



# **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). 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.

### **Westwood Montessori**

Spriggs Yard, Little Sampford, Essex CB10 2SA

Dates of the accreditation visits:

Visit 1: 9 February 2012

Visit 2: 3 May 2012

This accreditation report relates to the provision for children aged 6 months to 5 years.

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

Westwood Montessori is located in Little Sampford, Essex. The building is a converted barn on a farm and consists of two classrooms, a large reception area, kitchen and office. There is a large outdoor area, part of this is grass and part is hard-surfaced. There is also 'Forest School' provision.

The setting is open term time only, Monday to Friday and runs two sessions a day. The morning session runs from 9.00 to 13.00 and the afternoon from 12.30 to 15.00 (14.45 for the younger group), with many children staying all day. It is registered to take 60 children from 6 months to 5 years and presently has 81 children on roll. The number of children attending varies from day to day. There is provision for children with special educational needs (SEN) and English as an additional language (EAL).

Westwood Montessori is one of four nurseries that are run in conjunction with a board of trustees. The principal is actively involved in all four settings and holds a full Montessori diploma together with a degree in Childhood and Youth Studies and has Early Years Professional Status. A full-time manager has responsibility for the day to day running of the setting; she has a full Montessori diploma. There are 12 part time members of staff; two hold full Montessori diplomas and the others have either almost completed their Montessori training or hold other appropriate childcare qualifications.



## Summary and conclusion

This well established pre-school draws in children not just from the local community but from all over this part of Essex. There is a calm and harmonious atmosphere at Westwood Montessori, described by one parent as 'a sanctuary'. Its great strength is the expectation that parents will become an essential part of the children's education and they will work together as a partnership. Parents are enthusiastic in their praise of the setting and are very appreciative of the feedback they receive on their children's progress. The setting is well managed by enthusiastic and committed staff and the children are confident and eager learners.

The team at Westwood fully understand the concept of 'following the child' as each one is treated as a unique individual; this is reflected in the observations and subsequent planning. The location of the school on a rural, working farm provides an excellent opportunity for the children to fully explore and appreciate the natural environment.

Westwood staff continue to review their practice through the school development plan. This covers all aspects of the setting and is updated at regular intervals throughout the year. By doing this the setting has achieved all of its points for development and has reflected on the one aspect of the plan that remains a work in progress, adapting its plans accordingly.

***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:***

- continue to adapt and develop the outside space in response to the school's development plan.

### **Philosophy:**

The school's prospectus and website both show its clear mission statement together with aims and objectives. The school aims to provide a safe, secure environment for the children to grow and learn under the guidance of experienced and knowledgeable adults. These aims and objectives are reviewed periodically by staff and discussed at staff meetings.

The school environment, both inside and out, allows the children freedom to move about, explore and develop. During both visits, staff supported the children by following their lead in their choice of activities. The partnership with parents is very important and encourages families to be an integral part of this pre-school community.

There is a parents notice board in the reception area with information about daily routines as well as what is going on in the local village community. All parents are aware of the recording and assessment procedures and how these are used to support their child's development in this nurturing Montessori environment.



### **Learning and Development:**

The managers of all four settings attend an annual meeting in September. Staff at Westwood Montessori meet regularly to discuss planning and other staff issues. Both the baby room and pre-school classroom use a combination of Montessori and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curricula in their planning. There is long term continuous provision covering all the Montessori activity areas and these are linked to the EYFS themes. Although some topic planning takes place, the staff discuss these plans with the children and follow their interests. Spontaneous activity in the pre-school classroom is recorded.

In the baby room adults use a daily log to record the activities the children have experienced during the day as well as what they had for snack/lunch, if they had a nap and any nappy changing. This is shared with parents and is also recorded on the setting's Keep Track computer system. This system enables staff to link Montessori activities to the EYFS areas of development. Since the initial visit, staff in the baby room have introduced personal development folders for the children, similar to the Learning Journey Sharing Books used in the pre-school room. These record significant events including language progress as well as planning details. This folder is shared with parents who are encouraged to add to it with photos. The baby room has a designated outdoor area which they can explore and the children spent some time outside during the second visit.

In the pre-school room individual planning is recorded on planning sheets and is related to the child's interests. Observations are carried out regularly and are either hand written or recorded directly onto the setting's recording system. This system allows for assessment of learning and planning.

