

# Comparing Waldorf, Montessori & Public Education

By Melissa Rocky Lewis

When parents are researching schools, the myriad of options and different educational philosophies can sometimes be overwhelming. Many of the parents considering Waldorf education also consider Montessori. This is probably because both education methods cater to a student’s individual learning style with reverence and respect for each child and their gifts. But how the Waldorf and Montessori methods approach this objective vary greatly.

Many other parents are considering transitioning their children from public school into a private education. And so, the question for them becomes, “What exactly is the difference between a public education experience and Waldorf or Montessori?”

One might be tempted to summarize the differences in this way: Waldorf puts high value in art, imagination, and creativity and does not pursue academic instruction before the age of seven. Montessori puts high value in real life experience and an orderly environment and pursues early academics at a young age. Public education puts a high value on standard and measurable academics, with a focus on math and reading starting at age five.

But this does not shed much light on the multi-layered and nuanced approaches of each methodology. In an effort to clarify, we have created this chart describing similarities and differences in each educational system. But, for true clarification about these methods and their appropriateness for your child, visit schools in your area and experience in-session classroom visits.

	WALDORF	MONTESSORI	PUBLIC
Early Academics	Play is the work of a young child. Waldorf seeks to nourish and inspire imagination and creative thinking. Academics are delayed until Grade 1 so that the child has more time for imaginative play, art, music and the building of social skills and class cohesion.	The young child is a sponge. Montessori seeks to expose young minds to a rich array of academic tasks and experiences. Early education focuses on challenging intellectual tasks, which build upon each other for early academic adoption.	Academic knowledge grows linearly. The earlier a child begins academics, the less likely they are to fall behind and the more they can learn by graduation. Early education curriculum focuses on children meeting a grade’s standards. (1, 2, 5)
Curriculum & Later Academics	In a same-aged classroom environment, Waldorf educators encourage a love of lifelong learning through the use of multi-disciplinary methods that incorporate art, music & craftsmanship. Lessons are language rich and focused around all arts and multiple senses. Subject integration and classroom collaboration are key to the academic experience.	In a multi-aged, multi-graded classroom, Montessori educators encourage children to engage in self-disciplined learning. Lessons are focused around real-life and classroom manipulative material. Subjects are approached with step-by-step procedure that guides students, individually, toward learning specific concepts.	In a same-aged classroom environment, public school educators encourage children to engage in accountable, individual learning. Lessons are focused around measureable academic accomplishments, where reading, writing and math remain the sole focus. In later years, those skills are more broadly applied to special subjects and integrated into the older child’s day. (1)
The Classroom	Waldorf believes the child thrives in a rhythmic and predictable environment. The teacher leads the students in the classroom as collaborators with one another, as often as they work individually, and provides regular guidance.	Montessori believes the child thrives in a free and self-led environment. The teacher withholds their will and allows the children to choose their own activities in the classroom, providing guidance when necessary.	The child thrives in a state-of-the-art structured environment. Teachers lead the students in the classroom, primarily as individual learners and then as collaborators under the guidance of the teacher, textbooks and technology. (7)

	<b>WALDORF</b>	<b>MONTESSORI</b>	<b>PUBLIC</b>
<b>Teaching Methods</b>	Children learn best through imitation, collaboration and Socratic inquiry. Watching and working with a teacher and fellow students facilitates age-appropriate academics and skills.	Montessori believes children learn best through focused individual learning tasks and are self-driven. Teachers strive to stay out of the way, allowing the child's interests to drive learning.	Teaching methods vary by teacher. The essential focus is on student results from the teacher's classroom. Core-Standards.org says, "Focus on results rather than means." (8, 9, 11)
<b>Materials</b>	Waldorf classrooms are filled with all natural and child-created materials. Grade school children create their own learning materials and textbooks based on lectures, special projects and other collaboration with the teacher. Technology is not a part of the elementary classroom.	All of the learning materials in the Montessori schoolroom were designed by Maria Montessori for a specific academic purpose. The Montessori method is multisensory and uses uniquely designed sensory materials for different subjects.	All of the learning materials in public school are provided by the state for a specific academic purpose. Children take notes from books and lectures and sometimes fill in accompanying worksheets, tests and quizzes. Technology is an essential part of the classroom. (1,4)
<b>Society</b>	Waldorf education strives to give students a sense of ethics and to produce individuals who can engage the world with clear and creative thinking, compassion, moral strength and courage, and to make sure students are able to adapt to a changing world.	A high goal in Montessori is to nurture the child's understanding of life processes and awareness of the world and society around them, so they can develop their own values.	The focus of public education is to provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn to "find success in college and careers, and to make sure American students are positioned to compete successfully in the global economy." (1,3)
<b>Social</b>	The development of the child in the social realm is as important as any other academic learning. The teacher plays a key role in orchestrating how social skills develop with individuals and between students.	The development of self-discipline in the child is key along with encouraging cooperation and respect with other, varied-age classroom children.	The development of the student in the social realm is addressed as it pertains to classroom learning. Parents are encouraged to tackle behavioral and social issues in the home. (6, 7)
<b>Individuality</b>	Children come into the world with unique personalities and gifts. The teacher's role is to get to know the children, respect their nature, and guide and inspire them to reach their full potential with personalized methods of engagement and learning.	Montessori teachers believe children discover their gifts through intellectual and personal freedom. The teacher's role is to respect the unique individuality of the child and allow their nature and will to freely emerge.	Growth of the individual child is balanced with the needs of the whole classroom. Since the focus is on results and not teaching methodology, there is no specific recommendation on how a teacher should address a child's individual skills, except as they relate to measurable results. (10, 11)

There is a great quote from the education blog, Education Japan, saying this about the Waldorf and Montessori educational models: "One thing is clear... Each brings a high level of love and caring and a path through childhood vitally needed by children today. Each of these paths are brilliant, full of compassion, and honoring of the child."

We agree. Which is right for your child is up to you and your family. We encourage you to tour a Waldorf school while class is in session to experience Waldorf education first hand.

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