



SA MONTESSORI  
quality early childhood education and care

## What should we do in the year before school?

*The Pros and Cons of attending Kindy / ELC either in combination with, or at the expense of Montessori.*

We have developed this resource to help families who are making the important decision about what to do in the year prior to their child starting primary school.

**Please note that it is not compulsory for any child to attend government kindy prior to Primary School. It is not a legal requirement, and is absolutely not a prerequisite for entry to school.**

Many Montessori parents contemplate combining their child's Montessori experience with attendance at a Kindergarten or an early learning centre (ELC) attached to the primary school they hope to attend. Some families consider *decreasing or ceasing* their child's Montessori time to increase their time at Kindy or ELC. A worrying element is the trend of parents who do not really *want* their child to attend kindy or ELC but feel pressured to do it anyway. This may be social pressure from peers who encourage you to emulate their own choices, or it may be pressure from institutions such as primary schools that imply that families need to attend a kindy or ELC to secure entry into Reception. We respect the right of each family to make their own choices regarding their child's early years but we believe that they deserve to make *informed* choices.

Here is a list of the most common comments that we hear from parents about the 'Pros' of attending a Kindy or ELC. On the other side of the table you will find our responses, which point out the 'Cons' of leaving or decreasing Montessori. These answers won't necessarily apply in every situation, as every child is unique and every Kindy and ELC has a different structure, philosophy and quality, but they do offer some food for thought in response to some common perceptions and misconceptions.

This document is long, because we wish to address all the 'frequently asked questions' we get, so if you are not able to read through it all then please glance down the column on the left-hand side to see if any of those comments sound like something you have thought or a discussion you have had with your partner or other parents. Then you can simply read the responses that correspond to the issues that are relevant to you.

We would like to make it clear that we respect the work of Kindergarten and ELC teachers. We are aware of many wonderful Kindergartens and ELCs throughout Adelaide, and we have had many children and parents who have been very happy with their time at Kindy or ELC. Kindy is a valuable service which benefits many children. We simply believe that, for those families who can afford to do so, giving your child as much time as possible in a Montessori environment may add to or exceed the value of time in a different environment.

Pros	Cons
<p><b>“The kindy/ELC ‘feeds’ into our local school so my child will make friends who will be with them in Reception”</b></p>	<p>Not all children who attend a Kindy will go to the closest school so your child might make friends who will not be at Primary School with them. This is true even in a school’s ELC, as some families may be using the service for early learning without the intent of moving on to the primary school. While this, in itself, is not a large problem if you have specifically told your child they are going to Kindy or ELC to meet friends for school they might be upset when they discover this is not the case with their favourite friend.</p> <p>There is also the potential that your child may meet children who they dislike or have conflict with who <i>will</i> be going to the local school. If your child has conflict with another child at Kindy or ELC, at an age where it can be difficult to emotionally deal with these issues, then they might begin to fear the idea of Primary School if they know that child is going to be there also.</p>
<p><b>“Kindy offers a child a chance to ‘socialise’ and have experience with new friendships”</b></p>	<p>The truth is that Montessori offers your child the chance to increase their confidence through achievement and the acquisition of skills, to develop their own personality and interests and to build their ability to communicate their ideas. These are the key elements required to make friends at any age – confidence, knowing and being true to who you are, and communication – and so we are preparing them to make friends in any environment in the future.</p> <p>At Montessori Pre-School there are countless opportunities for your child to socialise. The children do not spend all their time working independently at Montessori – they simply have <b>choice</b> about whether they do an activity on their own, with one friend, or with a big group. This means that the children are empowered to socialise <i>when and how they feel comfortable</i>. They can build their social skills in a comfortable, natural way rather than have social situations forced on them by constant group games or ‘activity stations’.</p>
<p><b>“At Kindy/ELC they will have to fit the expectations of a group instead of being allowed to follow their own interests. They have to <u>get used to this</u> because it will happen in school.”</b></p>	<p>This is a funny one for us – we hear that from parents as a ‘pro’ but it strikes us as a big ‘con’! The argument seems to be that children should somehow ‘get used to’ what is coming, but that theory overlooks the fact that individuals need <i>secure foundations</i> in order to build resilience.</p> <p>If we can agree that it is ideal to respect a child as a unique individual, not just a number in a class, then why wouldn’t we allow them to experience this for as long as possible?</p> <p>Lumping children into one group regardless of their individual interests or abilities is not ideal. Perhaps we shouldn’t make them ‘get them used to it’ as early as possible; instead we should <i>avoid it for as long as possible</i>.</p> <p>If you went to work and your boss told you that in one year you were going to have to start working longer hours, for less pay, would you ask your boss to please introduce those conditions immediately so that you could get used to it? No. You would want to avoid it as long as possible. So why we do we start imposing unfair or unpleasant conditions onto our children as young as we can so that they can ‘get used to the real world’.</p>