All areas of the Montessori curriculum are easily accessible for the children. The long uninterrupted work cycles give children plenty of opportunity to choose their own activities and repeat them as often as they wish. In spite of cold weather during both visits, children moved between both indoor and outdoor environments and were well supported by staff. Almost all the learning that took place was child-initiated, including a lively and spontaneous music session.

Children with special educational needs are offered appropriate support from staff and the school liaises closely with both parents and outside agencies.

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

In the baby room, there is plenty of space for the children to crawl and toddle around safely. There is a large book area in the middle of the room, with plenty of soft cushions for the children to lie on, a partitioned area with cots for those little ones requiring a mid-morning nap, a nappy changing area and a recently acquired fabric wigwam, together with other cosy spaces for the children to explore. There is a small wooden staircase for toddlers to practice their climbing skills, plenty of large chunky wooden puzzles, treasure baskets full of natural materials and some early years Montessori resources. The children also have access to art and craft materials. The room has been decorated in neutral colours and the setting recently changed the lighting from strip lights to four small chandeliers, giving a softer light to the room. A lot of thought has gone into this room and it is still evolving.

Outside, there is a covered area with a small shed, shelves containing a variety of tactile



materials, slide, sand pit and pedal cars. There are also a number of puzzles for the children to use, all kept on low, easily accessible shelving.

The hard-covered area runs along the length of both classrooms and is surrounded by a low picket fence. The outside space for the baby room is separated from the pre-school children's area by another low picket fence. Gates in both sections open onto the grass in front of it enabling the children from the two classrooms to play together. The full length glass doors lead out from the pre-school room onto the paved outside space adjoining that of the baby room. A variety of activities and resources representing the different areas of the Montessori curriculum are kept on accessible shelving, bringing the indoor Montessori environment to the outside. The school keeps two guinea pigs and a rabbit which the children look after. In the garden, there are ducks and chickens as well as a bird hide made of willow which the parents helped to build. The children also have access to a Forest School area. A story-telling gazebo has been installed between the first and second visits and is proving very popular. In spite of the inclement weather on both visits, the outside area was in almost constant use by the children in the main classroom. The babies and toddlers also used the outside area with support from adults.

The school would like to have a section of tarmac specifically for the bikes so that they can be used in all seasons and weather; this is a long term plan and following the first visit, the owner made investigations into the project. To carry out the work properly would involve considerable expense, therefore the setting has had to make alternative plans. The staff have now re-arranged the resources under the covered patio area to make space on which the children can ride the bikes safely. The setting would still like to have a proper cycle track and have raised almost half the funds needed. The children have also been involved in the initial design of the track.

The pre-school classroom is very well organized and resourced, in particular the cultural section, which contains an interesting variety of natural materials and a nature table. There is plenty of space for several children to work in each area and all activities are accessible for use. As well as the Montessori activities on low shelving, there is a snack area, book corner and art and craft area which also incorporates space for 'wet' play.

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

The children are able to easily access all the materials and complete their cycle of activity, repeating activities as often as they wish. Children in the baby room are encouraged to tidy away and often do so spontaneously. Older children can see to their personal care, put on their own coats and hats to go outside, while the younger children are supported by staff in their efforts to become independent.

Children in the pre-school room have a rolling snack time which is well monitored and are able to decide for themselves when they want their snack. Staff in the baby room have attempted to introduce a rolling snack but with children at such a young age, including babies, they have reverted back to a group snack time. This, together with lunch, is proving to be a very sociable time, as it is in the larger classroom. Here, the children bring a packed lunch and sit in groups of three or four, together with a member of staff. They wash up plates and cups and are encouraged to recycle packaging into the recycling bin.

Parents report that children are beginning to tidy away their toys at home without being asked



to and they receive plenty of information (including workshops that the principal occasionally holds) on how to promote positive behaviour at home.

The children have the freedom to work where they want, either by themselves or in small groups. Staff introduce new activities to the children when necessary and are very good at engaging children's interests. This is outstanding practice.

The children understand that they have to take responsibility for their classroom and do this by returning work to the shelves, washing up after snack and lunch and cleaning out the rabbit and guinea pig hutches. The staff act as positive role models and support the development of respect for self and others.

