

# Montessori 101:

## Some Basic Information that Every Montessori Parent Should Know

by *Tim Seldin, President  
The Montessori Foundation*

Every year thousands of young children begin their education in Montessori schools around the world. Their parents ask, "Just what is this thing called Montessori?" Their questions are well founded, because Montessori schools are normally very different from the schools most of us attended when we were young.

Those of us who have spent years around Montessori children know that Montessori works! Parents new to Montessori have to sort through a host of conflicting impressions. When friends ask them to tell them about their children's new Montessori school, most parents honestly don't know where to begin.

*"It all looked so nice when we visited the school last spring. But to tell the truth, most of what the school told us about how Montessori works sailed right past us! After all, it really is a bit much to take in all at once, all this talk about the planes of development, sensitive periods, and prepared environments. And just what is it that we're supposed to call Samantha's teachers? Are they 'directresses,' 'mentors,' 'facilitators,' or are they 'guides'? Gosh, I wonder if they ever just teach?"*

It all seems so terribly complicated, especially when people seem to have such different impressions of Montessori. Some rave about it, while others think that you must be crazy to put your child in a Montessori school. Some people are firmly convinced that Montessori is too rigid and that it robs children of their creativity; others object that it is completely unstructured and without any academic standards.

*"Isn't Montessori the sort of school where they allow the children to do whatever they want? Perhaps it will work for your Sally, but I'm afraid that if my Danny were left to his own devices, he'd never choose to do a lick of work! He needs order, structure, a small-class size, and discipline!"*

For more than thirty years, I've tried to help parents sort all this out so they could reassure themselves that Montessori isn't going to leave their children academically handicapped and unable to make it in the real world. It's still not easy to put Montessori into context when the rest of the world seems so completely committed to a very different approach to raising children.

Montessori 101 was written to help parents begin to discover and reconfirm what Montessori children know — Montessori works!

— Tim Seldin, President  
The Montessori Foundation



*Photos in this article were taken at Montessori School of Anderson in Anderson, SC*

### The Many Faces of Montessori in North America

There are perhaps 4,000 Montessori schools in the United States and Canada and thousands more around the world. Montessori schools are found throughout Western Europe, Central and South America, Australia, New Zealand, and much of Asia.

The movement is widespread in countries such as the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Ireland, India, Sri Lanka, Korea, and Japan, and it is beginning to mushroom in Eastern Europe, the republics of the former Soviet Union, and China.

There is tremendous diversity within the community of Montessori schools. Despite the impression that all Montessori schools are the same, perhaps a franchise like McDonald's, no two Montessori schools are the same.

Across the United States and Canada, we can find Montessori schools in almost every community. They are found in church basements, converted barns, shopping centers, former public schools, and on expansive campuses with enrollments of hundreds of children and the air of stature and stability.

We can find them in suburban and inner city public-school systems. Montessori schools are often found in charming homes — the outcome of the individual vision of the owner/director. Many are found in affluent communities, but just as many serve working-class neighborhoods and the poor. We can find Montessori in Head Start programs, child-care centers in our inner cities, migrant workers' camps, and on Indian reservations.

Some Montessori schools pride themselves on remaining faithful to what they see as Dr. Maria Montessori's original vision, while others appreciate flexibility and pragmatic adaptation. Each school reflects its own unique blend of facilities, programs, personality, and interpretation of Dr. Montessori's vision.

Most Montessori schools begin with three year olds and extend through the elementary grades. Every year more schools open middle-school programs at one end; infant-toddler programs at the other.

Montessori schools offer a wide range of programs. Many are focused on meeting the needs of the working family. Others describe themselves as college-preparatory programs. Public Montessori programs pride themselves on serving all children, while many independent schools work hard to find the perfect match of student, school, and family values. The Montessori Foundation and International Montessori Council celebrate the diversity to be found among Montessori schools. Just as each child is unique, so are the schools that we create unique communities of parents and teachers.

