

# The Icebox

The Monthly Newsletter of Montessori in Redlands

Reprint



## Journey & Discovery: Better Late than Never

BY KRIS GOODFELLOW, ELEMENTARY PARENT

Like so many Montessori in Redlands parents, I am busy. And there is always something that feels like it isn't getting my full attention. Bennett's early education was certainly one of them.

There are lots of days when I drop Bennett off and think, ugh, I forgot to brush his hair. Then I get to work and sigh...I forgot to brush my hair. While I have loved Montessori it has been mostly from afar during the 3 years that my 6-year-old son Bennett has spent there. I haven't done much to get involved at school or understand Montessori. But I have had good intentions. Like the time back in September when I picked up a Wish List note back in Kara and Dorama's class asking for an old sheet. I found the note in the bottom of my purse a few weeks ago. (Do you still need the sheet, ladies? Or are you all set? And why in the world do you need that old sheet anyway?)

This year, I have resolved to figure this out and to know more about my son's day away from me and what Montessori is giving his education. I started by going to Journey and Discovery on Saturday. Some, including the guilty voice in my head, might say that I should have done this three years ago when he was starting school. Or five years ago before I decided to not send him to the toddler program. But I did not let that voice keep me from going at this late date. Better than never, right? I made the necessary preparations for this day, signed up a babysitter, prepped Bennett, set the coffee maker...and still showed up 15 minutes late. While I

missed the juice and muffins, I arrived just in time to hear the Chinese proverb, attributed to Confucius, that set the stage for the day's events:

*I hear and I forget*

*I see and I remember*

*I do and I understand*

The proverb, Maura explained, reminds us of the things we know best how to do, and it is also the philosophy that underpins teaching at Montessori in Redlands. Rather than reading a text book and listening to corresponding lectures, the students are learning by doing the "work" I have heard Bennett describe. The "parts of the fly work" was a particular favorite of his in the primary class. Now, it's the bead frame work. So I could relate to this in my own experience as well as through Bennett's eyes. Still I must honestly admit that while Bennett was, in my traditional view, still in "preschool," that I was not particularly worried whether learning the parts of the fly was going to help my child get into college. But now that he's in Elementary, I want to know that the bead frame work is going to give him a foundation for the math portion of his SATs.

Maura went on to explain that the learning by doing, which Maria Montessori codified 100 years ago, is being proven to be the best way for children to learn today. She talked about scientific studies of children at "work" and the scientists who showed the physical connections in the brain growing as they did so. She talked about studies suggesting children need hands-on



education, need to learn to work in groups, and need to learn to think, and that even though the observations are being done using the most modern techniques, that all these were the lessons of Dr. Montessori.

From here, we were ready to silently explore the classrooms from Toddler to Primary to Elementary to Middle School. We were instructed not to stand next to our friends and be tempted to chat, so that we could better observe the environment where our children spend their days. We moved (mostly) silently from the miniature, delicate Toddler rooms with their tiny chairs and precious buttoned purses and gentle music, to the Primary class which, though empty, seemed vast and raucous and energizing, to the Elementary classroom which felt more structured where there were elements of school that I remember, not desks, to be sure, but pencil boxes and notebooks and cubbies, to the Middle School room, which, with its slouchy couches and computers had the feel of a cleaned up, lazy teen. We were brought back together to discuss our observations. I listened and privately thought that

Bennett had certainly missed a lot not being in that Toddler class, but worried about how he might fare in Middle School without the basketball games to go to or band to join. And what about how would he test, if he never takes a test? How are they tested?

Good question. Maura said to hold onto it until after the second leg of our journey.

This time we were allowed to talk -- quietly, of course -- and to do the work our children do. It was nothing if not amusing to watch parents achieve yogi positions to fit into toddler chairs to color, or explore those purses, or match up plastic animals with laminated cards. Then on to Primary to see Maryhelen holding forth on the math lessons that the children learn and to hear one concerned parent asking in 100 different ways the same question: But how will you know if my child has really learned each lesson? (That testing question again...)

From there we went into the Elementary classroom, my son's class. For me this was the best part of the day. I got to do the bead frame work with Emily and diagram a sentence and read his notebook. It was great. This is very much where my son lives a great part of his day and will live his days for a number of years. The environment felt positive and rewarding—and challenging. While Margaretann did the checkerboard work, multiplying two large numbers together using beads placed on a felt

checkerboard, one parent asked, "How do you keep them from knowing that they are smarter than you when they come home?" Everyone laughed. I thought about it more, and decided that no doubt, we can all check their long multiplication with the calculator we keep in the drawer, but these Montessori tools were new to most of us, even if the lessons were old. And it is a scary thing to have your child's educational experience be worlds away from your own. Certainly we parents must each wrestle with our comfort in this regard.

Finally we were off to the Middle School classroom, where my personal highlights were watching the rocket experiment involving a bike pump, water and a 2-liter plastic bottle, and watching a friend attempt to paint a chard of plaster like an ancient Roman fresco. All of the lessons were at this point much more like those I would be asked to do in college: figure out how to build a new mousetrap, write an essay on one of the following Renaissance women. I thought that this was a very interesting contrast to the text book lessons that formed my middle school. What did I remember from

middle school? Outside of the mountains of homework, I remember my social studies teacher who asked us to invent something and the shop class where I learned to wire a plug and rewire a lamp, a skill I have used regularly since. That's a pretty pathetic list for a "good student."

In the end we returned together for lunch, more discussion and an answer to the pesky testing question. Maura said that the children are learning how to learn. In the beginning their development will be very uneven because they are not being taught to the test. So in third grade, they start taking standardized tests. Their scores at this time are all over the map. From that point, however, they advance steadily until they exceed their grade levels and sometimes two. That made perfect sense to me after experiencing what the children did at each level. There were more questions and parent bonding, and then we parted ways.

As I left, I felt for the first time not only happy about the beautiful school that Bennett attends and the attentive, calm teachers who I admire, but I also had clarity that he is in a great school by all the traditional measures I carry around in my head, and some I couldn't have imagined until my day at school; definitely, better late than never.

—Kris Goodfellow is mother to Bennett, who recently moved to Elementary.

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