**“Kindy is so cheap they might as well do both because it is the best of both worlds that way.”**

Furthermore, if a parent believes it’s possible for a 4-year-old pre-schooler to adjust to the expectations of kindy then why not trust a 5-year-old Montessori Graduate to adjust to the expectations of school? An older child is more emotionally mature and their communication skills have improved so they can better comprehend the reasons for the change in expectations.

To anyone who still stands by the motto of ‘they have to get used to it, that’s what the real world is like’, we’d empower you to contemplate that perhaps instead of changing the children we should be changing the real world.

Sometimes it does work out this way, and we certainly prefer for children to combine Montessori with Kindy rather than leave Montessori altogether, but the truth is that the two environments can be so different that it can be confusing for some children. At Montessori we put out a wide selection of activities, designed and altered for each group according to their needs and with the abilities of individual children in mind, and then we encourage children to independently choose their tasks based on their own interests. At many kindergartens it is common for a teacher to set out only a small number of activity stations for children or run whole group activities. This is still fun for children but it does not require them to be as aware of their own preferences or to practice decision making. Therefore, when they next come to Montessori they are not immediately self-directed; we have to remind them that they don’t have to wait for the teacher to tell them what to do.

Montessori environments also allow children to enjoy *intrinsic* motivation without the distraction of *extrinsic* rewards or punishment. In a Montessori classroom all children are respected equally. We share their joy and pride when they achieve but we keep the spotlight on their own experience rather than interfering with our adult judgements. We help children who stumble to learn from the situation rather than feel ashamed of it. Yet in some kindergartens there are external judgements such as Gold Stars for children who have done a “good job”. This might seem innocent enough but imagine how it feels for the children *without* the star or the compliment. External incentives of any kind can interfere with natural motivation, having effects such as diminishing an individual’s desire to take risks (as easy tasks are more certain to produce ‘good’ results than challenging ones). So, the children return from Kindy to Montessori thinking they have to be praised for every task they engage in or choosing only the simplest activities because they’re now afraid to take risks.

Every minute the Montessori teachers spend trying to ‘undo’ the Kindy characteristics and remind the child of the expectations of a Montessori classroom (speaking softly, being independent, embracing challenge) is a minute less that the child is able to learn new skills or information.

**“They have done everything at Montessori so we want them to have something new at Kindy.”**

There are hundreds of lessons within the Montessori Early Childhood curriculum – and many more that are unique to our centre as our experiences evolve over time based on the needs and interests of our children. It is true that they are not all on the shelves every day (how on earth could we fit them all there?!) but they are constantly available to the children as the teachers are always there to access and present new activities, extension tasks, or fun variations on familiar games.

The Montessori Early Childhood Curriculum is actually designed for children up until the age of 6! We have activities for spelling and grammar rules, multiplication and division, and materials that explore scientific concepts as complex as botany and zoology. When children graduate from Montessori to primary school at age 5 we are proud of all they have achieved during their time with us but even then we can't help but think of the *next* step we would have taken with them, the next concept we would have introduced them to, as the materials to scaffold that next step are in our cupboards. It is almost impossible for a child to 'do everything' in the vast Montessori curriculum even if they stay until they turn 6, and it is a certainty that a child has not completed the curriculum by the age of 4.

**“They are going to have to learn at school so I want them to just *play* now.”**

Work *is* play at this age! We only use the phrase 'work' at Montessori to add a sense of weight and value to what the children are doing each day. The truth is, though, that the belief that learning is a chore is not a human instinct. Young children **love to learn** and we feel it is their right to have this opportunity. Many Kindergartens or ELCs, although well-resourced with games, dress ups and Arts and Crafts, do not necessarily have the resources to teach a child the characteristics of the animal kingdom so he or she knows more about the animals they are dressing up as, or to teach children about geometric forms so that their art work can be filled with more patterns and shapes.

