



# **Montessori Evaluation and Accreditation Board**

## **School Accreditation**

This report is prepared following two accreditation visits made on behalf of the Montessori Evaluation and Accreditation Board. It considers how far the school follows the criteria set out in “The Guide to the EYFS in Montessori Settings” (2008) and subsequent 2012 revisions. The second visit sought to assess the progress made on the recommendations set out in the report from the first visit.

The report does not address the standards and quality issues which are the responsibility of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) which reports separately. Also the report does not provide any assessment of financial aspects of the school.

### **The Old School House Montessori**

Ashford Road, Tenterden, Kent TN30 6SR

Date of first accreditation visit: 13 June 2011

Date of second accreditation visit: 19 October 2011

This accreditation report relates to the provision for children aged three months to under eight years.

#### **Description of the school**

The Old School House Montessori has been registered since 1997 and is privately owned and managed. It follows the Montessori philosophy and principles, whilst also following the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The school operates from a self-contained building in the grounds of the owner’s home in a rural area of Kent. The building has three main areas: at one end is an area for babies and toddlers; the middle section is for two year olds and has access to the school office and the staff kitchen; at the other end is a room for older children. They all have access to secure, enclosed outside play areas. The nursery has a pet guinea pig and tortoise and the owner keeps horses, pigs, goats and chickens in the nearby paddock. The children grow various types of plants, including herbs and vegetables, some of which are cleaned and prepared on the premises for the children’s meals.

The nursery is registered for a maximum of 60 children at any one time, of whom no more than 18 may be under two years. Children attend for a variety of sessions. There are currently 75 on roll, of whom 20 are under two years. The nursery is open Monday to Friday from 08:00 to 18:00 all year around, and offers a holiday club for children up to the age of eight. The nursery is able to support children with special needs and disabilities, as well as those who speak English as an additional language.

There are 14 staff employed to work with the children; of these, 11 hold recognized childcare qualifications, including seven Montessori qualifications. The group receives support from the local authority and is a member of the Pre-School Learning Alliance (PLA).



## Summary and conclusion

The Old School House Nursery is a well-managed setting committed to providing high quality Montessori education. It is a warm, welcoming, stimulating and nurturing environment, set in a beautiful building and location, catering for children from three months to under eight years of age.

The school successfully implements the Montessori early years curriculum alongside the Early Years Foundation Stage, under the expert guidance of a committed and dedicated management team. The school's reflective practice and dedication to each child's individual needs ensures that the children's learning at school is very well supported. The children's behaviour and good progress is a credit to this skilled and hard-working team.

Partnership with parents is given high priority, and the school works hard to improve how they have contact with families for the benefit of the child. Relationships between children, staff and parents are very good, helping to give the children a successful and confident start in life.

***The school provides an education which follows the principles of the Montessori approach and environment. The school has successfully achieved the points for action recommended on the first visit, and this merits accreditation by the Montessori Evaluation and Accreditation Board. Consideration should be given to the following points for further development:***

- Fully communicate and implement newly documented standards and procedures for peer review and team development;
- Continue to strengthen the partnership and communication with parents, clarifying the principles of Montessori education and enabling children to benefit from a consistent approach between school and home;
- Extend the opportunities for free-flow access for the children aged two and ensure that planning for all children incorporates the opportunities for outdoor activities.

### **Philosophy:**

The school puts the child firmly at the centre of its practice and concern. The teams collaborate closely, within the rooms and in regular staff meetings, to "follow the child," giving the children appropriate levels of support. They honour the children's intentions, recognise their inner needs and work flexibly around their interests, needs and desires. There is an excellent balance between child-initiated and practitioner-led learning and play.

Indoors, the children tend to be industrious and calm. Their teachers, who are consistently respectful in their communications, provide good role models for them, enabling the children to take and retain the initiative wherever possible in their learning.

Although the outdoor facilities are excellent, the adults sometimes restrict access to the garden. This means that the children do not always have complete freedom to go outside.

All the rooms in the building have an atmosphere of calm and happiness. The rooms for the very youngest children meet their needs for rest, exploration, food and play, supported by adults who know how to stand back when possible and support when needed.



The rooms for the older children give a general impression of calm, with confident children who are developing their independence gradually. The happiness and trust shown by the children is evidence that they feel respected and secure with their teachers and helpers. Expanding the freedom of access for two-year-old children to the senior room and to the outdoors would further enhance the high level of commitment to children.

The children are regarded within the context of their family and partnership with parents is highly valued. The principles, goals and philosophy take account of Montessori's descriptions of the nature of the child. These principles are now being reviewed more regularly and are being linked to daily practice.

