Types of curriculum for kids: Montessori to Singapore math, explained

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Montessori, classical, Charlotte Mason, Singapore math, the science of reading and the IB: what each kind of curriculum is, who it suits, and what the evidence says.

There is no single best curriculum for kids. There are a few big ideas about how children learn, and most programs a school or family buys follow one or two of them. Montessori lets the child choose the work. Classical education teaches in three stages. Charlotte Mason uses "living books" and short lessons. Singapore math moves from objects to pictures to numbers. The science of reading teaches the code of letters and sounds directly. Peabody Teach now has a free curriculum guide with a plain-words page for each of 49 approaches and national curricula, from preschool to 12th grade. Each page covers where the approach came from, what a day looks like, what the research says and how to try it. Peabody is free through the end of 2026, with no ads and no affiliate links.

This post is the short tour: the main families of approaches, what separates them, and how to choose without reading forty books first.

The four questions that separate them

Nearly every curriculum argument comes down to four questions.

1. Who chooses what to learn next: the adult or the child? In a traditional or classical program, the adult does, from a set sequence. Montessori and Reggio Emilia give the child much more choice inside a prepared room. Unschooling hands the choice almost entirely to the child.
2. Is it taught directly, or discovered? Explicit teaching shows a worked example, then lets the child practise. Inquiry or problem-based teaching starts with a puzzle and lets children find ways in, with the adult drawing the ideas out afterwards.
3. Is it taught in a spiral, or to mastery? A spiral program touches many topics each year and comes back to them. A mastery program stays on one skill until it is secure.
4. Books, materials or screens? Charlotte Mason and Waldorf lean hard on real books, nature and handwork. Montessori is built around physical materials. Many modern programs are on screen.

Once you know your own answers, the list of approaches gets short very quickly.

The early years: ages 2 to 6

The best-known preschool approaches are Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Waldorf, HighScope, The Creative Curriculum, play-based learning, forest school and academic pre-K.

The honest summary of the research is "it depends on quality". Small, intensive programs such as the Perry Preschool project found long-term benefits. Some large public programs found that early gains faded by the later grades. The skills with the clearest evidence for this age are hearing the sounds in words, knowing letters, and early number sense built step by step. Each guide page says what its approach does with those.

One practical note: some early-years approaches ask for few or no screens. Waldorf in particular discourages them for young children. The guide says so on those pages, and points families to off-screen ways to use what Peabody has.

Whole-school philosophies

These shape every subject, every year:

- Classical education teaches facts and memory work first, then logic, then rhetoric, often with history taught in order from ancient times.
- Charlotte Mason uses living books instead of textbooks, short lessons, narration (the child tells back what they heard), copywork and nature study.
- Core Knowledge sets out exactly what children should know in each grade, on the idea that background knowledge drives reading.
- Project-based learning and unit studies teach several subjects through one topic or project.
- Unschooling follows the child's own interests.
- Mastery-based learning lets each child move on when they can show a skill, not when the calendar says.

For several of these, especially classical, Charlotte Mason and unit studies, there is little outcome research either way. The guide says that plainly instead of pretending otherwise.

Reading and writing

This is where the argument has been loudest. The science of reading and structured literacy teach phonics systematically and explicitly. Balanced literacy mixes some phonics with leveled books and guessing from pictures and context. Many US states have passed reading laws in recent years that steer schools toward systematic phonics. The National Reading Panel's 2000 report found systematic phonics instruction helped children learn to read.

Phonics is only the start. Knowledge-building programs build comprehension through connected topics. For writing, the guide compares writer's workshop with explicit writing instruction, which teaches sentences and strategies step by step.

Math

Math programs split along the same lines:

- Singapore math: blocks, then bar-model drawings, then numbers.
- Teaching for mastery: small steps, the whole class together.
- Spiral math such as Saxon: a little of everything, every day.
- Problem-based math: start with a puzzle and compare methods.

Two more math pages answer the questions parents ask most: math fact fluency, meaning how much timed practice and when, and high-school math pathways, meaning algebra in 8th grade or not. We wrote a whole post on why math is more than math facts.

Standards are not a curriculum

A common mix-up: Common Core and your state's standards are lists of what children should be able to do by the end of each grade. They are not lessons. A curriculum is the actual books, lessons and order used to get there, and many different curricula can meet the same standards. The guide also explains the International Baccalaureate, Cambridge International and other countries' national curricula, for families who move or are curious.

Curricula outside the US

Outside the US, most children follow a national or provincial curriculum, and each counts school years its own way: England's Year 4 is about US 3rd grade, Scotland's P1 is the year before kindergarten, and Ireland starts with two infant years. The guide now has a page each for England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Ireland, Canada's provinces, Australia, New Zealand, India's boards and South Africa, and a find your curriculum page with every system's school years side by side. Our post on school curricula around the English-speaking world is the short tour.

A curriculum (what to learn, and when) and an approach (how to teach it) are separate choices, and on Peabody a parent or teacher can set both for each child.

How to choose (and why most people mix)

Few families or classrooms follow one approach to the letter. A common, sensible mix is:

- a structured, explicit program for reading and math, where the research on teaching the basics directly is strongest;
- something looser and more book- or project-rich for history, science and the arts.

The eclectic homeschooling page shows sample mixes. And whatever you choose, a few study habits help: spaced review, quick low-stakes quizzes, and worked examples before solo practice. They are on the page called what works in every approach. One idea the research does not support is matching lessons to a child's "learning style".

When you have narrowed it to an approach, the homeschool curriculum comparison lists programs by method, with prices read from each publisher's own site.

Where Peabody fits

Peabody is a free reading and learning site for kids, free through the end of 2026. Its library of leveled stories starts with decodable books that follow a systematic phonics order. It also has math practice from counting to 8th grade, word games, science and more. Each guide page has a "Using Peabody with it" section that says honestly what Peabody can do for that approach, and what it can't.

Questions parents ask

What is the best type of curriculum?

There isn't one best for every child. The evidence is strongest for teaching early reading and math skills explicitly and systematically. Beyond that, the right fit depends on your child, how much you want to plan, and how you feel about screens and books.

What is the difference between Montessori and classical education?

Montessori lets children choose hands-on work in a prepared room and move at their own pace. Classical education follows a set sequence led by the adult, with memory work first, then logic, then rhetoric. The guide has a page on each.

Is Charlotte Mason the same as classical?

No, though they overlap. Both value great books and history. Charlotte Mason uses short lessons, narration and nature study. Classical is built around the three-stage trivium and often adds Latin.

Do I have to pick just one approach?

No. Most homeschool families mix, for example one program for math, another for reading, and their own plan for history and science.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/types-of-curriculum-for-kids