

## Points to be Considered While Deciding the Age of Admission to a Montessori School

Dr Shashi Rekha M

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**Abstract:** Preschool education in India was neglected till 2020. The Right to Education Act, although mandated compulsory education for all children from 6 to 14 years, omitted preschool. Thus, Admission to preschools was optional, and parents had the freedom to admit their children at any age. This resulted in same-age children being in different classes. The National Education Policy 2020 instructs the admission age for formal schooling to be between 6 and 7 years and insists on three years of preschool before entering the formal school. This ambiguous age of admission has confused the parents and has prevented them from admitting their children to nursery school. The current paper argues the importance of admitting children to a Montessori school around 2 ½ years of age.

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### Introduction

Every April and May, parents ponder about the right age to admit their children to school. Until recently, early childhood education was under parents' control. They were the sole deciders of their children's preschool admission. Their decision was based on two arguments. One is the 'catch them young' philosophy, and the other is 'the maturation philosophy'. The first group believes that children learn better at a younger age. They admit their children to a preschool at 1 ½ years. The second group thinks that older children learn better and delay preschool admission until seven years. Both these notions are inadequate and do not consider the needs of the children. Moreover, this has resulted in extreme age differences in classes, depriving them of getting age-appropriate support from schools [1].

The earlier policies neglected preschool education so much that the Right to Education Act mandated compulsory education only for children between 6 and 14 years. Later, the policymakers announced the policy was made on the assumption that the Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS) takes care of early education. This omission was corrected by the National Education Policy 2020. Considering the criticality of early childhood education, the National Education Policy 2020 fixed the grade 1 admission age to six years and mandated three years of preschool before that. Nevertheless, all children will not be six years old on the day school reopens, and the state government fixed the admission age between 6 and 7 years. However, this admission age is one year later than the earlier policies. This late admission has caused the parents to seek admission directly to grade 1, forgoing the critical three years of preschool. The current paper argues that the right age to start schooling is three years, depending on the varied requirements of the child at different stages, making most of the potentialities of the first stage of development, the existence of sensitive periods, expanding the horizon when in need, and because of the neuroscientific reasons.

### Child Developmental Stages

One needs to consider the developmental needs of a child before deciding on the admission age. Maria Montessori discovered four stages of development: birth to 6 years, 6 to 12 years, and 12 to 18 years [2]. At every stage, the child goes through a metamorphosis, and he exhibits different traits, needs, and requirements, like a butterfly.

Compare the child in the first stage to a child in the second stage. The younger child is chubby, falls sick often, and has the first set of teeth. He is also homebound and wanders around his mother. In contrast, the older child is thin but healthy. He wants to explore the outer world and stays out of the house. Accordingly, the younger child learns by manipulating things with his hands. The older one learns by reasoning and imagination. While the younger one explores the world through his senses, the older child explores the world using his/her imagination. The younger child plays alone, whereas the older child likes to be in a group. The younger child wants to know the names of things. The older one is interested in how things work and enjoys the reason behind them. The younger child is happy with the mundane and practical aspects of his environment. The older child rejoices in the extraordinary.

Furthermore, the preceding stage prepares and lays a foundation for the succeeding stage of development. For instance, the child learns the names and their visible characteristics of the things in his/her environment [3]. This awareness lays a foundation for further awareness and the reason for their existence. Therefore, one type of schooling is hardly beneficial for both groups. The younger child needs a school that

provides sensory education and real, practical, hands-on activities. In contrast, the older child needs a curriculum that helps him understand how the world functions.

The Montessori curriculum is designed according to the developmental needs of the children. Montessori says that at the preprimary level, the mind is prepared to plant the seeds of culture. Hence, it is essential to admit the child to a preprimary Montessori classroom at 2 ½ years.

### **Time is the Essence**

Every minute is crucial to the development of children. Consider newborn children. They are almost zero [4]. They cannot sit, stand, walk, use their hands, or even talk. The same child, within two years, sits, stands, walks, runs, and speaks as many as five languages. How could children achieve this within that short span while adults take decades to achieve the same? Children can achieve this because of the special powers they have at that period. These non-conscious powers are Absorbent mind, Horme, and Mneme [4]. The absorbent mind absorbs whatever the child encounters. Horme drives the child to work towards a goal and achieve it. Mneme internalises whatever the absorbent mind has absorbed. These powers enable the child to absorb languages from the environment. He doesn't learn a language but absorbs it by being in the place where the language exists. Such mighty powers are short-lived. They cease making way for conscious powers—intelligence and willpower. Hence, every second of the child's life is precious to utilise the short-lived powers. The stimulating environment of school can have a long-lasting impact when the children still have these powers. Hence, it is essential to start Montessori school before three years.

