

Developing 'RAW' skills with Steiner and Montessori

Written by
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How do alternative educational philosophies support the development of reading, arithmetic and writing (RAW) skills in young children? Steiner-influenced childminder Una Archer and Montessori childminder Jenny McArthur explain how following tried and tested methods underpin these fundamental skills in children for life.

Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner, both thinkers in early education, have influenced generations of childcare workers, children and families. The child is at the heart of both schools of thought, which is why they are both still going strong today.

In a Steiner (or Waldorf) setting you will find lots of natural, open-ended resources, a connection to the rhythm of the day and seasons, and an adult engaged in work that the children may choose to imitate. In a Montessori setting, you will find a beautifully prepared environment with special Montessori equipment designed to isolate specific tasks focusing on developing a particular skill as well as independence. An adult will be there ready to guide the child in any work they are drawn to.

Jenny McArthur works with another childminder and an assistant to run Drakes Montessori Childcare in Devon. She became fascinated with the Montessori method when working in a Montessori nursery. She then did an International Diploma in Montessori Pedagogy with Norland College and set up Drakes in 2005. She says, "My own daughter's dyslexia made me very aware of the need to provide a multi-sensory environment for children with a range of needs."

Una Archer works with another childminder and an assistant at a Steiner-influenced setting, Old Orchard Cottage, in

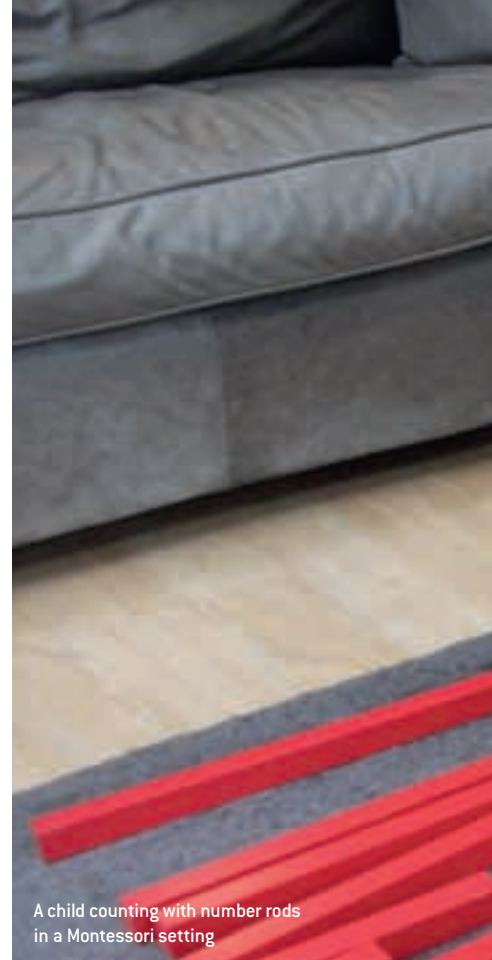
Sussex. She was drawn to the work of Steiner at a parent and child group in London. "After the session," she says, "I was left feeling nourished; having a deeper connection with life." She appreciated the simple environment, clear rhythm, and seasonal crafts and songs fundamental to Steiner-influenced childcare.

Steiner teachers don't introduce reading and writing to children until they are older, usually age 7, and as such are exempt from the literacy element of the EYFS in England and the Foundation Phase in Wales. But there is plenty of work in the early years with language, vocabulary and sound, building a strong foundation of pre-literacy skills.

Language

"We choose a story appropriate for the children in the group," explains Una. "We learn the story by heart, connecting with the images, characters and metaphors and tell the same story every day for a period of time, usually two weeks." The children develop listening skills, follow narrative and can form mental images – a stepping stone to reading, abstract and symbolic thinking.

Immersed in rich and real experiences (playing outside, walking, gardening, preparing food, taking part in festivals, engaging in crafts, developing their own ideas in free play), the children spend a lot of time talking to each other, explaining,



A child counting with number rods in a Montessori setting

negotiating and listening. "When the time comes for them to write, they have a lot to say," says Una.

Jenny also feels it's important to use language in her work. "Because we work with very young children who are developing language as well as those with additional needs, we talk about what we are doing. For example, we will explore the comparative language of rough and smooth with sandpaper blocks."

Sandpaper letters and numbers are part of the Montessori sensorial materials, which help the child make sense of abstract concepts and underpin literacy and numeracy. "One 3-year-old child with verbal language was drawn to the sandpaper numbers," explains Jenny. "We enabled him to count by matching the sandpaper



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numbers (numerals) with objects (quantities)."

Fine motor skills

Both Steiner and Montessori encourage lots of activities to develop fine motor skills, important for writing later on.

At Old Orchard Cottage, the children are busy sewing, finger knitting, chopping, weeding, painting and doing other crafts that develop their fine motor skills.

While at Drakes, they might take part in similar activities, but there will also be some that are broken down into specific developmental parts. For example, children's dexterity progress can be measured by picking up pom-poms from one shiny container and dropping them into another. The children work with their hands to begin with, move onto

big tongs and then tweezers, which refines their pincer grip.

Visual awareness and symbols

When children arrive at Drakes, they hang their coats up on pegs (without pictures or labels so they can concentrate on the task of hanging). They then take their shoes and socks off, putting one sock into each shoe (an early introduction to counting). Finally, they take the sandpaper letter of the initial of their name to feel, say the sound and use it to find their name label in the fridge to put their lunch away. "We isolate each skill to enable refinement and then independence with that skill, which builds self-confidence," explains Jenny.

Montessori tasks are grounded in practical life skills, which are all worked from left to right, building

up pre-reading skills. Another skill for reading is visual awareness, so they will match objects with pictures. For example, following a farm visit, pictures of the animals can be matched up with toy animals in their setting.

Most of the things children play with in a Steiner setting are open-ended and made from natural materials: a wooden block can be a truck, a table or a book. "Using tangible objects," explains Una, "rather than abstract symbols, letters and numbers, helps children feel at home with the symbols and own the experience."

Uninterrupted play

In both settings, the children's play or work is self-directed, with children allowed time to follow their interests, building resourcefulness and focus for future learning. ■

STEINER TALK

Una will be speaking at a gathering of Steiner-inspired childminders on 5 October, 2013.

Email dorothy@dorothymarlen.net for more details or visit www.steinerwaldorf.org.uk

MONTESSORI CPD COURSE

Montessori is now running a CPD course for childminders. To find out more, email childminder@montessori.org.uk or go to the website: www.montessori.org.uk