We have a lot of fun at Jescott. It is just that in addition to singing, dancing, painting and playing we also give children the gift of respecting them as little learners. We answer their questions. We guide their explorations. We allow them time. We help them build the structure of the brain that they will use for life.

**“Kindy is so much cheaper!”**

There really isn't a way to refute this claim. It is true. Kindy is cheaper because it is funded by the Government. Yet we maintain that what we offer is worth the cost. We do wish that we could offer lower fees to families but our structure is based on the true costs of operating such an enriching environment. Our fees allow us to afford our talented, qualified Montessori educators, our specialised teaching materials and a beautiful environment that makes children feel welcome, valued and empowered. The truth is, that in some cases (not all, there are many wonderful kindergartens out there) you get what you pay for.

**“My child brings home a lot more things from Kindy so they must be doing more there.”**

When children take home a ‘piece of paper’ it can look like they have done more. The truth is, however, that at Montessori your child is constantly engaged during their time here. Our ‘Work Cycle’ in the classroom lasts for 3 hours. That is 3 hours worth of solid, engaging activities for your child (and don’t forget that even more learning and exploration occurs during our outdoor play and our afternoon period). The reason they don’t take these tasks home on paper is because we most often use the *Montessori materials* to teach. **These Montessori materials are designed to present concepts with a concrete experience first and an abstract application later.** This means that, for instance, in Mathematics we use the Golden Beads to teach about units, tens, hundreds and thousands. Your child might start working with these at the age of 3 and a half. From this early age they are having a hands on experience with the system of hierarchies that make up our infinite counting patterns. They are exchanging 25 units for 2 tens and 5 units. They are reading the numeral ‘5247’ and retrieving those 5 thousands cubes, 2 hundred squares, 4 ten bars and 7 unit beads from the ‘Bead Bank’. However because we are using these **concrete experiences** first to make sure that your child comprehends the concept before asking them to make an **abstract application** of this knowledge it might not be until the age of almost 5 that your child takes home a worksheet with thousands written on it. We know that it would be nice as a parent to receive this ‘written proof’ but we choose not to confuse or compromise your child’s understanding by introducing worksheets before they are ready.

**“The kindy/ELC puts up lots of photos of the children on display boards or puts artwork up on the walls.”**

We take photos when we can, but never at the expense of our presence and engagement with the children. We have iPads in the classroom and we try to take photos frequently and write observations regularly to give parents an insight into the classroom. However, any time a teacher has an iPad in their hand it means they are not 100% focused on the children. It is a barrier between the teacher and child. Every minute we spend taking photos is a minute that a child has to wait for a lesson they are interested in. That one minute might be too long, their attention might wander. So, instead of asking a child to wait or pose, we prioritise them. We choose to invisibly teach a child rather than take impressive photos. We do wish there was a way to do both, because parents absolutely deserve communication and insight into the classroom, but right now we don’t have the octopus arms required to hold an iPad and a child at the same time so we always choose to put the children first. When we take lots of photos it is because the classroom is functioning very independently but when the photos are fewer and further between it is because the children need *teachers* not *photographers*.

Furthermore, we choose to share a child’s photos, artwork or work samples privately and directly with families, rather than creating public displays. This is to protect the child from the tyranny of comparison and competition. When evidence is on display it sends many implicit messages to the children (and parents!). Some children may feel inadequate when they see their work beside another child’s ‘neater’ example. Some parents may feel distressed that their child doesn’t seem to be engaging with tasks as challenging as a younger peer in another photo. We deliberately protect our children and parents from this pressure by avoiding public displays in favour of direct communication.

**“Kindy/ELC writes down what my child does every day.”**

The response to this is the same as the answer to the question of why we don't take photographs more often. Kindy teachers often have long periods of 'non-contact time' where they are not in the classroom but are instead in the office writing observations or cutting and pasting parent communication sheets. We are aware of some kindergartens that actually replace the "teachers" with unqualified volunteers in the afternoons so that the qualified educators can be released to write observations. This 'evidence' might seem, at first glance, very impressive but I'm sure most conscientious parents would prefer that their children receive a full day of attention from specialized, qualified teachers rather than losing access to those experts halfway through the day. We do take 'non-contact time', because writing observations can guide our intentional teaching and help to make a child's learning journey more visible to a parent, but this time 'off the floor' is kept to a bare minimum so that we do not miss time with the children.

