



# How to identify authentic Montessori: Primary

All Montessori schools are not created equal. Montessori isn't a trademarked name, nor is Montessori a franchised operation. Each school interprets Montessori differently: some schools invest in everything needed to deliver a high-quality, authentic Montessori experience, while others may combine elements of Montessori with other approaches, or may make quality trade-offs to offer programs at a tuition that appeals to a broader group of families.

At Little Elephant Montessori, we pride ourselves in offering a high-quality, authentic Montessori environment and a warm, thoughtful community experience for parents and children alike. As you research different school options, here is a quick cheat-sheet that will allow you to evaluate how authentic and high-quality the Montessori approach is at different schools you may consider.

Montessori concepts and principles	LEMA	Others
<b>A beautiful, purposefully-prepared environment</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Wooden furniture</b> arranged to create different spaces and to display materials in an orderly, appealing way</li> <li>• <b>Natural, subdued shades of color</b>, with purposeful wall displays at child's height; no visual clutter</li> <li>• <b>Access to nature</b>—e.g., real grass, gardening areas, flowers &amp; plants in the classroom; outside workspaces with easy access for children</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>  <input type="checkbox"/>  <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>  <input type="checkbox"/>  <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Schedule &amp; class structure</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>An uninterrupted 3-hour work period</b> in the morning, and 2 hours in the afternoon</li> <li>• <b>A full mix of three years</b> (ages 3-6) in one room, including Kindergarten (no separate K/1 or Pre-K/K classes)</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>  <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>  <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Background of the adults &amp; adult/child interactions</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>High-quality Montessori training</b> for lead teacher (accredited AMI or AMS classes, vs. in-house training or self-study/short online courses)</li> <li>• <b>Respectful, deliberate adult-child interactions:</b> calm, soft voices; explanations for processes rather than abrupt commands; adult at child's level with eye contact when speaking with individual children</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>  <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>  <input type="checkbox"/>

A good Montessori primary classroom has four clearly identifiable areas: Practical Life, Sensorial/Cultural, Language, and Math, with opportunities for artistic and musical expression available throughout the classroom. While there are hundreds of materials in a well-equipped, authentic Montessori classroom, here is a list of a few that tell the tale of authenticity and quality. Observe whether the materials are **available** (displayed in a nice, orderly way on the shelves), **in use** (a wide range of activities should be going on, across all four classroom areas, at any time), and **in good shape** (well-maintained, attractive looking, versus worn or chipped).



Montessori materials and activities	LEMA	Others
<b>Practical Life: Care of self, community, environment</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Food preparation:</b> real knives, wooden boards, and real food prepared by children and served by them to friends (as against velcroed wooden items)</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Snack &amp; lunches with ceramic plates,</b> glasses, placemats and real silverware (vs. paper plates and plastic)</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>“Practical Practical Life:”</b> work done for a meaningful purpose, rather than pretend work. E.g., sewing a real button on an apron vs. lacing shape toys; flower arranging with real flowers to be enjoyed; cleaning up real messes with real tools (brooms, crumbers...)</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art activities that focus on the <b>exploration of art</b>—vs. adult-led uniform or worksheet-based products</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Sensorial/Cultural Studies</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The Montessori Bells</b>—a music material with a set of matching metal bells on a dedicated stand—in each classroom and in use. <b><i>This is an expensive material, and many schools do not invest in it—but it is critical for a quality Montessori music program.</i></b></li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other <b>advanced materials present, in use, and in good shape</b>—e.g., a full assortment of puzzle maps of each continent; the Binomial and Trinomial Cubes</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Language</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Cursive Sandpaper Letters</b> for children to trace, as well as cursive moveable alphabets of different sizes</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The Farm:</b> a miniature farm with a building, yard, and farm animal figurines, used to explore grammar concepts</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Mathematics</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The Montessori Bead Cabinet:</b> a shallow shelf with hanging colored bead chains, bead squares and bead cubes, from one (red) to tens (gold)</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The Golden Beads:</b> a set of beads (may include cubes with colored circles) to practice arithmetic into the thousands</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The Small and Large Bead Frames:</b> an abacus of red, blue, and green beads, with four or seven rows of beads (2x or 3x green, 1x or 2x blue and red)</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Materials and activities you will not see in a quality Montessori primary room</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Computers, TVs or any other screen-based technology used by children. (Teachers may have iPads or computers for record keeping.)</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traditional toys—e.g., dress-up, dolls, LEGOs, board games, etc. <b><i>(These may be on a moveable shelf for after-school use, or early in the year for new children, but it should be visibly set apart from the Montessori activities.)</i></b></li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Worksheets. You may see ruled or squared pieces of paper. You should not see pre-printed worksheets being colored in or written on by children in large volume. <b><i>(Exception: at the end of the year, some children moving on to 1st grade in traditional school may receive transitional lessons on how to work with worksheets.)</i></b></li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>