

## The Toddler Program

Many Montessori schools have initiated toddler classes for children 18 months to three years. The toddler classroom is simpler and slower paced than the classroom for three to six year olds. Tables and chairs are smaller and the teacher-child ratio is lower.

However, this program is neither a watered down version of the three to six year old program, nor is it an academic preparation for subsequent years of Montessori education. **The toddler program offers very young children a unique year of self-development in a tender atmosphere of special understanding, respect and support.**

Of fundamental importance is the gradual separation of each child from his or her primary caretaker, usually the mother. The Montessori toddler program protects this fragile stage of development by creating a very gentle and slow parting of each adult-child couple. As the toddlers gradually become comfortable in their new environment, they learn to trust the teachers and the other children around them.

Simple sensorial activities in the classroom respond to the toddlers' urge to use all their senses – indeed their whole bodies – to explore everything around them.



The toddler program also appropriately accommodates the very young child's sensitive period for language by offering creative and intriguing concepts to expand their growing vocabularies. Joining conversations, listening to stories, classifying objects and learning songs and poems all nurture their budding language skills. To help smooth their initial social interactions, the toddlers also learn to use words for the feelings they experience in themselves and others.

Many of the activities in the toddler program highlight the self-help skills that lead to independence. Children are gently urged to hang up their own coats and aprons and to problem solve rather than say, "I can't." Since this is an age of very strong imitation, the teachers constantly model appropriate social skills, good manners and consideration of others.

Through song, dance and freedom of choice, the toddlers have access to a variety of large muscle activities that offer them opportunities to jump, climb, balance, crawl or skip. These exercises, as well as creative art activities, are offered for each child to choose. This freedom in a safe space is crucial to the toddler program. However, it is always tempered by two important limits that will be beneficial for a lifetime – respect for others and respect for the environment.