

# Learning Indian traditions at the local Montessori

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It's 11 am on a Tuesday at the D A V Montessori School. As per schedule, the youngest students, three and four year olds in matching blue uniforms, shuffle from one room to the next, where their elders, between five and six, have been singing songs in Hindi. It's time for moral science, and Acharya Premchand Shridhar takes his place on a chair as the children form a ring on the floor around him. As the acharya holds his hands together and starts chanting the Gayatri Mantra, a boy, either overcome with emotion or in dire need of a bathroom break, starts crying.

His sympathetic teacher, Madhu Bangia, soothes him before whisking him away and allowing the acharya to continue.

So it went on, the second day of school at what is quite possibly the only institution of its kind in America. The DAV, run by the Arya Samaj of Houston and licensed by the state of Texas, combines regular Montessori instruction with lessons in Hindi, Indian history and Naitik Shiksha, what it regards as appropriate social and spiritual values, culled mostly from Hinduism, but also drawing upon Buddhist and Christian stories.

The school opened in 2000 with six students. Now it has 30, aged two to seven, who can go as far as first grade. While many of the first students came out of the Arya Samaj community, whose members are mostly North Indian, the school has attracted outsiders through word of mouth.

"I was interested as apart from academics they were teaching the shlokas and prayers and an Indian language," said Priya Muralidharan, whose three-year-old daughter, Arya, has attended since January. "They celebrate all festivals. It's very inclusive."

Muralidharan, who is from Chennai, said she had 'shopped around' at other schools and was hoping to find

one that employed the Montessori method, which encourages children to pursue their areas of interest.

"Somehow, I was very comfortable here," she said. "The teachers are very personal. Other schools are bigger and have a higher student ratio. Here, they see to it that the children eat well. I can walk in and talk to the teachers any time."

She noted that the DAV costs \$325 per month for students who attend from 8:30 am until noon, and \$425 for those who stay till afternoon. This is in part due to a strong volunteer team – parents of students and others from the Arya Samaj – and a commitment by the founders to operate the institution not as a profit maker so much as a serv-

ice to the community.

According to Chetna Desai, who along with Madhu Bangia is one of the two Montessori-certified instructors, the Montessori method encourages children to pursue their area of interest, while striving for order, a principle contained within the Montessori mantra, OCCI – Order, Concentration, Courtesy and Independence.

"All exercises must bring OCCI among the children," said Desai.

Even for children who are too young to read, exercises emphasize a habit of scanning from left to right, top to bottom.

"In direct preparation for reading and writing," she explained.

"If you don't make them ready for that they'll start [*reading*] from the back page. I have seen so many children do that."

Although the quiet, orderly environment is to be expected on the second day of the school year, parents maintain this is typical.

"It's very rarely chaotic as the child picks up whatever they feel interested in doing," said Shailja Menon, a volunteer who performs administrative tasks and whose daughter, Roma is a student. "They do not compete with each other."

The difference between most schools and one with Indian students, said Desai, is the level of discipline children bring.

"Our children are very disciplined," she said.

"Maybe it's the home environment. The parents are willing to volunteer."

Last year, a girl from an Indian Christian family attended, her parents drawn to the curriculum and language lessons and emphasis on respect for parents and elders.

"But she was excluded from moral science," said Desai. "The parents requested that."

▪ TEXAS ▪



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