

What is Reggio Emilia?

For many parents of preschool-aged children, the beginning of the school years can be scary. When your child starts going to school, it means less parent involvement in day-to-day learning and more teacher-structured lessons—less play and more work. But a growing form of early childhood education, called the Reggio Emilia approach, is turning heads with its unique take on teaching—one that makes parents, teachers and children equal shareholders in the learning initiative.

Although Reggio Emilia is an Italian export, it's not, as you might expect, a fancy cheese. In fact, it's an approach to education from a city of the same name, and it focuses on the educational importance of community and free inquiry as its primary values. Since its development in the 1940s, the Reggio approach has spread into a worldwide network of preschools and kindergartens, with designs for elementary classes in the works.



Although the Reggio approach shares some of the values of the better-known Waldorf and Montessori schools, it's not a philosophy with a set system of beliefs. Rather, it's an approach based around certain fundamental values about how children learn. "These values are interpreted in different schools, different contexts and different ways," says Susan Lyon, executive director of the Innovative Teacher Project, which aims to develop and promote Reggio-inspired education.

Just what are these core values? Here's an introduction:

- **The child as an active participant in learning.** The Reggio approach "sees a child as a very competent protagonist and initiator who interacts with their environment," Lyon says. Andra Young, head teacher of a Reggio-inspired school in San Francisco, says that students are allowed to follow their own interests, but that "it's not willy-nilly." For example, she says, students in her classroom were showing an interest in building, so she brought wood stumps and building materials into the classroom. While exploring how to hammer nails, the children were given the opportunity to reinforce math skills, problem-solving and emerging literacy—all in relationship to their hands-on project.
- **The significance of environment.** "The environment of the school is seen as the third educator," after the teacher and the parent, says Lyon. Most Reggio classrooms include a studio, or "atelier," which is filled with materials such as clay, paint and writing implements. Children use these materials to represent concepts that they are learning in a hands-on way.
- **The teacher, parent and child as collaborators in the process of learning.** "Normally," says Lyon, "parents are not seen as part of the educational process in an authentic way." But the Reggio approach views the parent as an essential resource for the child's learning. To foster community, Reggio schools host a variety of events throughout each school year, including conferences and special lectures for parents. "For example, a teacher observed that a lot of parents were complaining that their children weren't sleeping well," Lyon says. The school responded by bringing someone in to speak to parents about the issue.
- **Making learning visible.** "The teacher observes and documents the daily life of the school to make learning visible," says Lyon. In Reggio-inspired classrooms, teachers use a variety of documentation methods, such as cameras, tape recorders and journals, to track children's thoughts and ideas as they play together or work with materials. For example, says Young, each child has a portfolio binder, including photographs of their projects, quotes from the child, artwork and writing samples. "It's kind of like a narrative of what the child learns at school," says Young, noting that the children take great pride and satisfaction in their portfolios.

Although adapting the values of the Reggio Emilia approach can be challenging for teachers, Young says it's

worth it. "Validating the children's work and supporting the child to go deeper into their perception of the world is the most important part of the process." Parents and teachers will agree: It's never too soon to start giving your child a nose for knowledge and the tools to investigate the world.