

Kindergarten and Your Child

I have three children, all of whom had some learning differences and through my journey trying to understand, support and maintain their confidence, I learned about most of the educational offerings in the county! I also have heard many parents expressing concern about what they perceive as kindergarten readiness. So I started doing these annual sessions to help parents plan for the next stages of their child's development.

Kindergarten kicks off the next phase of development and parents and children get excited about it, but parents need as much information as possible to help their child have a positive experience. I will be reviewing child development and how it aligns with the public school system, what is meant by kindergarten readiness, considerations for private versus public kindergarten, how to decide if transitional kindergarten is a fit for your child, and how to best support your child into the next phases of development and education.

Overview of Development Phases

Dr Montessori determined that children move through 4 primary phases of development, each approximately 6 years in length. Many other psychologists have confirmed similar development patterns. The child moves through stable, content times and through unstable transitions.

A child of 2 is at an unstable stage, hence the testing and emotional rollercoaster affectionately referred to as the terrible twos. A child of 3 is at a very stable, internally focused point. They tend to be content.

A child of 4.5 is coming into an unstable period in which their focus begins to shift from their internal growth and interests to a more socially informed awareness. Their imaginations are also quite developed and active by this time. They are gaining greater independence. These elements together cause some anxiety in the child. It is common to see a shift toward more conflict and high

emotional outbursts. The child is still not entirely in control of their rational behavior.

Kindergarten Today

Not long ago, kindergarten included imaginary play time, nap time, and artwork. There were probably many children capable of more advanced academic work, but there was no access to it, so we can't know.

Dr. Montessori believed that when the proper materials are made available in a prepared environment, children often spontaneously acquire knowledge beyond what is generally thought to be possible for their age.

Today, kindergarteners are expected to sit still, be attentive and work independently through the entire school day. They do a lot of writing and are required to be still in their chair for much of the morning. The language curriculum seems a little accelerated, but is not necessarily introduced in a sequential pattern. For example, my child's class worked on a new letter – name, sound, upper and lower case, writing of, and new sight word each week. On the other hand, in math, even simple addition may not be introduced until the second half of the year. This can be a detriment to boys as it is common for them to really like math and not be so attached to language work at this age.

The academic standards for entry into kindergarten are rarely a problem. If you review the state standards, you will recognize that children here are introduced to all of these concepts and often have mastered many of them even prior to kindergarten. Kindergarten teachers primarily cite the social and emotional issues as their main concerns regarding "kindergarten readiness". They want for a child to be able to work independently, sit for extended periods, take direction, transition smoothly and care for themselves, including tie their own shoes.

Development and Current Public Kindergarten Standards

There are two trends that have been occurring in public school in response to the fact that the skill sets being required of kindergarteners are not necessarily a good fit for their developmental stage.

1) Many more children are repeating kindergarten. Some families go into kindergarten knowing that their child will not likely succeed in the first year and expecting that the child will do two years of kindergarten. As stated on the CA Dept. of Education website, "Current literature reveals that retention may have a negative effect on student achievement, school attendance, attitude toward school, and student dropout rates." And those who do barely get through kindergarten are likely to be retained around 2nd grade.

2) Children are starting kindergarten at an older age. This is a better solution, but does have financial ramifications for families. But if you are considering delaying your child's start to kindergarten, your child will not stand out as being much older than the others in class.

Public vs. Private Kindergarten

Families are not required to enroll children in school until they are 6 years old, so Kindergarten is not a required grade. There are standards for kindergarten education, but no requirement that this be formal education. For this reason we are able to offer kindergarten, and Montessori schools commonly include the ages 2.5-6 and curriculum up to and exceeding kindergarten standards in the preschool classroom.

Only you can decide what is the right path for your child. Public schools must teach to a rigid time-based structure and must accept all children. They could have 1 teacher to 28 children. They necessarily have to teach to the "average". They are not able to provide good support for children who are slightly slow in their academic skills, nor are they good at keeping children who are above the average challenged and engaged. There are rigid policies on both accelerating a child and holding them back due to legal concerns, and due to best practices for children. There are not high quality support services available for children with learning differences. There is not much focus on social skills.

The Montessori classroom can be a good fit for bright children needing more social and emotional support, or children needing more time to master the foundation knowledge needed to develop into readers, or children needing to build greater confidence or self-discipline to succeed in a larger and more comparative environment.

I highly encourage you to go and visit several kindergarten classrooms. I also encourage you **not to discuss when and where your child will go to kindergarten** too early with them, or to hype up kindergarten as some amazing and exciting thing. Parents are always excited to see our children progressing, and we may also be excited to see costs go down =), but kindergarten is still school, and it will be a big change for them. They will need calm and kind support to prepare for a new school experience.