### **Sensitive Period for Touch**

Apart from the Absorbent mind, Horme, and Mneme, the child has some significant periods called sensitive periods. These are time gaps when the child is attracted to some aspects of his environment [3]. For example, period to learn the language, explore his tactile sense, and imbibe order. There is also a time for refining his senses. During these periods, extended work doesn't tire the child. The child has a sensitive period for language, starting from around four months and continuing till two years. During this period, the child makes many sounds and practices using his jaw, tongue, lips, and vocal cords tirelessly. He keeps practising the sounds and words of the language. Mother's admonishments don't have any impact on the child to be silent for a while. Like a flame that blazes without consuming any fuel, his learning is larger than his practice. After two years, the child's excess interest in language eventually ends. It doesn't mean that he stops speaking and learning, but he loses the earlier tenacity.

Another example is the sensitive period for touch. It starts when the child is two years old and ends by three years old. During this period, the child wants to touch each and everything. He is sensitive to the texture. Once that period of touch ceases, he becomes oblivious to touch. This is the time when the child is introduced to Sandpaper letters in the Montessori school. Sandpaper letters are used to associate the sound to the letters. Since the child is interested in touching the letters and extended work doesn't tire him, he/she learns the association faster and more effectively. What happens when the sound and letter association is given after three years? After three years, the child would lose the sensitive period for touch; he may not be as interested in tracing as he used to be during the sensitive period. He needs continuous support and constant reminders. Yet, the association would not be effective. Hence, to get the most out of sensitive periods for touch, it is necessary to start school before he loses them.

### **Expanding the Horizons**

At birth, the child becomes aware of his mother. Gradually, he learns about his father and other family members. This family forms the child's first environment. Later, when he steps out of his house, he comes to know his immediate neighbourhood and friends. This awareness of the neighbourhood is his second environment. Around 2 ½ years, the child requires a third environment where he meets other members of society and learns to interact. Montessori school forms the third environment. Hence, he should start his schooling at 2 ½ years [2].

### **Neuroscience and Brain Development**

Studies in neuroscience show that brain development is rapid in the first six years of life. It reaches 85% of an adult's size by 2 ½ years and 90% by three years [5]. This is when the child learns emotional control and speech. He also gains control over his motor skills. The increase in brain size doesn't happen because of the creation of new brain cells. It occurs due to changes in the size of cells and the number and type of connections between them. This change takes place due to the conditions of his environment. All physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and nutritional conditions affect a child's brain development. Children who lack these conditions may develop socio-emotional disorders later.

Maria Montessori observed that children lacking conducive environments develop several deviations such as restlessness, gluttony, daydreaming, and continuously asking questions [3]. She discovered that daily life activities in the third environment reduce this effect. Hence, the children should have the opportunity to do these activities starting from the age of 2 ½ years. This mandates school admission at 2 ½ years.

### WHO Recommendation

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends responsive care giving, promotion of early learning, integrated care giving and nutrition interventions and support of maternal mental health for all children from birth to three years. WHO stresses that early learning should be activity-oriented learning [6]. The Government of India provides these aspects in Anganwadis. As Prochner indicates, the quality of early learning is limited to songs in Anganwadis [7]. The parents who are oblivious to Anganwadis depend on untrained caretakers or baby care centres. Hence, it is essential to start Montessori schooling at 2 ½ years. Montessori set up called Nido, caters to children from 6 months to 2 ½ years.

### Conclusion

Studies have indicated that academic success depends on a stimulating preschool that provides for the developmental needs of the children rather than physical maturity. Child-centred, activity-based schools are crucial for children before starting formal schooling at six years of age. To get the maximum benefit of the child's special powers and sensitive periods and to ensure appropriate social learning, it is crucial to start preschool around 2 ½ years old.

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### Dr Shashi Rekha M

#### Author Note:

**Dr Shashi Rekha M** has a PhD for her thesis, *Play in Early Childhood Education: Its Importance in Montessori and non-Montessori Approaches*, from the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Jain University. Dr Rekha's work includes Montessori, early childhood education, play and inclusive education. Her ORCID ID is <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7350-7492>