timetables for developing verbal, social, and physical skills. We are amazed and surprised by each new "trick" they learn. Even twins follow their own schedules, as I have learned with our own kids. Children are genetically programmed to be masters of their own development. However, we make sure they don't practice walking beside a road; we have them wear helmets when they ride a bike; and we establish a bedtime routine. It is a freedom with limits. Instead of limits with some freedom tacked on, it is first and foremost freedom, with limits to protect kids' well-being, not stifle them. When this freedom bumps up against someone else's rights, or a social custom, or the safety of the child, there is a limit.

This "system of education" for babies and young children is simply daily life. It is in many ways much like a Montessori classroom. It is largely self-directed, and its success is astonishing. Prior to laying eyes on his first teacher, a young child has learned a couple thousand words of a new language, along with proper grammar; the social customs of his time and place; and the ability to lie, cheat, steal, comfort others, bike and swim if he has had access to bicycles and water, feed and dress himself, count, tell stories, throw a ball, play games, and sometimes even to read and write.

Now, fast-forward twenty years and take a look at graduate school, where we are also familiar with Montessori's style of education. We have world-renowned graduate schools here in the United States where students go to earn their doctorates. There is broad consensus that we are doing something right when it comes to education in graduate schools. Graduate students are expected to literally further human knowledge through the submission of a doctoral thesis. This thesis – the topic of which is self-chosen – should contribute in a tangible way to the academic area of their choice. They are able to work on this thesis for many years. It may take a decade for some to finish. A professor or adviser is available to help out with suggestions or advice, but usually does not teach from a syllabus or lecture or have any of those duties we regularly assign to teachers. Comparing the bookends of our education system, the similarities are evident. Both have a Montessori feel to them: self-direction, self-motivation. The nearby parents and professors are helpful observers, but tend not to equate learning with lecturing or following lesson plans.

The Montessori-style process of learning that is so successful for young children and graduate students alike can be equally successful for those in between. The roots of Montessori's method are in the natural way children learn. The entire middle section of traditional education – the part with the desks, chalkboards, tests, and report cards – continues to vex educators and reformers. We continue to dig the hole deeper by arguing for more money, better textbooks, better qualified or paid teachers, smaller student / teacher ratios, or even busing, race, and cultural fixes. We even argue for longer schooldays as if *more* time in the traditional system will somehow counter its ill-effects! This is futile. It is the fundamental nature of the classroom that needs to be changed. Luckily, we have hundreds of examples of successful and effective Montessori schools around the country. These schools are bridging the gap and bringing this revolutionary method to more and more children. The method began as a children's home, designed by Maria Montessori over one hundred years ago in a tenement building in the slums. It is now a model for educational success.

We ended the year full of good cheer. Once again we supported families on behalf of Children's Aid, whose Christmases will all have been much brighter thanks to you. There were positive comments about our concert, and the Festive Food Fair brought in \$405.00 for the school.

And speaking of fundraising, the Pancake Breakfast with Santa raised \$637.00.

Thanks to everyone who participated!

In addition, the students raised enough money with their baking and crafts in December to purchase TEN bedkits for Sleeping Children Around the World. With Cole and Sam Stevens' contributions, we were able to order **FOURTEEN BEDKITS** altogether. Well done!

Mark your calendars for **Tuesday, January 19th**, when we will be holding our annual **ELEMENTARY AND CASA OPEN HOUSE** from 6:30-7:30 pm. All elementary students and third year casa students (those in their last year of the Casa program) will be invited to participate.

The next big event is, of course, our **VALENTINE'S FAMILY PARTY**, which will take place on **Saturday, February 13th** this year. This is our largest fundraiser – watch for sign up sheets and more information in the days and weeks to come!

An introductory planning meeting will be held this **WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 13**. To accommodate different schedules, you may choose to attend either at 2:30pm (child care provided) or at 7:00pm. **LET THE OFFICE KNOW IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO ATTEND THE EVENING SESSION.** Please make an effort to be there. Thanks to past committees, the hardest work is done; we just need people to put the plans into action!

The office has received several enquiries from parents this week asking about dates. You may not be aware, but apart from the school calendar in your Parent Handbook, monthly calendars in newsletters, and the mini-calendar that was sent with your Welcome Package this year, you can also access the calendar online on our website: www.waterdownmontessori.com.