### What makes Montessori schools different?

Montessori schools are not completely different from other schools. Over the last century, Dr. Maria Montessori's ideas have had a profound and growing influence on education around the world. However, while individual elements of her program are finding their way into more classrooms every year, there is a cumulative impact that we see when schools fully implement the entire Montessori model which creates something quite distinct.

Here are a few key points to consider as you look at Montessori schools more closely:

Montessori schools begin with a deep respect for children as unique individuals. They work from a deep concern for their social and emotional development.

Montessori schools are warm and supportive communities of students, teachers, and parents. Children don't get lost in the crowd!

Montessori consciously teaches children to be kind and peaceful.

Montessori classrooms are bright and exciting environments for learning.

Montessori classes bring children together in multi-age groups, rather than classes comprised of just one grade level. Normally they span three age levels. Children stay with their teachers for three years. This allows teachers to develop close and long-term relationships with their pupils, allows them to know each child's learning style very well, and encourages a strong sense of community among the children. Every year more non-Montessori schools adopt this highly effective strategy.

Montessori classrooms are not run by the teachers alone. Students are taught to manage their own community and develop uncanny leadership skills and independence.

Montessori assumes that children are born intelligent, they simply learn in different ways and progress at their own pace. The Montessori approach to education is consciously designed to recognize and address different learning styles, helping students learn to study most effectively. Students progress as they master new skills, moving ahead as quickly as they are ready.

Montessori students rarely rely on texts and workbooks. Why? Because many of the skills and concepts that children learn are abstract, and texts simply don't bring them to life. Also, in the case of reading, many reading series fail to collect first rate and compelling stories and essays; instead, Montessori relies upon hands-on concrete learning materials and the library where children are introduced to the best in literature and reference materials.

Learning is not focused on rote drill and memorization. The goal is to develop students who really understand their schoolwork.

Montessori students learn through hands-on experience, investigation, and research. They become actively engaged in their studies, rather than passively waiting to be spoon fed.

Montessori challenges and sets high expectations for all students, not only those considered "gifted."

Students develop self-discipline and an internal sense of purpose and motivation. After graduation from Montessori, these values serve them well in high school, college, and in their lives as adults.

Montessori schools normally reflect a highly diverse student body, and their curriculum promotes mutual respect and a global perspective.

Students develop a love for the natural world. Natural science and outdoor education is an important element of our children's experience.

The Montessori curriculum is carefully structured and integrated to demonstrate the connections among the different subject areas. Every class teaches critical thinking, composition, and research. History lessons link architecture, the arts, science, and technology.

Students learn to care about others through community service.

Montessori teachers facilitate learning, coach students along, and come to know them as friends and mentors.

Students learn not to be afraid of making mistakes; they come to see them as natural steps in the learning process.

Montessori students learn to collaborate and work together in learning and on major projects. They strive for their personal best, rather than compete against one another for the highest grade in their class.





## A Day in the Life of a Montessori Student

It's dark at 7:05 on this mid-winter's morning when Jeanne Saunders pulls up to the drop-off circle at the Montessori school that her three children have attended since each was two years old.

Jeanne has made this trip so often over the years that the school feels like her second home. She works downtown and typically can't leave work until after five. Her husband teaches in the local public schools and gets off much earlier. He'll pick the children up from the after-school program by 4:30, but if he's late, he knows that they will be fine until he arrives. The school prides itself on being family-friendly, and working families appreciate its extended day and summer camp.

Teddy, Josh, and Jennifer definitely think of the school as their second family. Jennifer is one of those children who, after ten years in Montessori, speaks about her school with affection and conviction. Visitors often find her coming up without a moment's hesitation to greet them and offer a cup of coffee or campus tour. When people ask her if she likes it in Montessori, she will smile and say, "Sure, how could anyone not love it here. Your teachers are your best friends, the work is really interesting, and the other kids are like my brothers and sisters. It's a family. You feel really close to everyone."

