

Q & A

What is Montessori?

Montessori is an approach to education with the fundamental belief that a child learns best within a social environment which supports and respects each individual's unique development.

What makes Montessori Education Unique?

- **The “Whole Child” Approach.** The primary goal of a Montessori program is to help each child reach full potential in all areas of life. Activities promote the development of social skills, emotional growth, and physical coordination as well as cognitive preparation. The holistic curriculum, under the direction of a specially prepared teacher, allows the child to experience the joy of learning, time to enjoy the process and ensure the development of self-esteem, and provides the experiences from which children create their knowledge.
- **The “Prepared Environment”.** In order for self-directed learning to take place, the whole learning environment – room, materials, and social climate – must be supportive of the learner. The teacher provides necessary resources, including opportunities for children to function in a safe and positive climate. The teacher thus gains the children's trust, which enables them to try new things and build self-confidence.
- **The Montessori Materials.** Dr. Montessori's observations of the kinds of things children enjoy and go back to repeatedly led her to design a number of multisensory, sequential and self-correcting materials to facilitate the learning of skills and lead to learning of abstract ideas.
- **The Teacher.** Originally called a “Directress”, the Montessori teacher functions as a designer of the environment, resource person, role model, demonstrator, record-keeper, and meticulous observer of each child's behavior and growth. The teacher acts as a facilitator of learning.

How Does It Work?

Each Montessori classroom, from birth through high school, operates on the principle of freedom within limits. Every program has its set of ground rules which differ from age to age, but is always based on core Montessori beliefs – respect for each other and for the environment.

Children are free to work at their own pace with materials they have chosen, either alone or with others. The teacher relies on his or her observations of the children to determine which new activities and materials may be introduced to an individual child or to a small or large group. The aim is to encourage active, self-directed learning and to strike a balance of individual mastery within small group collaborations within the whole group community.

The multi-year span in each class provides a family-like grouping where learning can take place naturally. More experienced children share what they have learned while reinforcing their own learning. Because this peer group learning is intrinsic to Montessori, there is often more conversation – language experiences – in the Montessori classroom than in conventional early education settings.

How is Creativity Encouraged?

Creativity flourishes in an atmosphere of acceptance and trust. Montessorians recognize that all children, from toddler to teenager, learn and express themselves in a very individual way. Music, Art, storytelling, movement and drama activities are integrated into American Montessori programs. But there are other things particular to the Montessori environment which encourage creative development: many materials to stimulate interest and involvement; an emphasis on the sensory aspect of experience; and opportunities for both verbal and non-verbal modes of learning.

Montessori – The Early Childhood Years (3-6)

EARLY CHILDHOOD

Dr. Montessori characterized the 3 to 6 year-old child as possessing an extraordinary capacity, the ability to absorb information from his or her surroundings. Dr. Montessori named this quality “the absorbent mind”. The child from 3 to 6 is a sensorial explorer, soaking up every aspect of the environment, including language and culture.

Dr. Montessori recognized the motto of this young child to be “help me to do it myself”. Development during this period focuses on learning to be independent. The corresponding educational environment, then, should support the natural drive, enabling the child to become competent, and therefore confident.

The Montessori approach embraces the full development of the youngster, addressing all aspects (physical, social, emotional, cognitive and spiritual) of the whole child.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MONTESSORI EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM

Social, Emotional, Spiritual Development

In a Montessori prepared environment, children are mixed in ages, within a 3-year developmental span. Mixing ages enables the older, more socially advanced and capable children to become role models for the younger ones. A feeling of community develops as younger children are aided by older ones and as older children learn patience, nurturance, and an appreciation for other perspectives through their experiences with younger children. In a mixed age classroom, children can choose friendships based on common interest, not just age.

Respect for themselves, for others, and for the environment, forms the basis for all classroom rules. As children are treated with respect by the adults, they learn to treat themselves and others in kind.

Physical, and Motor Development

To become independent, children must develop motor coordination and control. The freedom of movement found in the Montessori early childhood environment allows children the opportunity to learn to control their bodies in a defined space.

The activities of Practical Life instill care: for oneself, for others, and for the environment. These exercises include pouring liquids, preparing food, washing dishes, setting a table, polishing silver or shoes and dealing gracefully with social encounters. Through these tasks and experiences, children learn to concentrate, coordinate their movements, and develop fine-motor skills. Practical Life activities are the foundation of all future academic work because they promote concentration, order, and a complete work cycle.

The Sensorial materials are designed to enable 3-6 year-olds to identify and refine information obtained through their senses, and to order and classify sensorial impressions. By seeing, smelling, tasting, listening to, touching and further exploring the sensorial properties of these materials, children begin to classify and eventually name objects and attributes in their environment.

Cognitive Development

Because the 3-6-year-old child's mind is absorbent, this is the ideal age to assist the development of brain pathways. Montessori observed that the child of this age was in a "sensitive period" for absorbing language, both spoken and written. The Montessori early childhood classroom is rich in oral language opportunities – listening to stories or reciting poems, singing and conversing with others. Introduction of the Montessori sandpaper letters connects each spoken sound with its symbol, supporting the development of writing, and eventually, reading.

Young children are intrigued by numbers – knowing how much or how many provides another dimension in understanding the world. The Montessori math materials and lessons help children to develop an understanding of math concepts through the manipulation of concrete materials, building a secure foundation of math principles, skills, and problem-solving abilities.

Science, geography, history, art, and music are all incorporated into the early childhood environment. They are presented in sensorial ways with specifically designed materials and real-life experiences. In geography, children learn not only about the names of countries, but the life of people and their respective cultures. They develop a sense of respect for different cultures, recognizing that we all belong to the family of people. Young children are natural scientists. Watching and caring for classroom animals and plants creates an interest in science lessons and a reverence for life. Art and music give the children an opportunity for creative and joyful self-expression, as well as experiences with great music and works of art.

The materials in the Montessori environment are designed to isolate one concept at a time in a very concrete manner. Children work with materials that are self-correcting, thus allowing for auto-education. "Errors" are viewed as a necessary and helpful part of the learning process. The Montessori materials provide a bridge from concrete, experience-based learning toward increasingly abstract thought.

Impact of Montessori Education on the Child

Children who have been educated using the Montessori method grow into competent learners who know how to learn and love learning. The solid foundation begun early in life creates self-confident, contributing adults.

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