

WHAT THE MONTESSORI PROGRAM LOOKS LIKE FOR THE 3-6 AND 6-12 CHILD AT SCHOOL

Preschool for the 3- to 6-year-old child

An ideal class size has one lead guide with one or two assistants and up to thirty children.

Daily routine

The 3-6 class is often a half-day program for children younger than 5 and a full-day program for children 5 or 6 years old. The children arrive and there is a 3-hour work cycle. During these 3 hours, the children are welcome to explore the environment with free choice over what they would like to work on, whether they would like to work with someone or by themselves, and where in the classroom they would like to work (at a table, on a mat, or outdoors, if the environment allows).

A child arrives in the morning and greets their guide—this may be a handshake or a simple verbal greeting. The child then places or hangs their backpack in their cubby, hangs up their coat if they have one, and changes into their indoor shoes. They then wash their hands and head into class to start their work for the day.

The morning often starts slowly as they catch up with their friends, form a circle, find familiar work, or get oriented for the day. The guide observes the children and will give lessons to children based on their interests and needs. As the morning progresses, the children reach their deepest concentration often while exploring new or more difficult work.

The work cycle frequently ends with a short circle time to read a book together, sing songs, or share. They may then transition to play outside, eat lunch, and/or be collected to go home. The oldest children in the class often have an afternoon work cycle.

For a full-day program, the afternoon program varies. It may be a continuation of the morning activities in the classroom, enrichment activities such as gymnastics, tae kwon do, or ballet, or outdoor exploration and other group activities.

Areas of exploration

The 3–6 class provides rich opportunities for hands-on exploration. The following are the main areas for the child to explore:

Practical life activities (activities of daily life), where the child learns to care for themselves, others, and the environment through activities such as food preparation, cleaning activities, and handwork.

Mathematics, where they explore numbers, building numeracy skills, understanding operations, and memorizing math facts.

Language activities, to build vocabulary, writing, reading, and understanding of grammar.

Sensorial, where they refine their visual, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory senses. Working with materials that were specially used by Dr. Montessori, they explore color, shape, size, texture, smell, taste, and other qualities, and learn to distinguish, classify, grade, and name them.

There are also *cultural activities* for the child which include geography, botany, art, and an outdoor environment.

The activities are displayed on open shelves for the children to select. Everything needed for an activity is prepared and put together in a container like a box, tray, or basket. The child walks to the shelf, selects an activity, and brings it to a table or mat. They may choose to work by themselves or with another child. They work for as long as they need, repeating as much as they want. When they are finished, they make sure it is organized and ready for the next person and then return it to the shelf. Some of the younger children may need some help from an older child or an assistant until they gradually learn to do this independently.

The materials are beautiful and attractively made for the child to explore with their hands so they may make discoveries for themselves. Screens are generally not used in the 3–6 class.

The classroom

The Montessori classroom for the 3- to 6-year-old child is often referred to as the children's house or *casa*, which is the Italian word for house. Dr. Montessori designed it to feel like a house for the children, with everything built proportionally to the child's size and art and pictures placed at the child's level.

The prepared environment is carefully and intentionally set up by the guide for the children. It is beautiful, ordered, inviting, and calm. There are plants and animals to be cared for, ideally windows to provide adequate lighting, and spaces for the children to work by themselves or together with others. The entire environment is such that the children can access and manage it by themselves. There is also child-sized equipment to care for the environment, such as a child-sized broom, mop, and watering can.

The role of the adult

The lead guide (or teacher) is responsible for preparing the environment, observing the children to understand them, and seeing where they are and what they need. The guide is also responsible for connecting the child to the environment, usually by giving them interesting and engaging lessons. The guide is also modeling behavior for the children by the way they talk quietly, move gracefully, and respectfully approach the children. They are also responsible for identifying and removing obstacles to the child's development.

Community

The children in this age group are still constructing themselves and often choose to work independently on their own development, while beginning to become more interested in their peers. They are part of a community where they all feel safe and belong. They learn to solve conflict with the assistance of an adult and then manage by themselves.

There are some guidelines for the children that make the class run smoothly, for example: They return the work to its place on the shelf when they have completed an activity; they learn to walk around someone else's mat; they walk in the classroom and use quieter voices inside.

They also receive and practice lessons in grace and courtesy; for example, they learn how to excuse themselves; how to push in their chair; how to roll up a mat. These lessons help them to adapt to the community.

Creative expression

Children are shown how to work with beautiful art materials and then given the time and free choice to explore these materials in their own way. They learn to write their own words, sentences, and eventually stories. They learn to think creatively and work things out for themselves. The children are inspired by the beauty around them and by nature. They develop "an eye that sees, a soul that feels, and a hand that obeys." (Dr. Montessori)

Elementary class for the 6- to 12-year-old child

An ideal class size has one lead guide with one assistant and twenty-eight to thirty-five children. Generally, the children in elementary classes are more social, so these classes can feel quite different from the 3–6 class where children are often more interested in individual work. Since social relationships become very important to the 6- to 12-year-old child, there is a hum in the classroom like a busy atelier as the children explore ideas together.