Jennifer walks Teddy, age four, and Josh, who's seven, up to morning supervision. After dropping them off, she walks down the hill to the Upper School where she is a seventh grader. She joins two of her friends in the commons, sits, and talks quietly, waiting for her first class to start.

Teddy's morning supervision is in his normal classroom. After hanging up his coat, he walks over to Judy, the staff member in charge of his room until school officially begins at 8:30. He asks if there is anything ready to eat. Judy suggests that he help himself. He scoops out a bowl of cereal from a small bin and adds milk. He takes his morning snack over to a table and eats. Children and their parents drift into the room every so often, and gradually the number of children in the early morning program grows to about 15.

After eating his breakfast, Teddy meanders over to the easel and begins to paint with Teresa, a little girl just three, who has only joined the class over the last few weeks. They paint quietly, talking back and forth about nothing in particular. Eventually, Teddy tires of painting and cleans up. He is tempted for a moment just to walk away and leave the easel

messy, but he carefully cleans up and puts his materials away as he has learned from more than two years in Montessori.

At 8:30, his two teachers arrive, along with several more children. Others follow over the next few minutes until all 30 students and two teachers quietly move about the room.

Montessori children work with hands-on learning materials that make abstract concepts clear and concrete. They allow young students to develop a clear inner image of concepts in mathematics, such as how big is a thousand, what we mean when we refer to the 'hundreds' column, and what is taking place when we divide one number by another. This approach makes sense to children.

Through this foundation of concrete experiential learning, operations in mathematics, such as addition, become clear and concrete, allowing the child to internalize a clear picture of how the process works.

Teddy and another child have begun to work together to construct and solve a mathematical problem. Using sets of number cards, each decides how many units, tens, hundreds, and thousands will be in his addend. The cards showing the units 1 to 9 are printed in green; the cards showing the numbers from 10 to 90 are printed in blue; the hundreds from 100 to 900 are printed with red ink; and the cards showing the numbers 1000 to 9000 are printed in green again, because they represent units of thousands.

As Teddy and his friend construct their numbers, they decide how many units they want, find the card showing that quantity, and place it at the upper right-hand corner of their work space. Next they go to the bank, a central collection of golden bead material, and gather the number of unit beads that corresponds with the number card selected. This process is repeated with the tens, hundreds, and thousands.

The two addends are combined in the process we call addition. Beginning with the units, the children count the combined quantities to determine the result of adding the two together. If the result is nine or less, they simply find the large number card that represents the answer. If the addition has resulted in a quantity of ten beads or more, the children stop at the count of ten and carry these unit beads to the bank to exchange them for a ten bar: ten units equals one unit of ten. This process is repeated with the tens, hundreds, and thousands.

It's about 10 o'clock now, and Teddy is a bit hungry. He wanders over to the snack table and prepares himself several pieces of celery stuffed with peanut butter. He pours himself a cup of apple juice, using a little pitcher that is just right for his small hands. When he is finished, Teddy wipes his placemat.

Clearing up his snack has put Teddy in the mood to really clean something, and he selects table washing. He gathers the bucket, little pitcher, sponge, scrub brush, towel, and soap needed and proceeds slowly and methodically to scrub

a small table. As he works, he's absorbed in the patterns that his brush and sponge make in the soap suds on the table's surface. Teddy returns everything to its storage place. When he is finished, the table is more or less clean and dry. A four year old washes a table for the sheer pleasure of the process; that it leads to a cleaner surface is incidental. What Teddy is learning above all else is an inner sense of order, a greater sense of independence, and a higher ability to concentrate and follow a complex sequence of steps.

Teddy moves freely around the class, selecting activities that capture his interest. In a very real sense, Teddy and his classmates are responsible for the care of this child-sized environment. When they are hungry, they prepare their own snack and drink.

They go to the bathroom without assistance. When something spills, they help each other carefully clean things up. We find children cutting raw fruit and vegetables, sweeping, dusting, washing windows. They set tables, tie their own shoes, polish silver, and

steadily grow in their self-confidence and independence. Noticing that the plants needs watering, Teddy carries

the watering can from plant to plant, barely spilling a drop.

