Comparing Waldorf, Montessori & Public Education

By Melissa Rocky Lewis

When parents are researching schools, the myriad of options and different educational philosophies can sometimes be overwhelming. Many of the parents considering Waldorf education also consider Montessori. This is probably because both education methods cater to a student’s individual learning style with reverence and respect for each child and their gifts. But how the Waldorf and Montessori methods approach this objective vary greatly.

Many other parents are considering transitioning their children from public school into a private education. And so, the question for them becomes, “What exactly is the difference between a public education experience and Waldorf or Montessori?”

One might be tempted to summarize the differences in this way: Waldorf puts high value in art, imagination, and creativity and does not pursue academic instruction before the age of seven. Montessori puts high value in real life experience and an orderly environment and pursues early academics at a young age. Public education puts a high value on standard and measurable academics, with a focus on math and reading starting at age five.

But this does not shed much light on the multi-layered and nuanced approaches of each methodology. In an effort to clarify, we have created this chart describing similarities and differences in each educational system. But, for true clarification about these methods and their appropriateness for your child, visit schools in your area and experience in-session classroom visits.

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<th>WALDORF</th>
<th>MONTESSORI</th>
<th>PUBLIC</th>
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<td><strong>Early Academics</strong></td>
<td>Play is the work of a young child. Waldorf seeks to nourish and inspire imagination and creative thinking. Academics are delayed until Grade 1 so that the child has more time for imaginative play, art, music and the building of social skills and class cohesion.</td>
<td>The young child is a sponge. Montessori seeks to expose young minds to a rich array of academic tasks and experiences. Early education focuses on challenging intellectual tasks, which build upon each other for early academic adoption.</td>
<td>Academic knowledge grows linearly. The earlier a child begins academics, the less likely they are to fall behind and the more they can learn by graduation. Early education curriculum focuses on children meeting a grade’s standards. (1, 2, 5)</td>
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<td><strong>Curriculum &amp; Later Academics</strong></td>
<td>In a same-aged classroom environment, Waldorf educators encourage a love of lifelong learning through the use of multi-disciplinary methods that incorporate art, music &amp; craftsmanship. Lessons are language rich and focused around all arts and multiple senses. Subject integration and classroom collaboration are key to the academic experience.</td>
<td>In a multi-aged, multi-graded classroom, Montessori educators encourage children to engage in self-disciplined learning. Lessons are focused around real-life and classroom manipulative material. Subjects are approached with step-by-step procedure that guides students, individually, toward learning specific concepts.</td>
<td>In a same-aged classroom environment, public school educators encourage children to engage in accountable, individual learning. Lessons are focused around measureable academic accomplishments, where reading, writing and math remain the sole focus. In later years, those skills are more broadly applied to special subjects and integrated into the older child’s day. (1)</td>
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<td><strong>The Classroom</strong></td>
<td>Waldorf believes the child thrives in a rhythmic and predictable environment. The teacher leads the students in the classroom as collaborators with one another, as often as they work individually, and provides regular guidance.</td>
<td>Montessori believes the child thrives in a free and self-led environment. The teacher withholds their will and allows the children to choose their own activities in the classroom, providing guidance when necessary.</td>
<td>The child thrives in a state-of-the-art structured environment. Teachers lead the students in the classroom, primarily as individual learners and then as collaborators under the guidance of the teacher, textbooks and technology. (7)</td>
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There is a great quote from the education blog, Education Japan, saying this about the Waldorf and Montessori educational models: “One thing is clear... Each brings a high level of love and caring and a path through childhood vitally needed by children today. Each of these paths are brilliant, full of compassion, and honoring of the child.”

We agree. Which is right for your child is up to you and your family. We encourage you to tour a Waldorf school while class it is in session to experience Waldorf education first hand.
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