Daily

The elementary class may be divided into two groups: for 6- to 9-year-old children (lower elementary) and 9- to 12-year-old children (upper elementary), or may be a combined class for 6- to 12-year-old children.

It is a full-day program in which students of mixed ages are invited during the day for small group lessons with the guide based on their needs, interests, and skills. At the end of the lesson, the guide invites the children to explore this idea further themselves. For example, the guide may introduce the idea of different types of leaves and then the children may choose to go look for leaves and make a graph of the types they have found, create some art with different leaves, or write a nature journal that explores each type.

The children also like to spread out and do big work that may take a lot of space and time.

Areas of exploration

The work of the 6- to 12-year-old child is to understand the world and universe around them. Any subject area may be explored, including, for example, mathematics, geometry, language, literature, geography, history, science, biology, music, and artistic expression.

The 6- to 12-year-old child uses their reasoning mind and their imagination to explore these topics, and learns to think for themselves and take action. They are no longer only sensorial learners; they now also want to understand why and how.

They also explore cosmic education and begin seeing the interconnectedness of all life and things. Part of their cosmic education is the five Great Lessons that are introduced in the elementary years (see online Appendix: “An introduction to the Great Lessons”).

Practical life activities for the 6- to 12-year-old child include engaging in purposeful activities to yield a specific result (whereas a 3- to 6-year-old child is interested in refining movements through process). For example, a 3- to 6-year-old child will wash the table to practice the movements, but the 6- to 12-year-old child will wash the table because it is dirty and they want to use it. The children are also responsible for making sure the

materials are tidy on the shelves, the tables are cleaned after lunch, the laundry is done for the whole school, and the shared spaces are clean and neat. Practical life activities can also include making arrangements for going out (see below).

The classroom

The classroom looks different in the 6–12 class, as children begin to move from concrete materials to abstraction. The items on the shelf serve as inspiration for further discovery; for example, the items may comprise beautiful shells, fossils, or a model of the human body. There are also materials for science experiments, art supplies, and groceries for preparing meals together. We will find books throughout the classroom related to their subject areas; however, there will also be fewer books in order to encourage the children to go out of the classroom and take their research further.

There are also large tables, or tables grouped together, and large spaces where the children can spread out on the floor and work together in small groups.

The environment will be beautiful and organized (this is especially important as the children are not so ordered at this age). There are plants and animals for the children to care for. There are tools for taking care of the environment, as well as tools (often in an atelier) for woodworking, sewing, knitting, creating, and building.

Going out: The elementary child is not limited to the classroom. They can go out into the community to explore further. They may call an expert, go to the market to shop for supplies, arrange a visit to a museum, art gallery, or recycling plant, or visit the library or planetarium to research further. An adult/parent from the community will be with them for safety as a chaperone.

Community

A large part of the children's work from 6 to 12 years old is practicing being in a community with others. At the beginning of the school year, they will develop agreements for the class that make everyone feel safe and provide a sense of belonging. These agreements are living documents and can be adjusted as needed in collaboration with the others in the group. They are also learning to solve conflicts with others more independently.

The children also work outside the classroom and are practicing becoming members of the wider community. They may mow the lawn for the elderly neighbors next to the school, take part in a community project, or write letters to the local government if they see injustice or a problem that needs to be addressed.

The role of the adult

The adult in the elementary class entices the child to explore further. The presentations/ lessons are short (around 10 to 15 minutes) and give just enough information to plant the seeds of interest for the children to explore further.

The guide observes the children to see what skills they need to build and what their interests are. The guide also aids a child who may be avoiding an area. There are curriculum requirements for this age, so the guide will help the child plan their time or make the area interesting for them to explore.

Rather than giving instructions, the guide asks questions to help the children explore their mental independence and reasoning mind. For example, the guide might say, “What do you need to get ready for lunch?” or “Where do you think you might find an answer for that?” or “How can you explore that idea further?”

A big part of the elementary guide’s work is guiding the children through social interactions and conflicts.

Creative expression

Handwork is very popular with elementary children. It is relaxing, allows repetition, perfection, and mastery, and allows 6- to 12-year-old children to get into a flow state. They make things because they are beautiful, and they can talk with others as they work too. Handwork includes sewing, woodworking, knitting, embroidery, ceramics, weaving, and modeling. Creative expression also includes creating art, art appreciation, writing, putting on original plays or theater productions based on what they have been studying, and musical performance and appreciation.