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

The work cycle in the baby room is a minimum of three hours in the morning (punctuated by a mid-morning snack time). Following a request by parents who have older siblings that stay all day in the pre-school room, an afternoon session has been introduced when children stay until 14.45.

The older children have a morning work cycle of almost three hours as they break for lunch at around 11.45. The afternoon work cycle begins when the children finish lunch at about 12.30. The long work cycles enable them to have full use of the resources both inside and out, through mostly child-led, spontaneous activities. Staff move around wherever they are needed and take it in turns to monitor the snack area and outside environment. Children are calmly encouraged to try new activities in order to extend their learning and development. Activities such as cooking and music are also available; plans for these activities are always discussed in advance with the children who have complete choice as to whether or not they participate.

Children stay in the baby room until they are almost 2½ years old. The term before they are due to move up to the bigger classroom, they spend 10 to 15 minutes a day in the pre-school room, initially with their key person who gradually withdraws as the children become used to the new environment. As the child becomes more comfortable in the main classroom, they are able to stay for a longer time and during the second visit, the transition children spent quite lengthy periods in the main classroom, supported by their key person. Staff occasionally swap between the two rooms and are very flexible in their deployment.

The pre-school children have a weekly visit from the Forest School co-ordinator. They go in small groups either to the nearby Forest School or participate in activities in the school's garden area.

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

The staff carry out daily risk assessments, they have all had training in first aid, safeguarding children and food hygiene. They share the responsibility for cleaning and maintaining the environment, inside and out and their rota is on the staff notice board.

There are regular observations made of the children. These are either hand written or placed directly onto the school's computer system. Each key person is responsible for ensuring their key children's records and planning are up to date.



Staff and parents in the main pre-school, use the school's Learning Journey Sharing Books as one of the methods of communication. Photos and children's activities in and out of school are recorded in the books. Parents are positively encouraged to talk to the staff at the end of the day and all feel they are given plenty of information on their child's progress and development. Each child also has a scrapbook in which parents stick photographs of their families and special events in the child's life. A similar system has been introduced in the baby room. Newsletters are sent to parents every half-term. These give details of any special events coming up in the following weeks and encourage parents to come and look at the children's work. There is also an informative parents' notice board in the reception area.

Parents of children about to go onto Reception are invited to a formal parents evening at the end of the academic year and are given a comprehensive and detailed report on their child's time at Westwood. A copy of the report is also sent on CD to the primary school. Representatives from all of the local primaries visit the school to meet the children before they move onto Reception.

### **Staffing:**

The principal who holds a full Montessori diploma, BA (Hons) in Childhood and Youth Studies and has Early Years Professional status, takes an active part in the setting but leaves the day to day running to her very capable manager. The manager has a foundation degree in early years and a Montessori diploma. Two of her twelve-strong team also hold full Montessori diplomas. Six of the team have almost completed their Montessori teaching practice, one has a BA (Hons) in Early Childhood Studies, one has an NNEB Norland diploma, one has the foundation certificate in Montessori practice as well as an NVQ level 3 qualification and one an HNC in Early Years and Childcare. Continued professional development is a particular strength of this setting.

There is a comprehensive induction process. As part of this procedure, staff have to write a short paragraph on their understanding of the Montessori philosophy and ethos and the importance of the extended work cycle. The group of nurseries have recently completed their review of the staffing structure including job descriptions, salaries and staff appraisals. Members of staff report that the new system of peer observations and appraisals make them think a lot more about their practice and strengths and weaknesses. The manager is very happy with the new system and, as part of the school development plan, will continue to monitor the system and discuss this with her colleagues.

Staff communicate with each other at the end of the day and via email. Following the first visit, the number of formal staff meetings has increased to twice a term and these have proved beneficial, especially as this is a large pre-school team with some members of staff only working two or three days a week.

The purchase of major items of equipment needs the approval of the board of trustees otherwise, for everyday resources and training, approval is given by the principal.

The team at Westwood are committed and professional, carrying out their responsibilities calmly. They are clear in their knowledge of Montessori practice and take great delight in all the achievements of the children.



Name of Assessor: Margot Best

Date of reports:

First visit – 9 February 2012

Second visit – 3 May 2012