Private schools and charter schools are beginning enrollment now! You may need to get on a lottery list or apply for enrollment. Scholarship applications are probably due very soon too.

Leave your options open without setting up expectations or disappointments for them. Some children don't appear ready, and then make great progress in the summer months before kindergarten. Some are borderline, for emotional reasons, and would probably have a better experience staying in the Montessori Primary setting for one more year. Some are quite advanced, and may be better served in a more individualized setting, allowing continued rapid growth of academic skills. You know your child(ren) best! Education is not one-size-fits-all. When I started off, I never imagined that I would be taking each of my children to a different school. I started out thinking they would go to the local public school, but as I started each child in kindergarten, I found that the public system was not providing what I wanted for each child's unique needs. And eventually my children were attending different schools based on their strengths and support needs.

You can help to offset some of the issues with public school through active involvement. It is important to be a strong advocate for your child. Speak to the teacher often. Request more challenging work if you notice your child easily completes homework assignments, and augment as necessary. Do not make your child complete

assignments that he/she is not able to do somewhat independently. If your child shows any signs of learning differences, seek assistance outside of the public system if you are able. Educate yourself on best practices so that you can be confident that the assistance that is being provided is quality and proven to be effective.

Often private schools will have a kindergarten and if you know the private school path that you want to take, it may make sense to begin attending at the kindergarten year. Private schools generally, but not always, offer better teacher to child ratios. In our own Montessori kindergarten program we will strive to insure that your child meets or exceeds the state standards, while maintaining the individualized learning environment, the beneficial mixed-age grouping, eight to one child to teacher ratio, and focus on social grace and courtesy and conflict solution.

Please note: If your child will not be 6 by the cut-off date of the year they enter 1st grade, the public school does not have to admit them into 1st grade. Therefore if your child has achieved the kindergarten academic standards while attending our school, they still may not be enrolled into 1st grade. I saw a FAQ that said that if they were 5 years old, completed a full year of private kindergarten, the parents felt it was the right fit, and the school approved, they can be admitted to 1st grade.

Kindergarten age Cut-off

A child must be 5 by Sept 1 of the school year in which they attend kindergarten. This age actually hits children right at a transitional point in their development and can cause difficulty succeeding in the current traditional school environment. The system is also skewed more to the average skill sets of girls vs. boys, and boys generally mature emotionally a little later, making too early a start in kindergarten especially difficult on them. Boys with summer birthdays should be carefully evaluated to determine if it is a good fit for them.

Transitional Kindergarten (TK) Age Eligibility

For this year a child must turn 5 by April 2 of their TK year. Programs are expanding to serve younger children. For the 2024-25 school year a child who turns 5 by June 2 of the TK year is eligible. And by

the 2025-26 school year, child who turn 4 by September 1 will be eligible.

Transitional Kindergarten

Transitional kindergarten was originally set up in response to parents upset by moving back the cut-off date for kindergarten from December to September, hence the program only covered those dates. The date was moved back because the curriculum was getting significantly more advanced and the younger children were not succeeding. There is now a goal of universal TK by 2025 so cut off dates will be being extended by 2 month each year until all 4 year olds are eligible for TK. California is using the TK program to move to universal public preschool.

There is definitely research supporting the benefits of attending a quality preschool program to be ready for kindergarten success. In my opinion, the transitional kindergarten program is a big benefit for those families who do not have access to a quality preschool program, but they do not measure up to the outstanding program that we offer, with the opportunity for each child to progress at their own rate, which, in many cases, is faster than expected. We want to build a joy of learning and not a dread of school!

Children who start in the Montessori environment generally take the 3 year old year to build confidence and independence, lay foundation knowledge in phonics, pencil grip, math concepts, life sciences, geography, etc. and then really explode into more advanced skills in their 4 year old year, also enjoying the opportunity to become more of a leader in the classroom, and building self-discipline. Those who leave after just their 3 year old year will miss out on some of the benefits that the Montessori education is known for.

Those who stay will often achieve a good number of the end of kindergarten goals before leaving here. This can be a big benefit when they move into the next phase of development which is more social and less focused on skills and knowledge acquisition. And also can provide a cushion so if the curriculum is going by too fast, they have the foundations and knowledge to keep up and take in the new environment and processes and not feel overwhelmed or behind on classwork.

The TK programs are traditional preschool programs, and we hope you will continue to value the special Montessori environment that you already chose over traditional preschool environments.

Additionally, we offer the extended day program, while most TK programs will be half day programs, requiring the child to participate in an afterschool recreation program if you need afternoon care.

Some districts are offering full day TK and kindergarten, though full day programs usually end at 2:30 or 3:00. We do acknowledge the financial strain of private education, and the variety of other factors, like other children already attending the public school system.