Now it's 11:00, and one of his teachers, Ann, comes over and asks him how the morning has been going. They engage in conversation about his latest enthusiasms, which leads Ann to suggest another reading lesson.

She and Teddy sit down at a small rug with several wooden tablets on which the shapes of letters are traced in sandpaper. Ann selects a card and slowly traces out the letter *d*, carefully pronouncing the letter's phonetic sound: *duh, duh, duh*. Teddy traces the letter with his tiny hand and repeats the sound made by his teacher.

Teddy doesn't know this as the letter *d*, for the next year or so, he will only call it by its phonetic sound: *duh*. This way, he never needs to learn the familiar process of converting from the letter name, *d*, to the sound it makes, *duh*. Continuing on with two or three additional letters, Ann slowly helps Teddy build up a collection of letters which he knows by their phonetic sounds.

Ann leads Teddy through a three-step process. "Teddy, this is *duh*. Can you say *duh*? Terrific! Now, this is a *buh* (the letter *b*). Teddy, can you show me the *duh*? Can you give me the *buh*? Fine. Okay, what is this (holding up one of the sandpaper letters just introduced)?"

Teddy responds, and the process continues for another few minutes. The entire lesson is fairly brief; perhaps 15 minutes or so. Before long, Teddy will begin to put sounds together to form simple three-letter words.

Teddy's day continues just like the morning began. He eats his lunch with the class at 11:45, after which he goes outside with his friends to play in the snow. After lunch, the Spanish teacher comes into the room and begins to work with small groups of students. Eventually, she taps Teddy on the shoulder and asks him if he would like to join her for a lesson. He smiles, but graciously declines. He is too engaged in the project that he's chosen.

In the afternoon he does some more art, listens to selections from a recording of the *Nutcracker* ballet, works on his shape names with the geometry cabinet, and completes a puzzle map of the United States.

When the day is over, Teddy has probably completed 20 to 30 different activities, most representing curriculum content quite advanced for someone who, after all, just turned four two months ago. But when his dad picks him up at 4:50, his response to the usual question of "What did you do in school today" is no different from many children, "Oh, I don't know. I guess I did a lot of stuff!"



## Dr. Maria Montessori: A Historical Perspective

*"To aid life, leaving it free, however, to unfold itself, that is the basic task of the educator.*

*Ours was a house for children, rather than a real school. We had prepared a place for children, where a diffused culture could be assimilated, without any need for direct instruction... Yet these children learned to read and write before they were five, and no one had given them any lessons. At that time it seemed miraculous that children of four and a half should be able to write, and that they should have learned without the feeling of having been taught.*

*We puzzled over it for a long time. Only after repeated experiments did we conclude with certainty that all children are endowed with this capacity to 'absorb' culture. If this be true - we then argued - if culture can be acquired without effort, let us provide the children with other elements of culture. And then we saw them 'absorb' far more than reading and writing: botany, zoology, mathematics, geography, and all with the same ease, spontaneously and without getting tired.*

*And so we discovered that education is not something which the teacher does, but that it is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being. It is not acquired by listening to words, but in virtue of experiences in which the child acts on his environment. The teacher's task is not to talk, but to prepare and arrange a series of motives for cultural activity in a special environment made for the child.*

*My experiments, conducted in many different countries, have now been going on for forty years (Ed. note: now more than ninety years), and as the children grew up, parents kept asking me to extend my methods to the later ages. We then found that individual activity is the one factor that stimulates and produces development, and that this is not more true for the little ones of preschool age than it is for the junior, middle, and upper school children.*

— Dr. Maria Montessori  
The Absorbent Mind

**M**aria Montessori is as controversial a figure in education today as she was a half century ago. Alternately heralded as the century's leading advocate for early childhood education or dismissed as outdated and irrelevant, her research and the studies that she inspired helped change the course of education.

