



Starting Younger WSMS Pilots a Program for Two's

If you were to stop by the 1W classroom this fall, you would probably notice that something has changed, but you might not immediately be able to pinpoint what. The room is still every inch a West Side Montessori School classroom, from its spacious layout and warm atmosphere to its inviting array of work materials, thoughtfully arranged. It is when you see the children, and the tables and chairs they are using, that it might dawn on you that just about everything—and everyone—in this room is a bit smaller than usual. Welcome to the Two's Program at WSMS.

Launching this fall, this new program offers two-year-olds the opportunity to enjoy the many benefits of a WSMS education, with a curriculum tailored to the developmental needs and abilities of this age group. As eagerly anticipated as this program has been by these new young students and their families, no one is more excited about it than its head teacher, Karen Deinzer.

MEET OUR HEAD TEACHER

"It's amazing how many things two-year-olds are capable of mastering," Karen marvels. "This program will give them the opportunity to discover things on their own, and the responsibility to do things for themselves."

Karen has had extensive experience working with infants and toddlers. She comes to us from Twin Parks Montessori Schools, where she was Infant/Toddler Coordinator. Prior to that she was Executive Director of Cornerstone Montessori in North Kingstown, Rhode Island. In the "small world" department, our Head of School, Mimi Basso, had Karen's daughter in her class when Mimi was running a toddler program in Ridgewood, New Jersey.

"Karen became interested in Montessori education because of her daughter's experience," Mimi recalls. "She is probably the best toddler teacher I've ever known. I remember when she told me she wanted to take the training, I thought, 'I hope they don't ruin her!' because she's so good naturally."

“I wanted to learn all about the philosophy,” Karen remembers about those days. “I was amazed by the extent to which simply touching materials helped my daughter—helped all the children—to internalize information. It’s such a natural way to learn.”

For the Two’s Program, Karen is leading an energetic and dedicated group of teachers. Neeta Arbeiter, a former WSMS head teacher (1995-2000) who earned her master’s degree and her certification in early childhood Montessori education from New York University, is thrilled to be back after having taken some time off to be with her children. Kassi Baxter, a graduate of Penn State who worked with Karen last year, is also on board. WSMS teachers Hulda Haughton and Mingma Ukyab complete the team. Together they gently guide and support the children, work with parents and caregivers to address any concerns and facilitate healthy separation, and, perhaps most important, maintain a cheerful and relaxed atmosphere that puts children and adults alike at ease.

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

The idea of a WSMS program for two-year-olds has been around for a few years, but it was the school’s most recent Strategic Plan, adopted in 2011, that specifically identified such a program as a possible means of achieving our goal to expand and improve our offerings to students and their families. Proceeding from that plan, the school performed market research that, upon evaluation, clearly indicated the desirability and potential benefits of a two’s program.

“We found out that 60% of our children had attended a formal program before coming to WSMS,” Mimi reports. “We figured that if parents were already enrolling their two-year-olds elsewhere, it would provide so much more consistency for the children if they could start here.”

Of paramount importance to Mimi was that the program be consistent with WSMS’s mission, particularly with regard to the school’s commitment to building a diverse community. Part of this commitment is providing options for working parents in need of full-time programs. As a result, parents of two-year-olds have a choice of three programs: two three-hour mornings a week, three three-hour mornings a week, and five days from 9 am to 3 pm.

For this first of two pilot years, enrollment is limited almost entirely to younger siblings of currently enrolled students: 20 out of this year’s 24 students fall under this category. This majority is intentional: The idea is to keep spaces in the Early Childhood (ages 2.8 to 6) Program available for families with no prior connection to WSMS. The school has a strong sibling policy when it comes to admissions. Therefore, younger siblings who come to WSMS at age two aren’t shrinking the number of available spaces for the following year, as presumably they would have been accepted if they had applied a year later. Thus, the Two’s Program is open only to families who already have a child enrolled in the school, or to those who have been personally referred by a WSMS family.





“We don’t want to be that school where you have to enroll your child at age two in order to secure a place,” Mimi asserts. She expects that the program will remain limited primarily to younger siblings of enrolled students. She also anticipates, however, that all students at WSMS will benefit from the new program, as the confidence and comfort level of the younger children will have a ripple effect throughout the other classrooms after they’ve moved up to the Early Childhood Program.

JUST RIGHT FOR TWO’S

As for what goes on in the Two’s classroom, the curriculum is consistent with WSMS, but geared toward younger learners. Most of the materials are on trays with handles, which allow them to be easily picked up and carried (“We want children to be able to succeed in what they’re trying to do,” Karen explains). Many of the materials teach the children about self-care: dressing and undressing, toileting, washing hands, dishwashing. One particularly thoughtful station consists of a box of tissues on a small table in front of a mirror. A child can look at herself while she is blowing her nose or wiping her mouth, and inspect her face when she’s finished.

