

A parent's commentary at journey's end.

Today my son leaves for his last day at primary school. This will mark the end of nine academic years at The Children's House Montessori Primary School. In keeping with the school's policy of nurturing independence, he leaves on his own to catch the no 47 bus. En route he will also buy his own healthy lunch.

I stand and watch him leave and I wonder where did the time go? In my mind he is still surely no more than a happy go lucky 8 year old that enjoyed kicking a ball down the street.

Then on reflection I realize that time passes in the everyday repetition of seemingly ordinary things both at home and at school. It passes in the washing of socks, the preparing of lunch boxes the running for school collections the admiring of insets, the guessing of flags so beautifully drawn, the chanting of times tables, the spelling of hard words for projects, the looking for costumes for the school play, the organizing of play dates and parties . . . it passes and a small child becomes grown up and ready for the next adventure that life promises.

How has the time at the Children's House prepared my child for that adventure? Admirably well I think. In fact, I believe now more than ever that it has prepared him better than any other educational environment could have. My son was in three Montessori cycles in the school, a 3-6 cycle a 6-9 cycle and a 9-12 cycle.

The 3-6 cycle is what most parents will be familiar with, although few children that attend a Montessori environment will have the benefit of the full 3-6 cycle as the pressure to accept places in National Schools is so great at age 4-5. My son was in a class which benefited from three directresses each with a common goal but with different styles. This is important as not all children respond to the same message from the same person. Variety in the way learning is directed makes a big difference I believe. Here during his sensorial period he learnt to read not by repetition and rote but by an amazing multifaceted approach that included sandpaper letters, immersion in sounds and phonics, and numerous hands on materials. Writing seemed to follow later very rapidly and quickly as fine motor skills was enhanced by specific tasks using insets, spooning beans into bowls, building towers picking and placing fine items with precision. Naoise's handwriting even at 8 was the envy of many adults! Learning to count was more than just the chanting of words 1 – 10 which followed a sequence. Instead my son learnt in a hands-on way about quantities. He learnt that they can be manipulated in two and three dimensions, he learned about volume and binomial mathematics. Without his being really aware the foundations of polynomial equations were already laid at age 4.

In the 6–9 cycle the Montessori environment really came into its own. For example in mathematics the children were exposed to more seemingly ingenious materials that enabled easy completion of long division and fractions and further experimentation in complex manipulation of quantity and volume. Here I noticed that my son did not just learn by doing the same thing that everyone else was doing with every child's learning pace forced to be something that wasn't natural or innate to them. They didn't all just do a lesson from a book, they didn't just all sit down at desks and listen to the teacher. Oh no . . . this was a cauldron of learning, an alchemist's den in which insights sprung from the children themselves! Here whilst children were directed, their imagination and thirst for new insights and achievements

propelled them on to inventive projects, curious stories and bold imaginative paintings. Children worked in groups (how normal), children learnt not just by conceptualizing but sometimes by simple observation of others at work (how normal).

The final cycle 9 – 12 enabled children to mature in their learning skills and also offered more opportunities for responsibility and independence. At this point I started to see the transition from sensorial understanding to conceptual capacity in my child. He moved easily from hands-on mathematical materials to written mathematical exercises. This transition is often queried by commentators . . .” How will he ever cope with anything different?” people asked me. Very well as it turns out! However, I didn’t know that at the start of course, I had to take a leap of faith that it would be so. Putting my son into a completely different educational environment than is the norm took courage and many a time I had to stand firm in my convictions when well meaning friends and relatives queried my decision.

The Children’s House has provided an amazing learning environment for my son. I haven’t regretted one second of his being there and I would do it all over again in a heartbeat. He has developed into the kind, confident, independent, motivated, curious young man that Montessori promised he would. He leaves with a sound academic basis as measured by the State, with a particular flair for mathematics that is well beyond his years. I am without a doubt that this is because of his hands on experience that the Montessori environment provided. When he was 10 a secondary school teacher commented that his art work was almost at College level entry standard. Admittedly Naoise was always good at art, but the learning environment that the school offered enable his particular talent to flourish. The same can be said of his great musicality; I was never aware of his capacity in this area until it came to light via practice in the school concert. Once identified, his talent was nurtured encouraged and supported in the same way that every skill that is unique to every child in the Children’s House is.

It is not just WHAT my son has learnt at The Children’s House that has me in awe, but HOW he has learnt it. As a former lecturer in TCD myself I was often disappointed with the shallow learning skills that student’s came into College with, and I often felt that one of my roles was to encourage and kindle a love of learning in my students. The Children’s House has already done this for my son.

Enabling children to achieve a lifelong love of learning, a sense of independence and a fulfilling of every child’s full potential; this is what was promised by the Children’s House some 9 years ago and this is what has been delivered.

Thank you to all at the Children’s House a million times over for your guidance, patience compassion and dedication to all you believe in and hold true in education.

Kryisia Lynch, current parent.

My answers to some frequently asked questions of prospective parents

The school is quite small – will my child have adequate social opportunities?

Yes. Unlike primary school where 30 children of the same age are in an environment where they need to sit down work independently and not engage too much with their peers, the Children's House offers the more natural mixed age group setting where children are encouraged to work together, to explore social skills in the classroom and to learn how to engage with others of different ages. So the older children learn kindness, compassion and responsibility and the younger children feel cared for and included. Of course children enjoy playdates, and I have found that although my son was the only one in his graduating class this year he enjoyed playdates with those older than him and those even a couple of years younger than him. I also like the fact that he has left for secondary school on his own terms. He will go seeking new friends and opportunities rather than arriving tied to a gang of children he met 8 years previously.

Social opportunities may also come from sources outside school, such as sporting activities or other hobbies. My son made firm friends in dance classes and through rugby and football. If we think of the friends that we have as adults do we have 30 close friends? Are they all the same age? The answer is probably not, so why do we expect the same of our children?

It's very expensive to pay for primary education – isn't it better to set that money aside for secondary education?

There is an adage that goes something like "money spent on education is never wasted". Personally, having read a wealth of books on childhood development and learning I have come to the conclusion that it is the early years that set in motion our learning habits and the way we engage with the world. There is a lot available on this on the internet for you to explore and ponder at your leisure. Yes, the Children's House is definitely more expensive than national school, however given the choice I would choose paying for primary education over paying for secondary education any day. The primary goal of secondary education in Ireland is to carry students over the leaving cert finish line. That is more about instilling knowledge and a capacity for appropriate recall than offering children a love of learning. Secondary education, by its nature builds on primary education and can only supplement what has gone before. So from my perspective I would consider the foundations more important than the detail on the edifice.

The Children's House is far away from where I live – won't that be taking my child out of his local community?

That is a factor worth considering, especially in today's climate when children rarely play freely in the street or in their local park. Opportunities can always be found in the local community though, for example sporting clubs, scouts, girl's brigade, and parish activities.

I travelled some 7 - 8 km to take my son to the Children's House and I found it quite manageable as most of the other parents were also travelling similar distances. Furthermore over the years I found that there were other families to share lifts with which made it much easier for all of us.



Naoise leaving for school at the Children's House for the last time!