Those who studied under her and went on to make their own contributions to education and child psychology include Anna Freud, Jean Piaget, Alfred Adler, and Erik Erikson. Many elements of modern education have been adapted from Montessori's theories. She is credited with the development of the open classroom, individualized education, manipulative learning materials, teaching toys, and programmed instruction. In the last 35 years, educators in Europe and North America have begun to recognize the consistency between the Montessori approach with what we have learned from research into child development.

Maria Montessori was an individual ahead of her time. She was born in 1870 in Ancona, Italy, to an educated but not affluent middle-class family. She grew up in a country considered most conservative in its attitude toward women, yet even against the considerable opposition of her father and teachers, Montessori pursued a scientific education and was the first woman to become a physician in Italy.

As a practicing physician associated with the University of Rome, she was a scientist, not a teacher. It is ironic that she became famous for her contributions in a field that she had rejected as the traditional refuge for women at a time when few professions were open to them other than homemaking or the convent. The Montessori method evolved almost by accident from a small experiment that Dr. Montessori carried out on the side. Her genius stems not from her teaching ability, but from her recognition of the importance of what she stumbled upon.

As a physician, Dr. Montessori specialized in pediatrics and psychiatry. She taught at the medical school of the University of Rome, and through its free clinics, she came into frequent contact with the children of the working class and poor. These experiences convinced her that intelligence is not rare and that most newborns come into the world with a human potential that will be barely revealed.

Her work reinforced her humanistic ideals, and she made time in her busy

schedule to support various social-reform movements. Early in her career, she began to accept speaking engagements throughout Europe on behalf of the women's movement, peace efforts, and child labor-law reform. Montessori became well known and highly regarded throughout Europe, which undoubtedly contributed to the publicity that surrounded her schools.

In 1901, Montessori was appointed Director of the new Orthophrenic School attached to the University of Rome, formerly used as the asylum for the "deficient and insane" children of the city, most of whom were probably retarded or autistic. She initiated reform in a system that formerly had served merely to confine mentally handicapped youngsters in empty rooms. Recognizing her patients' need for stimulation, purposeful activity, and self-esteem, Montessori insisted that the staff speak to the inmates with the highest respect. She set up a program to teach her young charges how to care for themselves and their environment.

## Maria Montessori is as controversial a figure in education today as she was a half century ago.

At the same time, she began a meticulous study of all research previously done on the education of the mentally handicapped. Her studies led Montessori to the work of two almost forgotten French physicians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Jean Itard and Edouard Seguin. Itard is most famous for his work with the "Wild Boy of Aveyron," a youth who had been found wandering naked in the forest, having spent ten years living alone. The boy could not speak and lacked almost all of the skills of everyday life. Here apparently was a "natural man," a human being who had developed without the benefit of culture and socialization with his own kind. Itard hoped from this study to shed some light on the age-old debate about what proportion of human intelligence and personality is hereditary and what proportion stems from learned behavior.

Itard's experiment was a limited success, for he found the "wild boy" uncooperative and unwilling or unable to learn most things. This led Itard to pos-

tulate the existence of developmental periods in normal human growth. During these "sensitive periods," a child must experience stimulation or grow up forever lacking the adult skills and intellectual concepts that he missed at the stage when they can be readily learned! Although Itard's efforts to teach the "wild boy" were barely successful, he followed a methodical approach in designing the process, arguing that all education would benefit from the use of careful observation and experimentation. This idea had tremendous appeal to the scientifically trained Montessori and later became the cornerstone of her method. From Edouard Seguin, Montessori drew further confirmation of Itard's work, along with a far more specific and organized system for applying it to the everyday education of the handicapped. Today Seguin is recognized as the father of our modern techniques of special education.

From these two predecessors, Montessori took the idea of a scientific approach to education, based on observation and experimentation. She belongs to the "child study" school of thought, and she pursued

her work with the careful training and objectivity of the biologist studying the natural behavior of an animal in the forest. She studied her retarded youngsters, listening and carefully noting everything that they did and said.

