



Waldorf and Montessori

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Midwifery, Homebirth, Waldorf Parenting and Education

Can you please give an explanation of the differences between Montessori and Waldorf education?

The educational philosophies developed by Rudolf Steiner and Maria Montessori are similar in that they both involve a comprehensive view of the human being that goes beyond just educating the intellect. However, they differed in their understanding of how best to meet the needs of the growing child. While both agreed that young children shouldn't be sat down with workbooks, Montessori education tends to introduce concepts tactilely, through specially designed "toys" that can be manipulated in only one way. Steiner, in contrast, advised to allow the young child to be in his or her natural creativity until the age of seven, so "toys" in Waldorf tend to foster children's imaginative play.

In a Waldorf early childhood program a great deal of time is devoted to free play and to artistic activity that comes from the child him or herself (water color painting, coloring with block crayons, beeswax modeling, etc). The play is nourished by seeing the adults do real work and by a rich storytelling tradition. This emphasis on nurturing a child's natural creativity as a wellspring for future academic and creative work is absent in the Montessori programs. Montessori endeavored to provide children from 3-6 years of age with the freedom to choose activities and explore them deeply without interruption, but these were adult-determined learning activities. The teachers introduce new materials and concepts as individuals and small groups become ready for them, and this can include early reading.

In contrast, direct academics would be absent in a Waldorf early childhood program because Steiner felt awakening the cognitive functions before the neurological changes around the age of 6-7 can be harmful to children's health. They don't gain any advantage by early academics, and they lose a year or two of the kind of consciousness that a young child has and revels in – and will grow out of by age seven no matter what we do!

Those are a few of the major differences. Before I discovered Waldorf, I had my oldest child in a Montessori school because it seemed to have a coherent, spiritual vision of the child. He was very awake and was reading by age four, but when we got into Waldorf (he was in second grade), he actually seemed to get younger and more balanced emotionally and artistically.

I would say that if you want to know more about the differences, the best way would be to visit both types of schools, if they exist in your area. There are also two interesting articles available online, "*Montessori and Steiner: A Pattern of Reverse Symmetries*" by Dee Joy Coulter at www.oakmeadow.com/resources/articles/coulter.htm and "*Three Approaches from Europe: Waldorf, Montessori and Reggio Emilia*" by Carolyn Pope Edwards at <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v4n1/edwards.html>.

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