Because two-year-olds tend to have shorter attention spans than three-year-olds, the days, at least initially, are more open-ended than those in the Early Childhood Program. Children are free to explore at their own pace, with comparatively few group activities. Karen devotes a lot of time to music with puppets and props, knowing that children’s participation will increase as their attention spans grow. Group snacktime gives the children a chance to socialize by talking about what they’re eating. Every day includes many opportunities for gross motor development, including walks around the neighborhood, which introduce a wide range of topics to discuss.

“Our goal for this program is not to have these children reading earlier; it is for them to develop socialization skills, to refine and develop large motor skills, and to really feel good about themselves,” Mimi explains.

A large part of feeling good about oneself is having a positive experience learning how to separate from parents and/or caregivers. This process often affects the parents as much as, if not more than, the children.

“Separation should be a happy phase-in for both parent and child,” Karen concurs. “It’s essential to give both of them time to make the transition.” Accordingly, the process is as gradual as it needs to be for each family. Parents and caregivers are asked to sit quietly in the classroom; children can sit in their parents/caregivers’ laps if they prefer.





"It's amazing how many things two-year-olds are capable of mastering."

-Karen Deinzer

The Two's Program is not the only exciting development at WSMS related to educating very young children. Also launching this year is a teacher preparation program for adults seeking to become Montessori-certified teachers of infants and toddlers (see sidebar, "WSMS Expands Teacher Education Program").

EARLIER IS BETTER

The lasting benefits of early childhood education have been highlighted with increasing frequency in various arenas, from universities to the White House. James J. Heckman, Nobel laureate and professor of economics at the University of Chicago, has argued forcefully for education policy reform that would make quality early childhood education available to all. In a recent editorial in the *New York Times* he writes:

*The cognitive skills prized by the American educational establishment and measured by achievement tests are only part of what is required for success in life. Character skills are equally important determinants of wages, education, health and many other significant aspects of flourishing lives. Self-control, openness, the ability to engage with others, to plan and to persist—these are the attributes that get people in the door and on the job, and lead to productive lives. Cognitive and character skills work together as dynamic complements; they are inseparable.**

In her keynote address at WSMS's 50th Anniversary Celebration, Alma Powell, Chair of America's Promise Alliance—and proud WSMS grandmother—observed, "West Side has always understood that education is not simply what happens when children start first grade—that the all-important foundation for success is built in those earliest years."

The Two's Program at WSMS promises to strengthen that foundation further by increasing options for WSMS families with younger siblings; by contributing to the school's continuing efforts to build as diverse a community as possible; and by helping a wider range of students develop the cognitive and character skills necessary to become, in the words of Maria Montessori, "a uniquely endowed individual living a whole life in a whole world."



*Heckman, James J., "Lifelines for Poor Children," *New York Times*, September 15, 2013

WSMS EXPANDS TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM

This past August West Side Montessori School's Teacher Education Program (WSMS-TEP) launched an Infant & Toddler Program, through which adult students may earn an Infant & Toddler teaching credential from the American Montessori Society (AMS). WSMS-TEP has already gained international recognition for its success in teaching students to become effective and responsive Montessori teachers. With the Infant & Toddler Program, WSMS-TEP is expanding its offerings to accommodate those wishing to work with children from birth to age three. The annual program begins with a three-week summer session and continues through the academic year. After the academic coursework is completed, students apply their knowledge in a supervised student teaching placement in a Montessori classroom.

Among the four distinguished teachers in the program is Maria Gravel, a pioneer in the Montessori world. With her husband, Doug, Maria played a pivotal role in the formation and growth of the American Montessori Society in the 1960s (in 2010, she and Doug received a Lifetime Achievement Award from AMS for their ongoing leadership within the organization). She also designed and established one of the very first infant and toddler programs in New York City: the Seton Day Care Center at the New York Foundling, which she ran from its inception in 1972 until 2008. Both Mimi and Karen took their Infant Toddler training under Maria at Seton.

When asked what skills she and her colleagues are teaching their Infant & Toddler adult students, Maria replies, "We are trying to help them gain the knowledge and the competencies to design environments that are warm and nurturing, and where the developmental needs of these young children are being supported. The goal is for every student to recognize that each child is his/her own unique person with his/her own learning style, and to offer each child activities that will help him/her grow and become an independent learner."

Maria's fellow teachers in the program are Mimi Basso; Karen Deinzer, head teacher of WSMS's new Two's Program; and Tara Greaney, Director, Christine Beshar Children's Center, Cravath, Swaine & Moore LLP, and former Director of the Early Program at the Caedmon School. There are seven students enrolled this year. Two of them, Neeta Arbeiter and Kassi Baxter, are also teachers in the Two's Program; three others will be starting infant and toddler programs in other schools.

"This new component of WSMS-TEP is really going to make a difference," Mimi enthuses. "Part of the mission of our school is to disperse the best practices in early Montessori education. Since we were getting an increasing number of inquiries from people who wanted to be trained in the burgeoning area of infant and toddler education, we felt it was imperative that we meet that need by creating another training program. We see it as having great growth potential, and I couldn't be more excited about our team."