REGISTRATION for the fall will begin in the next week or two. Packages will be sent home to each family. We will be calling people on our waiting list soon afterwards. ***Remember, if you are considering the elementary class for your child, you are more than welcome to speak to Mrs. Barbara and / or arrange to observe in her class.*** The next page addresses a question that often arises when considering the elementary class.

If you have any questions about next year, please speak to your child's teacher or to myself.

Sue Reid-Kulpa
Principal

The Elementary Years: Class Size and Social Interaction

As you are well aware, each year our 5 year olds move out of casa. We know a number of casa students will be moving up to the elementary class. We know that others will be leaving the school, and we are aware that some of you remain unsure of next year's plans. While there are many reasons for the different choices you make with regard to your children's elementary years, I would like to offer you my thoughts on one particular concern that is often raised, that of social interaction.

One of the reasons parents may choose a private school education for their children is the fact that many private schools offer smaller classes, a fact that is seen as an advantage to learning. Our class size is comparable to those of other local private schools.

The difference here is that our elementary class is composed of different age groups. Parents wonder about their child's social development in such a setting. Is there a big enough "peer group"? Will they find a friend? Will they be able to adapt to a larger social group at some future date? What if there are fewer girls than boys, or vice versa?

Think back to your years in public school. Of the many children in your grade, how many did you count as your friends? How many did you interact with on a daily basis? How well did you interact with children from other classes, or other grades...and how many children did you *never* speak to?

Most of us had a few close friends our age, and perhaps a slightly larger circle we could interact with at recess, or for group work if necessary. The children in our elementary class *all* interact with *every other child*. The small number means that every single student will sit, work, play, chat, eat lunch, and learn with every other child at some time or other.

Over the course of a year each child learns to interact with both boys and girls, and with a wide variety of personalities and ages.

It is amazing to watch as the most seemingly unlikely combinations of students choose to work together, with wonderful results.

With patience, encouragement and guidance from the teachers, tolerance and respect grow, and partnerships are formed as children recognize the particular strengths each classmate has to offer. Surely if anything, this makes them far *more* socially aware, more confident and more adaptable than their counterparts in larger classes.

Trevor Eissler addresses this issue in his book **Montessori Madness:**

When do students in traditional schools get to interact with others? When are they allowed to freely talk with each other, help each other, answer each other's questions, or work together? At recess? Is that it? Are they learning how to form a community by sitting in assigned seats, not moving, and not taking out of fear of punishment? How is this teaching them social skills? When do they learn to care for one another?

The Montessori method helps children become great learners and build strong academic foundations, but what about their social life? Maria Montessori argues that segregation by age as in traditional schools "breaks the bonds of social life, deprives it of nourishment." How does the method "nourish" this highest function of humans and cement the "bonds of social life"? One answer is the grouping of children within a three year age bracket into one class. This has a direct impact on their social skills. Children have the opportunity to socialize with others older or younger than themselves every day. When my kids were not old enough to tie their shoes, they each had a separate older classmate in their Montessori class who was their favorite to ask for help. Something such as this is so simple. And in Montessori, it's not limited to shoe-tying. Spelling, science, math, favourite sports teams, dolls, the weather, anything can be discussed between students in a Montessori class at anytime. Help can be requested by anyone, and of anyone. Remember "No talking!" from traditional schools? Montessori is different. It's a community.

Personal differences blend in within a community. Strengths and weaknesses are merely points on a continuum of growth and learning, not characteristics with which to permanently define a child. Children are used to seeing a wide range of abilities. They get used to working with others at various places on that long continuum. They lean to appreciate what others can do, not what they can't do (i.e. how many wrong answers they get on a test). In this community, one can practice, and get comfortable, working with all ability levels.

Sue Reid-Kulpaka
Principal

JANUARY DATES TO REMEMBER:

- ✓ Wednesday, January 13: Valentine's meeting - 2:30 pm and 7:00 pm (RSVP for 7:00pm)
- ✓ Tuesday, January 19: Elementary and Casa Open House – 6:30-7:30pm
- ✓ Wednesday, January 20: Coffee Club morning – all welcome!
- ✓ Monday, January 25: Ms. Wyn's after school Yoga for casa students starts (spots available)

January Birthdays

Nathan turned 5 on January 1.
Kiveli will be 9 on January 15.
Noah will be 3 on January 20.
Maddox will be 4 on January 20.
Sydney will be 5 on January 29.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ALL OF YOU!

