

The first step

By Amena Jafri

*School
Edu-Admission*

IT was only recently that I heard about an acquaintance whose one-and-a-half-year-old son just started schooling. Apparently, a lot of efforts were made to ensure that he is well prepared so as to appear eligible for admission for his age group in one of the best schools.

Although one and a half years seems quite young, even at the more common two to three years, one wonders, what is it that gives the schools a basis for deciding who to take at this stage when a toddler can barely speak in proper and complete sentences.

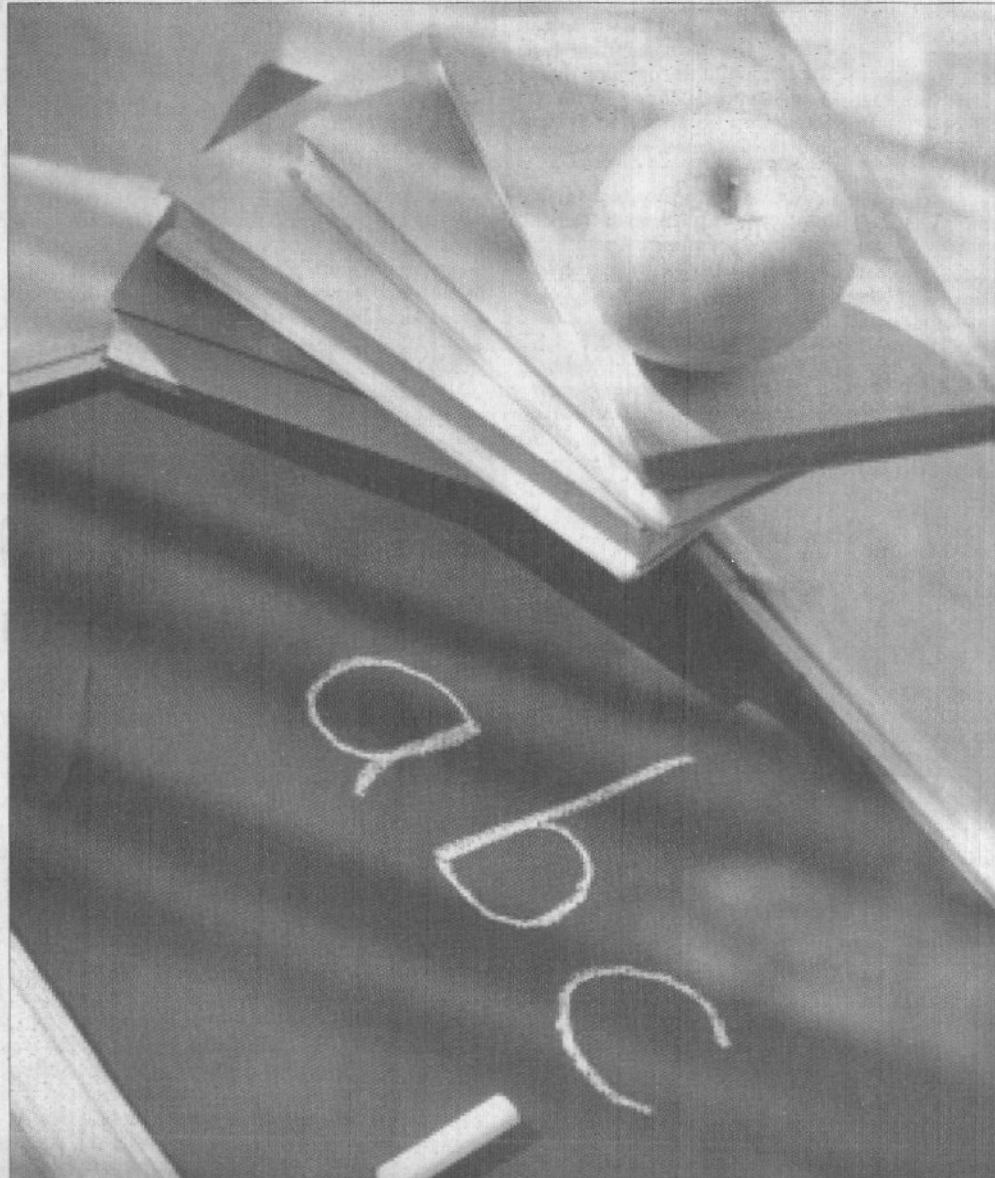
These little children can hardly be judged on their addition and subtraction skills, nor can they be judged on their reading and writing abilities. So is it the pattern in which they scribble that seals the deal?

Sakina, whose last experience of Montessori admission for children was 40 years ago, recalls that when she went for her daughter's enrollment in the Montessori school, the process was quite straight forward. She says, "We filled out the form, paid the fees and were asked two things: 'Is your daughter toilet trained?' and 'How well is her command over her language?' And that's it, the admission was done!"

Today, however, the process is quite different with tests and assessments and interviews of the child with a similar analysis of the parents. It is no longer a matter of wanting to join a good pre-school, in fact it has more to do with a good blend of one's monetary and social powers and personal aptitudes.