Our Montessori program requires constant input from teachers, even when the children are engaged in independent activities such as the Practical Life trays. We present tiny details that would be unnoticeable to most but which are immensely valuable to children. If a child is pouring a jug of water we might quietly ask for a turn and show them how we hold the handle with our right hand but use our left hand to support the jug just below the lip so it is easier to control. If we were not carefully watching and constantly ready to become involved in these situations then the children would potentially miss out on valuable learning opportunities. As the saying goes "the beauty is in the details" so instead of leaving the classroom to write down a general description we remain with the children to notice and help with those tiny, yet significant, details.

It is also harder to accurately quantify a child's time at Montessori because it is unique for every individual in our care. Each child follows a completely inimitable learning journey through the day, over the week and as the months and years go by. There are, therefore, no 'shortcuts' available to us when it comes to recording these experiences. We can't 'copy and paste' the same learning story for every child in the class and simply change the names and pronouns. If we compromised our program by offering fewer activity options, or by enforcing whole group experiences, it would be much easier to record but much less meaningful to the child.

We do keep records of our observations in our digital portfolios and we do offer comprehensive School Reports to children graduating to Primary School and we are always welcoming to parents who need to chat, to sit down for a formal meeting or to receive a written Progress Report. We also make our *prepared environment* visible and available to parents! You only have to spend a few minutes observing (or interacting with!) the Montessori materials in our classroom to gain an insight into how much inspiration and information the children can access.

**“My child just started kindy/ELC and suddenly they know all their letters so kindy/ELC must be teaching them more than Montessori”**

Children do have ‘absorbent minds’, and can often seem to pick up new information very quickly, but when it comes to complicated or abstract concepts it is important to release that children do not learn overnight. They can memorize new words or phrases almost instantly, because children go through a Sensitive Period for language and therefore absorb words effortlessly, but for more complex concepts such as written literacy a child needs time to observe, practice and revise a new idea before they can completely understand it. Furthermore, a child who is in the process of crystallizing a new concept in their mind might not externally reveal it. We often start working with the Sandpaper Letters, which give a visual recognition and a muscular memory of the shapes of letters and relates this to the pronunciation of their phonetic sound, with children who are 3. It is just that we can’t expect a child to instantaneously memorize all 26 letter symbols and their phonetic sounds. We introduce one or two letters at a time and we wait until these are firmly recognized before introducing more because we don’t want to confuse the child. Your child could be working on these letters long before they start spontaneously recalling or using them.

The reason that children start more obviously referring to and using letters when they start Kindy/ELC is not because they have a magical teaching method – **it is because the age of 4 is a developmentally appropriate time for children to begin using letters for literacy tasks such as writing and early reading.** Kindy is not the cause of the interest, it simply coincides with the natural timing of a child’s interest in more formal literacy. The preparation work that they have been doing internally at Montessori prior to this external expression is vital to their understanding of literacy.

What we see appearing on the outside is the result of what has been happening within your child’s mind and body for years!

### **Some final thoughts...**

If children are pulled out of Montessori before their final year of the program then a lot of their earlier experiences cannot reach completion or extension. Our materials and activities are specifically designed to link into the next stage of learning that concept. It is a shame when, halfway through building their understanding, a child is removed from the environment where that next step is offered and where the teachers know what that child is capable of already and what they are ready for next. It also robs that child of a chance to be a leader in the community, to be a role model in the room and repay the kindness and guidance they were offered by their elders when they first started.

It is our opinion that children benefit greatly from finishing their time at Montessori. However, we also respect the rights of parents to make their own choices about their child's learning and development. If you choose to take your child to Kindy/ELC as well as, or instead of, Montessori then we will accept that and we will still treat, and teach, your child with the same respect and commitment that we would if they were staying until Primary School.

We would like to take this opportunity to genuinely thank the parents who do make the decision to keep their child at Montessori until Primary School. We know that not all parents who make this choice are able to easily afford it and we appreciate your decision to allocate your finances in a way that values the incredible, immeasurable importance of the early years of your child's life.

You cannot get these precious early years back, they will be gone so quickly, so while you can we recommend keeping your child in an environment where they are respected as a valuable, intelligent, whole human, where they are given countless opportunities to explore, discover, problem solve and learn, where they will have fun with the things that they enjoy but not be forced to endure the things a teacher 'decides' are fun for everyone, and where they will ultimately build a sense of self-esteem, develop the characteristics of their personality and organize their brain in ways which will stay with them for a life time.

We believe that the environment where your child will receive those benefits is here in Montessori preschool.