

TWOS TWOS TWOS ... WONDERFUL TWOS!

This past September 47 two-year-olds began their educational journeys at WSMS ... an event no one could have anticipated ten years ago.

When Mimi Basso returned to WSMS as Head of School in 2007, she had a wealth of exciting ideas about how to maintain and enhance the school's premier reputation in the New York early childhood sphere. She had served as WSMS Associate Head of School in the late 1990s and had long been affiliated with the Teacher Education Program, so she was intimately familiar with what we did, and in her role as Director of School Accreditation at the American Montessori Society she knew what our peers were doing.

Mimi devoted a lot of listening time in her first years as Head and quickly learned that many parents wanted to expose their children to educational opportunities before they reached eligibility for WSMS. She realized that we sometimes lost families who needed all-day or part-time coverage (in fact, this has even been an issue with WSMS teachers who have left for positions at schools with younger program options).

At the same time, she was hearing from her peers about the need for Infant Toddler Montessori credential training.

This spearheaded the addition of several action items to the 2011-2016 Strategic Plan.

WHY DID WE ADD A TWOS PROGRAM?

Back in 2010, Suzanne Day, the Director of Admissions, conducted a survey. Some 60% of children had already been in a formal program, most of which were "separation" programs (which require parents to drop the children off rather than participate), before attending



WSMS. Some parents questioned why WSMS did not offer some form of this opportunity as well.

At the same time, UPK (Universal Pre-Kindergarten) was gaining widespread support in local public schools, and there was some legitimate concern in the administration that we would be losing four-year-olds to tuition-free schooling. We actually offered UPK for several years, but stopped because the city required separate classrooms—not consistent with the Montessori mixed age approach—and we had to accept all applicants. In addition, we quickly realized that having one-third of the students (all the four-year-olds!) paying no/minimal tuition would have a significant impact on our ability to provide our programming and offer financial aid to families who needed it.

Meanwhile WSMS-TEP (the Teacher Education Program), under the direction of Loren DeNicola, applied to AMS (the American Montessori Society) to add Infant Toddler credential training to their options.

In 2013 we launched a two-year pilot program and the first class of Twos began at WSMS under the direction of Karen Deinzer. [You can see a detailed description of the pilot program in the Fall 2013 issue of *Great Beginnings* on our web site.] The response was enthu-

siastic. Students were generally limited to siblings or connected families, so as not to affect availability to three-year-olds whose families chose to wait. The next year we offered an afternoon half-day option, but quickly discovered that two-year-olds really need nap time. We offered two-, three- and five-day options, and ended up with 55 two-year-olds in attendance. The logistics were complicated and we were forced to limit enrollment opportunities for three-year-olds new to WSMS because there were fewer classrooms.



Ultimately Mimi Basso and Judy Lyons, who succeeded Suzanne as Director of Admissions, resolved that what we do best is five-day programming. They decided to offer mornings, 9-3 and LAP (8:30-5:30) options for two-year-olds. And to figure out how to maintain sufficient openings for new three-year-olds.

Fast forward to 2018! Enthusiasm for the Twos remained high, and the limited number of classrooms meant outside families had little likelihood of acceptance. After considering a variety of options, we negotiated a long-term lease with the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church on the corner of 91st Street and West End Avenue. The summer of 2018 saw a major renovation of the basement space to include two classrooms and dedicated office space for TEP. The overhaul was not without a few unexpected snags, but ultimately 32 happy children were welcomed into the brand new space: 18 stay until 3:00 p.m., while the rest leave at 12:30 p.m. Another 15 are housed in 1W on 92nd Street; most of them are in LAP (the Late Afternoon Program).

DO THE TWO-YEAR-OLDS HAVE A DIFFERENT MONTESSORI PROGRAM?

Two-year-olds are active creatures—they need 45 minutes to an hour of gross motor activity every day—and their small motor skills are still developing. Key areas to address include language development, physical development and socialization.

The classroom shelves include an assortment of activities to meet the needs of every individual. These materials are chosen to tie more closely to the younger children's abilities and interests, while helping them understand cause and effect. Easels and shelf supplies offer multiple creative art options.

But the big difference from the typical early childhood classroom is physical activity: we have less furniture in the classroom, which allows for bikes, balance boards, movement and block building ... and we have even allocated space in the hallway outside the church classrooms for racing! Weather permit-

ing, every class will get some outdoor time: a trip to the park or a nature walk around the block.

AND WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING?

Karen Deinzer has watched the Twos Program flourish over the past five years. She has recruited a dedicated and experienced group of teachers (there are four teachers in every classroom). This fall she welcomed former parent Claudia Gravira as a teacher—not the first time a WSMS parent has found her calling in a Montessori classroom!

Karen has also become an integral part of the TEP Infant Toddler training, working with Uniit Carruyo (IT Level Coordinator) and Tara Greaney (IT faculty) during the academic year. With Tara and Maria Rosado (Twos teacher and IT

faculty support), she has made multiple visits to supervise the TEP IT program in Beijing, China.

Per Lisanne Pinciotti, Director of WSMS-TEP, there are currently 18 students pursuing the Infant Toddler credential training. In addition, many of the requests we get for adding locations request IT training.

Judy Lyons has seen a sparked interest in full-day applications, especially on the part of parents of potential Twos Program students. This has re-oriented our focus on providing increased LAP opportunities, both in terms of space needs and in appropriate activities (especially gross motor) for the post-3:00 p.m. crowd. This year we have 49 children in LAP, including 11 two-year-olds, but we expect that number to grow.