Casa and Elementary Open House

On Tuesday, January 19th, we will be holding a very special Open House, from 6:30 – 7:30 pm.

The Elementary children and the third year casa children (those who are finishing casa this year), will all be invited to participate.

The students have a chance to present some exercises, and adults have a glimpse of some of the work the children do each day. For those of you as yet unfamiliar with what the elementary programme has to offer, it is an eye-opening introduction. For parents of children participating, it is a joy to watch your child display their learning with pride and confidence.

We encourage *all* parents to attend, whether or not your child is presenting that evening. It is one of the best ways to learn a bit about the Montessori programme. Towards the end of the session, parents may have a chance to try the materials themselves. Are you up for the challenge?

New Students

We have 2 new students joining Waterdown Montessori School this month. *Damien* has returned to Ms. Wyn and Mrs. Julie's class after a long illness. Mrs. Barbara has a new first year student in her class. *João Pedro* is from Brazil, and is staying with his cousin's family for a few months. We wish both students and their families a warm welcome to the school.

Parent Observations

Curious about what your child does in the classroom each day? Now is your chance to find out. Parents have the opportunity to observe in their child's classroom for about half an hour.

Please add your name to the sign up sheet outside your child's classroom, or call the office to arrange an observation time. Parents in the elementary class are asked to speak to Mrs. Barbara to arrange a time.

When your turn comes, you will be asked to sit quietly in a designated area, and watch the activities in the classroom. Please note that this is NOT a time for discussion with teachers. They will continue as if it was a regular day. Of course, the very fact that there is a parent in the room means that it is not a regular day, but this is the closest we can come to letting you see how your child's classroom runs. It is very possible that you will have questions, comments and queries. You are welcome to jot down notes at the time to leave with the teacher, or to arrange a mutually convenient time to talk later.

Anyone who is interested in observing the elementary class is welcome to do so. Mrs. Barbara has extended an invitation to all parents in the school. Please speak to her or call the office if you are interested.



Thank you to Michael and his family, for the generous gift of a large pancake griddle! This will help simplify set up for our pancake breakfasts.

The Annual Valentine's Family Party

The annual Valentine's dinner and Silent Auction will soon be here. The first meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, January 13.

Individuals are in charge of each area: Food, Classroom Theme Baskets, Entertainment, Thank you letters, and so on.

Parents and children alike always eagerly anticipate this evening. For those of you new to the school, and those who have not been there before, I strongly urge you to attend.

The food is delicious, the atmosphere festive. This is both a social evening and the school's largest fundraiser. There is something for everyone, beginning with dinner. Originally a potluck affair, it has been catered for the past two years now. We will decide which way to go this year at Wednesday's meeting – we need your input!

Other activities may vary; there is usually an ongoing children's raffle, a wine raffle, and of course, the Silent Auction. A professional DJ provides music for dancing (it is mainly the children who dance), and there is entertainment provided for the children later on, giving the adults a chance to tidy up and to claim their prizes. From the youngest baby to grandparents and beyond, it is truly a family event, and a chance to enjoy being part of the WMS community.



TICKETS GO ON SALE SOON!

More information will follow!

Valentines Cards

Children are welcome to bring cards for their classmates should they wish to do so. You are encouraged to have your child write his or her name on each card, but please do *not* write the names of classmates on each one.

WHY NOT? Well, because... 20 children x 20 cards = **400 cards** for *each* casa teacher to sort and put into backpacks!

SUMMER CAMP

It may be hard to believe, but some parents are already thinking ahead, and have been asking about summer camp arrangements.

We have good news. Between them, **Emily and Meredith Kulpaka** will once again be hosting our June camp for the two weeks after school has finished, and will be offering several weeks of summer camp during July and August.

More information will follow.

CAN YOU HELP?

Mrs. Ann's computer is showing its age. If by any chance, anyone happens to be upgrading and might have a computer to replace our ailing machine, please let Ann know. Thank you.