

# Montessori Programs Designed on Three-Year Developmental Cycles

By Janet Wolfe Engel

Many parents this time of year are approaching a time of decision-making regarding plans for the next school year. In making that decision, it is important to consider some of Montessori's concepts of stages of development and three-year developmental cycles.

Montessori has designed educational program levels to coincide with children's developmental levels:

- Birth to three is a period of self development through unconscious absorption of environmental information
- Three to six years old is a period of conscious absorption and concrete sensory learning. There is an emphasis on individual rather than social development.
- Six to nine is a period of active learning. Academic skills are being developed and reinforced. Learning is becoming more abstract. The emphasis shifts from individual development toward social awareness and development. This period is also a period of the beginning of the acquisition of culture.
- Nine to twelve years old is a period when academic skills are mastered. There is strong interest in and awareness of morality, rules, laws, and how members of society function together.

Unlike traditional educational practice, which determines certain curriculum objectives for each grade level, Montessori curriculum is developed to cover three-year periods rather than a single grade level. This allows for flexibility in meeting individual children's interests, learning rates and cycles. Because of this it is not unusual that we would observe a 7 year-old working at a "3<sup>rd</sup> grade" level in math, but perhaps a "2<sup>nd</sup> grade" level in spelling. The same child might plateau in math for several months, but leap ahead in reading. The following year she might level out in all areas or pursue another interest altogether. However, at the end of the 3-year cycle, all curriculum objectives for that cycle would be completed.

To give children the opportunity to make the most of Montessori education at each level, it is strongly encouraged that children complete all three years of each cycle before moving on to the next educational experience.

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