

# The Yin and Yang of Montessori and Waldorf in Early Childhood Education

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Montessori and Waldorf (Steiner education) are two of the most popular forms of education today, spanning both public-charter and private-school systems, and influencing some public classrooms. When comparing Montessori to Waldorf for the early childhood years, parents often feel like they are comparing apples to oranges. However, a closer look reveals meaningful symmetries in these approaches, which both took root during the war-torn years of the early 1900s. We also explore ways to achieve a greater balance between these systems in the beginning stages.



Waldorf handcrafts



Montessori Schools  
{ founder Maria Montessori }



Waldorf Schools  
{ founder Rudolf Steiner }

## History and Approach

- » In 1907, Dr. Maria Montessori (1870–1952), Italy’s first female physician, founded Montessori education. Based on the observation that children teach themselves, Dr. Montessori designed a “prepared environment” where children choose from a number of developmentally appropriate activities.
- » Montessori emphasizes learning through the senses, and believes that children learn best at their own individual pace and according to a choice of prepared activities. Montessori classes place children in three-year age groups (3–6, 6–9, 9–12, and so on), forming communities in which the older children spontaneously share knowledge with the younger ones.
- » In 1919, Emil Molt, head of the Waldorf cigarette factory in Stuttgart, asked the philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) to help found a school for children of factory workers, based on equality and spiritual freedom, that could help reunite a culture torn apart by World War I.
- » Waldorf education balances artistic, academic, and practical work to address the child’s changing consciousness as it unfolds. Activities such as art, music, gardening, and foreign languages are central at Waldorf schools. Teachers either remain with the class from grades one to eight or (as is widely practiced today) from grades one to four, with a second teacher taking up grades five to eight. This allows teachers to work with children and families intimately.

## Task and Philosophy

- » Montessori offered disenfranchised children, in a relaxed country already infused with the arts, an opportunity to build up their skills, with the hope of them taking their place in society. Yet Montessori spoke eloquently of the spiritual embryo of the child and the spiritual preparation of the teacher.
- » Maria Montessori began an affiliation with the Theosophical Society later in her life while lecturing at its headquarters in Adyar, India, when World War II broke out and prevented her from returning to Italy. This war experience caused Montessori to press for peace education above all else.
- » Steiner’s task was to reintroduce the arts in a hard-edged country post-WWI and reawaken the heart forces in a group of working-class children. Steiner sought teachers who had rich practical life experiences to model for children ways to be in the world.
- » Rudolf Steiner began his spiritual path with the Theosophical Society and eventually broke away to form his own movement, which he called *anthroposophy*, prior to WWII. Anthroposophy is nondenominational and is not taught to the children, nor are teachers required to take it up.

## Early childhood curriculum

- » Montessori sees the child as having an absorbent mind, and seeks to supply a child with ever-more-challenging intellectual tasks from an early age. Montessori emphasizes freeing a child from his fantasies until he is grounded in reality.
- » Montessori materials are focused toward specific learning concepts and involve step-by-step procedures. Montessori focuses on learning tasks performed individually. Only the teacher may intervene if the child requests help. Children may help a younger child learn to do a new task; otherwise, they must wait their turn to use an activity already in use.
- » Montessori children are free to choose their own activities in the classroom. This protection of the child’s choice is a key element in the Montessori method.
- » Waldorf seeks to nourish and to keep alive the young child’s healthy imagination and creative thinking powers. In Waldorf, play is viewed as the work of the young child.
- » Waldorf toys are used to help children re-enact experiences from life as they actually happen. The less finished and more suggestive a toy may be, the greater its educational value and potential for open-ended imaginative play. Children interact through free play and joining together in circles, stories, and group plays. The teacher models good social behavior with the children and helps them work through disagreements.
- » Waldorf sees the child thriving in a rhythmic atmosphere. There are times for coming together and working as a whole group and times for playing individually or with friends.



It is proven that the children who usually do the best in school are the ones whose parents are actively involved in their education. After all, you are your child's first, and most important, teacher.



PHOTO: TORONTO WALDORF SCHOOL

### Conclusion

Combining elements from both Waldorf and Montessori may be the perfect blend of yin and yang for parents and children, particularly in the early childhood years, but this does not usually translate for teachers, who are often trained in only one system. With this in mind, we offer some suggestions to parents to get the best out of each system and to guide their child's unfolding, regardless of their preferred educational system.

In traditional Montessori preschools and kindergartens, the element of pretend play is discouraged. In traditional Waldorf preschools and kindergartens, letters and numbers are seldom formally introduced. This is because Montessori didn't find "pretend play" necessary for the children at her schools, and Steiner did not feel that young children were ready for a formal education until the age of 7 or the beginning of first grade, to give their physical bodies ample time to form and to develop the capacity to endure the rigors of structured learning.

Montessori taught that the child must learn to distinguish between reality and fantasy. Yet children spontaneously engage in imaginative play as a form of tension release from the world, as a way to make sense of real-life experiences. And imaginative play helps heal trauma and grief in small children. Children today need play in school, where it can be supervised and nurtured. Therefore, it is wise for Montessori parents to offer space for imaginary play that is simultaneously healing and educational. Using natural toys for opened play and creating an environment rich with possibilities, but

without a strict structure, could be beneficial, as could telling children fairy tales and allowing them to enact stories.

Waldorf parents could benefit from offering some handcrafted materials for conceptual math and language development since, let's face it, children, who are ready and eager to learn, absorb abstract concepts from their home environments anyway. This is because most parents are inclined to teach their children their letters and simple numbers. Waldorf parents can, for example, introduce a felted alphabet wall hanging with pockets for each letter and put some natural items in each pocket that represent the letter selected (for example, an acorn or small wooden apple for A) and include basic numbers as counting symbols in a pretend-play store in their free play space.

Overall, no one educational method can substitute for a loving and caring home environment. It is proven that the children who usually do the best in school are the ones whose parents are actively involved in their education. After all, you are your child's first, and most important, teacher. 🐘

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**Clockwise from top left:** Montessori geography\*; Maypole — Waldorf May Day Festival; Triangles — Montessori shapes\*; Drawing — Waldorf painting; Earth awareness, a shared approach; Counting — Montessori numbers\*