Slowly she began to get a sense of who they really were and what

methods worked best. Her success was given widespread notice when, two years after she began, many of Montessori's "deficient" adolescents were able to pass the standard sixth grade tests of the Italian public schools. Acclaimed for this "miracle," Montessori responded by suggesting that her results proved only that public schools should be able to get dramatically better results with normal children.

Unfortunately, the Italian Ministry of Education did not welcome this idea, and she was denied access to school-aged children. Frustrated in her efforts to carry the experiment on with public-school students, in 1907 Montessori jumped at the chance to coordinate a day-care center for working-class children who were too young to attend public school.

This first Casa dei Bambini or "Children's House" was located in the worst slum district of Rome, and the conditions Montessori faced were appalling. Her first class consisted of fifty children from two through five years of age, taught by one untrained caregiver.

The children remained at the center from dawn to dusk while their parents

worked. They had to be fed two meals a day, bathed regularly, and given a program of medical care. The children themselves were typical of extreme inner-city poverty conditions. They entered the Children's House on the first day crying and pushing, exhibiting generally aggressive and impatient behavior. Montessori, not knowing whether her experiment would work under such conditions, began by teaching the older children how to help with the everyday tasks that needed to be done. She also introduced the manipulative perceptual puzzles that she had used with the retarded.

The results surprised her, for unlike her retarded children who had to be prodded to use the materials, these little ones were drawn to the work she introduced. Children who had wandered aimlessly the week before began to settle down to long periods of constructive activity. They were fascinated with the puzzles and perceptual training devices. But, to Montessori's amazement, the young children took the greatest delight in learning practical everyday living skills reinforcing their independence.

Each day they begged her to show them more, even applauding with delight when Montessori taught them the correct use of a handkerchief. Soon the older children were taking care of the school, assisting their teacher with the preparation and serving of meals and the maintenance of a spotless environment. Their behavior as a group changed dramatically, from street urchins running wild to models of grace and courtesy. It was little wonder that the press found such a human interest story appealing and promptly broadcast it to the world.

Montessori education is sometimes criticized for being too structured and academically demanding of young children. Montessori would have laughed at this suggestion. She often said, "I studied my children, and they taught me how to teach them." Montessori made a practice of paying close attention to their spontaneous behavior, arguing that only in this way could a teacher know how to teach. Traditionally, schools pay little attention to children as individuals, other than to demand that they adapt to our standards.

Montessori argued that the educator's job is to serve the child; determining what is needed to make the greatest progress. To her, a child who fails in school should not be blamed, any more than a doctor should blame a patient who does not get well fast enough. It is the job of the physician to help us find the way to cure ourselves and the educator's job to facilitate the natural process of learning.

Montessori's children exploded into academics. "Too young to go to public school, they begged to be taught how to read and write. They learned to do so quickly and enthusiastically, using special manipulative materials Montessori designed for maximum appeal and effectiveness. The children were fascinated by numbers; to meet this interest, the mathematically inclined Montessori developed a series of concrete math learning materials that has never been surpassed. Soon her four and five year olds were performing four-digit addition and subtraction operations and in many cases pushing on even farther. Their interests blossomed in other areas as well, compelling an overworked physician to spend night after night designing new materials to keep pace with the children in geometry, geography, history, and natural science.

The final proof of the children's interest came shortly after her first school became famous, when a group of well intentioned women gave them a marvelous collection of lovely and expensive toys. The new gifts held the children's attention for a few days, but they soon returned to the more interesting learning materials. To Montessori's surprise, children who had experienced both, preferred work over play most of the time. If she were here today, Montessori would probably add: Children read and do advanced mathematics in Montessori schools not because we push them, but because this is what they do when given the correct setting and opportunity. To deny them the right to learn because we, as adults, think that they shouldn't is illogical and typical of the way schools have been run before.

Montessori evolved her method through trial and error, making educated guesses about the underlying meaning of the children's actions. She was quick to pick up on their cues, and constantly experimented with the class.