Some schools are conducting full-fledged tests and assessments for Montessori applicants in which they try to test various abilities like the child's recognition of animals, colours, phonics, numbers, etc. These tests are such a trial of skill and abilities that many parents are forced to send their child for tuitions to prepare for Montessori admissions as the level of assessment is much higher than what a child with a normal calibre would be able to reach.

While a lot of parents depend upon these tuition centres for coaching, some however, labour themselves, over preparing the two to three-year-old child to display the best possible skill set to the school. But all these efforts sometimes



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While speaking to the mother of three-year-old Haya, who recently started Montessori, I was told that while being assessed for admission in one of Karachi's finest schools, the test was not just for Haya to pass. In fact, her input in the screening process was probably lesser than the assessment that the parents were put through. They were interviewed by the school administration regarding matters such as why they wished for their child to study in that particular school, their own qualifications, salaries, the relationship between the child and the parents, family set up, relations with grandparents, etc.

In certain instances, some children have even been denied an admission primarily on the basis of the lack of concern judged in the parents' attitude or some other similar factor.

On the other hand, well-known schools have shown partiality in granting admission to students whose parents or siblings have also studied from the same institute. And in the absence of the required blood link, they have hinted to the parents that maybe donations to certain funds might just do the trick.

It was most shocking to find that a certain school even seems to turn up its nose on learning that the child was delivered through a cesarean section and not naturally. The school believes that natural birthing requires the child to make an effort in the process as well, whereas in the case of a cesarean, the child doesn't do anything to participate in his/her birth. Hence naturally born children are more hard-working than those born through cesarean section. This strange reasoning makes one question: do the children, in some cases, deliberately wrap the umbilical chord around their neck to cause a cesarean birth? Perhaps he or she just didn't want to go to the particular school and found the perfect excuse to rid themselves of the option by ensuring a cesarean birth.

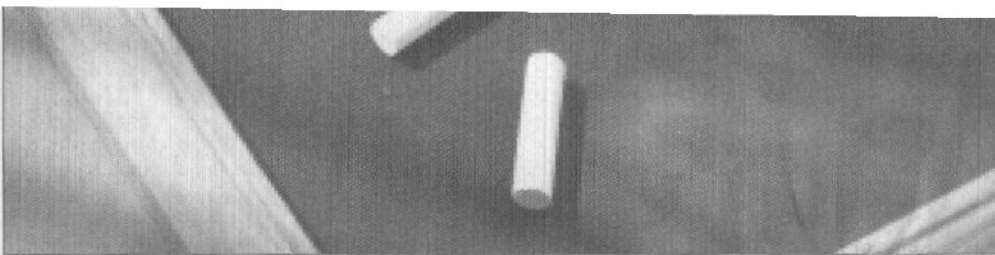
year-old child to display the best possible skill set to the school. But all these efforts sometimes go to complete waste when at the very crucial time of the child's assessment, he or she refuses to show off the wide array of accomplishments that he or she has been taught to master.

Farah, a mother whose child did something similar, says, "He (her son) completely refused to utter a word at the school although I know he knew everything that they were asking him and was fully capable of answering well."

Sadia, a mother of two, whose youngest started school a few years back, says: "I didn't do a thing to prepare either of my children for their earliest level of admission. I find it completely wrong and unnatural to send such small children to tuitions, etc., to prepare them for admissions as they are too young for such nonsense. Both my children attained admissions in quite good private schools without having to put up an unnatural act."

She further stresses on what she believes to be the "unethical" system that prevails, and says that just because no one is taking any steps to stop it, doesn't make it any more right.

Mrs Aamirah Rizvi, the vice principal of a prestigious preschool in Karachi, who conducts the selection of students at the reception level, says: "These children are so young. Some aren't even two years old at the time of registration so it is not right to assess them. We inquire about the child's speech development and our decision is based mainly on the parents and their interview."



Impact on the early stage, Jehan Khatkhat gained with the members of the restoration peace

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It was not easy to unearth all this information. While trying to get in touch with various schools, including some of the oldest and said to be the finest of Montessori institutes in the country, this scribe ran into a brick wall when most blatantly refused to speak on the subject of their admission policies or even explain ambiguities regarding the procedure given on their websites. This kind of an attitude on the part of the schools makes one to think that maybe what these schools are looking for is something they don't want people to know about.

Today, with everything becoming a race for time, we even have instances where parents register a child in a preschool when the mother is expecting. Hence the child's education process starts before he/she is even born.

It is the duty of all parents to ensure that their children have the brightest future possible and the most commonly sought way of doing that is to see to it that the child receives the best education they can afford.

Preschool admissions are therefore deemed as the most crucial step taken by the parents as they rightly believe it to determine the later stages of education as well. But despite the fact that this is a crucial stage, is it correct to exploit the parents, who only wish to ensure a concrete future for their offspring? ■

**The names of certain students and parents have been changed to protect their privacy*