### **Learning and Development:**

The curriculum is structured around the six areas of the EYFS and integrated with the Montessori curriculum. Long-term planning provides broad themes depending on the seasons, festivals or likely areas of interest, such as transport before the summer holidays. Medium term planning ensures all areas of the EYFS are supported and short-term planning incorporates input from key persons to ensure that their key children's needs are taken into account and provided for.

The 'Guide to the EYFS in Montessori Settings' is the basis for the child's record sheet. This enables detailed progress-tracking and planning against the EYFS Learning and Development framework and ensures that EYFS and Montessori curriculum work is integrated. Children are challenged, and supported with opportunities for trying, failing and overcoming obstacles when they try again. It offers the children a favourable environment for acquiring new knowledge and skills just when their level of interest is highest. The team are proactively seeking to optimise their record-keeping to make it user-friendly and detailed and more accessible for parents.

The children experience a full three-hour Montessori workcycle in the mornings and a shorter one in the afternoons. The established team ensure that there is a good balance between spontaneous learning and adult-led activities and that the developmental needs of each child are met.

At The Old School House Nursery children are given a rich choice of activities appropriate to their needs. Regular staff meetings and use of the Key Person system helps to ensure that the needs of each child are carefully considered and planned for. Families with more than one child send them to the nursery because they know that the children's progress is excellent.

### **Prepared Environment: resources and materials**

The building is spacious and light and provides excellent safe well maintained spaces for children to initiate and follow through their activities.

The entrance to the building opens into a hallway that leads into the area for two year olds, and a three-zone area for babies and toddlers, with access to the outdoors. There is a room for those not yet crawling, which is also used for sleeping. Children can sleep in a separate cot



space or on self-chosen mattresses on the floor, as and when needed. A second room is for mobile toddlers, with an area for exploratory play and access to the outdoors. The third zone, divided off by a low partition, is used for art, sensorial and practical life play, small group activities and meals.

The very good range of sensorial and practical life activities include home-made dressing frames, puzzles, object permanence boxes, a small slide and well-stocked treasure baskets. A number of laminated displays are placed within easy reach of the children, showing photos of the children themselves and some of the people in their lives.

The central area of the building is mainly for children aged two, although some toddlers under this age access this room earlier if the adults feel they are developmentally ready to do so. This area has a good range of sensorial and practical life activities, art and cultural activities as well as provision for imaginative play and access to the outdoors via the entrance hallway.

A set of double doors leads to the third area, aimed at three and four year old children. This room has a wide range of equipment across all areas of the curriculum. The materials for practical life are plentiful and beautifully organised and arranged. Many activities and displays in this area are labeled. Provision for sensorial, creative and cultural development is very good. It has an adjoining all-weather covered area outside and there is evidence of the children planting and growing things.

Following the first visit the areas for sensorial, mathematics and language were reorganised to make them more distinctive. The book corner has a more prominent position close to the shelves for language and looks very inviting with its comfortable cushions on a soft carpet.

The outdoor areas are well organized and offer a broad spectrum of activities. Four areas are connected by a large tarmac section with wheeled toys and some planted beds. At one end a garden with a deck offers many and varied activities across the curriculum. There is also a securely fenced area that gives babies and toddlers a safe outdoor play space, and at the far end a grassed area has many slides and climbing equipment.

In addition to free play they also regularly have access to planting and harvesting work, animal care, walks and organised group activities with parachutes and other props for physical skills practice. Opportunities for engaging with the natural world are plentiful for all children, both inside and out, including a classroom tortoise inside and pigs and ponies outside.

### **Montessori practice: independence, including independence at home, freedom, respect**

The children are encouraged to do things by themselves so they can experience success as a result of their own efforts. At snack time the children pour their drinks independently and at lunchtime they manage their cutlery and napkins very competently.

Children confidently choose their activities from well-organised displays on low shelves. They are seen busily working alone, in pairs and in small groups in all areas of the classroom and outside.

The different inside areas are interconnected. The doors between the area for two-year-olds



and older children are sometimes open so that the children can move freely between age groups to enable them to access different materials or to find siblings or friends of a different age. Opportunities for true freeflow between rooms and areas may be improved by extending the times during which children have this choice.

Snack is normally available for children from 10:00, or earlier if desired. Freeflow access to snack and the outdoors demonstrates trust in the children to direct their own activities. As a result, the children act spontaneously and with care and concern for others. Where they have difficulty sharing or waiting their turn they are sympathetically supported and gently guided towards kindness and patience. Children with special needs have full access to all the activities on offer and adults around them support them unobtrusively when needed. Children are allowed to figure things out for themselves, being offered the respect and space to do so.

