**Understanding the three year cycle**

The materials

Each of the Montessori curriculum areas is filled with a wide range of materials, some simple enough for a not-quite-3-year-old and others which challenge even for the most academically advanced 6-year-old. This is in contrast to many preschool programs, which offer a plethora of toys that can be played with in any order. At Clementine, you can see how materials start simple and get progressively more complex, embodying more advanced concepts as the child progresses through the program.

The ground rules

All of these materials are available and accessible at all times. Each child is free to work with any of the materials, with only three restrictions: a child may only take a material from a shelf (never from another student); the child must have had a lesson on how to use that material; and he may use only one material at a time.

The lesson

The Montessori teacher observes each child and tailors lessons to give according to each child’s individual readiness. A lesson is neither a lecture nor a large-group activity. Instead, it’s a brief, hands-on demonstration, usually delivered one-on-one for younger students, and occasionally in a small group for 2nd or 3rd year students. The teacher shows the child how to use a material, with slow careful movements and few words, and finishes by inviting the child to repeat the activity. When the lesson is done, the child may continue to work with the material or return it to the shelf. Important to note here is that the lesson is not when learning happens.

The learning

Instead, learning occurs when children *work with the materials*, often repeating the same activity many times of their free choice or returning to them once they’ve been shown a new variation on the original presentation. In effect, the material is the child’s actual teacher; the teacher is really a guide whose role it is to connect the child with the materials (hence the name, Montessori *guide*.)

The materials

Many materials possess a *control of error.* Children can judge, by themselves, when they have completed an activity correctly: the cylinders only fit in the Cylinder Blocks one way; the Trinomial Cube box can only be closed if it’s been assembled correctly; water spills and needs to get cleaned up if we don’t aim correctly when pouring. The built-in control of error has an important, long-term benefit for the children, too: Montessori preschoolers become *friendly with error.* They realize that mistakes are not something to be ashamed of, but helpful pointers towards areas where they can improve themselves. The focus is on “*getting better”* rather than “*being good”* at a task.

The children

Instead of correcting children, Montessori guides help children acquire the ability to self-monitor and self-correct. This is an additional way that the materials make it possible for 3-year-olds and 6-year-olds to be optimally challenged in the same classroom!