Practice within the setting is strong, and sharing with the parents what the children can do for themselves at school is effective and greatly appreciated by the parents. However, the setting does not always effectively convey the value of the Montessori-based activities with their strong emphasis on early independence.

The nursery uses informal opportunities to extend good practice at school into the home, for instance by encouraging parents to make their home child-friendly with low-level pegs for the children to hang up their own coats.

### **Montessori practice: classroom management**

The nursery operates an effective Key Person system and the Key Persons ensure that the needs of their group are met, by contributing to record-keeping and planning. Room leaders ensure that their environments are safe and complete.

The classrooms are very well managed, with an atmosphere of freedom with respect. The children's activities and conversations show that they are happy, independent and confident. The adults are inconspicuous but supportive where necessary and comforting and kind when needed. The children move flexibly from one activity to another as they see fit.

The adults work as a strong team, supporting one another and communicating clearly. They know each other very well and are comfortable with one another and confident in their role.

Adults encourage children to take part in regular activities and the children happily help out in preparations for lunchtime or when a younger person needs a hand.

Parents and carers collecting their children at lunchtime do so from the central area and have time to talk to the practitioners. Meanwhile the children aged two to four enjoy an undisturbed lunch together in the room for the older children. Food times are happy and harmonious.

In the baby unit the adults celebrate toddlers' achievements such as successful walking. They sit with children to look at books together and lull or rock them to sleep, whichever method works for the individual child.

Young babies have their food as and when needed, often feeding themselves sitting in high chairs. Toddlers sit around a low table and are encouraged to be independent. Mealtimes are



very well managed by the team, who tailor their level of support to the needs of each child.

### **Montessori Practice: links with parents, including reports and records**

Parent partnership is high on the setting's agenda and this is reflected in the great care taken over each child's needs and progress and on communication links with parents. Parents acknowledge the fact that their child's happiness is given priority and daily feedback is much appreciated by them. Many parents use the opportunity of the daily records to add their own comments and photos.

The welcome statement to the parents is very personal, warm and positive. This is reinforced by the attitude taken by the staff in their daily interaction with parents. Adults take time for the parents and conversations are happy and animated. The parents appreciate that the owner is nearly always on site, takes an active interest in their children and knows them well.

The school offers information evenings and events for parents and carers and they continue to seek further and alternative ways to enhance communication. Sending out personalised invitations and offering a choice of early evening, later evening and Saturday sessions has increased attendance figures at these events. Information presentations to parents are very well prepared with a talk by the principal, illustrated with photos of the children at work and comments on how this helps their development.

Knowledge about the children's progress at school is shared with the parents in effective ways, making this a strength of the school. They seek to do more to strengthen their partnership with all parents. They are trialing various approaches to providing information about Montessori education and to sharing with the parents how the children's experiences at school can be supported and extended at home. Interviews with parents showed that not all parents were equally well informed about the characteristics and the benefits of Montessori education, nor always about the EYFS or the Key Person system.

Since the first visit the school has enhanced the newsletter and the website to include information about the principles and philosophy of Montessori education. There are additional plans – including introducing a pre-start child profile to initiate the home-school communication process, updating the school website further and the use of social media – to help enhance parents' understanding of Montessori education and the EYFS.

### **Staffing:**

The school has high a retention of staff. It is run by a strong and loyal team that works together with dedication and enthusiasm. This results in a strong family atmosphere with very good and supportive relationships. The new members of the team receive a good induction, including learning about Montessori principles such as respecting the children's choices and striving to be a 'guide on the side'.

Montessori practice is very good, strengthened by the fact that half of the team have Montessori qualifications. A programme of in-house Montessori training is greatly appreciated by the newest members of the team. Practitioners are interested in how they can improve their



practice further and are keen to learn. Relationships between children, staff and parents are very good, helping to give the children a successful and confident start in life.

Most management practices are firmly embedded; the school has regular planned meetings that are well prepared, documented and followed up on. It would further benefit from a vision or mission statement generated by the team to clarify their shared values and standards. Since the first visit a thorough and detailed staff handbook has been created, as well as formal job descriptions. Introducing and agreeing the job descriptions and adding processes for peer observation and reviews is a work in progress that will help consolidate and develop good practice.

The parents' positive feedback and, the children's behaviour and good progress are a credit to this dedicated and hard-working team and the beautiful Montessori environments they have created.

Name of Assessor(s):	Thea Bredie
Date of reports:	16 <sup>th</sup> June 2011, 21 <sup>st</sup> October 2011
First visit –	13 <sup>th</sup> June 2011
Second visit –	19 <sup>th</sup> October 2011