For example, Montessori tells of the morning when the teacher arrived late to find that the children had crawled through a window and gone right to work. At the beginning, the learning materials, having cost so much to make, were locked away in a tall cabinet. Only the teacher had a key and would open it and hand the materials to the children upon request. In this instance, the teacher had neglected to lock the cabinet the night before. Finding it open, the children had selected one material apiece and were working quietly. As Montessori arrived, the teacher was scolding the children for taking them out without permission. She recognized

that the children's behavior showed that they were capable of selecting their own work and removed the cabinet and replaced it with low, open shelves on which the activities were always available to the children. Today this may sound like a minor change, but it contradicted all educational practice and theory of that period.

One discovery followed another, giving Montessori an increasingly clear view of the inner mind of the child. She found that little children were capable of long periods of quiet concentration, even though they rarely showed signs of it in everyday settings. Although they were often careless and sloppy, they respond positively to an atmosphere of calm and order. Montessori noticed that the logical extension of the young child's love for a consistent and often-repeated routine is an environment in which everything has a place.

Her children took tremendous delight in carefully carrying their work to and from the shelves, taking great pains not to bump into anything or spill the smallest piece. They walked carefully through the rooms, instead of running wildly as they did on the streets. Montessori discovered that the environment itself was all important in obtaining the results that she had observed. Not wanting to use school desks, she had carpenters build child-sized tables and chairs. She was the first to do so, recognizing the frustration that a little child experiences in an adult-sized world.

Eventually she learned to design entire schools around the size of the children. She had miniature pitchers and bowls prepared and found knives that fit a child's tiny hand. The tables were light-weight, allowing two children to move them alone. The children learned to control their movements, disliking the way the calm was disturbed when they knocked into things. Montessori studied the traffic pattern of the rooms as well, arranging the furnishings and the activity area to minimize congestion and tripping. The children loved to sit on the floor, so she bought little rugs to define their work areas, and the children quickly learned to walk around them.

Through the years, Montessori schools carried this environmental engineering throughout the entire building and outside environment, designing child-sized toilets and low sinks, windows low to the ground, low shelves, and miniature hand and garden tools of all sorts. Some of these ideas were eventually adapted by the larger educational community, particularly at the nursery and kindergarten levels. Many of the puzzles and educational devices now in use at the preschool and elementary levels are direct copies of Montessori's original ideas. However, there is far more of her work that never entered the mainstream,

and educators who are searching for new, more effective answers are finding the accumulated experience of the Montessori community to be of great interest.

Maria Montessori's first "Children's House" received overnight attention, and thousands of visitors came away amazed and enthusiastic. Worldwide interest surged as she duplicated her first school in other settings with the same results. Montessori captured the interest and imagination of national leaders and scientists, mothers and teachers, labor leaders and factory owners. As an internationally respected scientist, Montessori had a rare credibility in a field where many others had promoted opinions, philosophies, and models that have not been readily duplicated. The Montessori method offered a systematic approach that translated very well to new settings. In the first 35 years of this century, the Montessori method seemed to offer something for everyone. Conservatives appreciated the calm, responsible behavior of the little

children, along with their love for work. Liberals applauded the freedom and spontaneity. Many political leaders saw it as a practical way to reform the outmoded school systems of Europe and North America, as well as an approach that they hoped would lead to a more productive and law-abiding populace. Scientists of all disciplines heralded its imperial foundation, along with the accelerated achievement of the little children. Montessori rode a wave of enthusiastic support that should have changed the face of education far more dramatically than it has.

Montessori's prime productive period lasted from the opening of the first Children's House in 1907 until the 1930s. During this time, she continued her study of children, and developed a vastly expanded curriculum and methodology for the elementary level as well. Montessori schools were set up throughout Europe and North America, and Dr. Montessori gave up her medical practice

to devote all of her energies to advocating the rights and intellectual potential of all children. During her lifetime, Dr. Montessori was acknowledged as one of the world's leading educators. Education moved beyond Maria Montessori, adapting only those elements of her work that fit into existing theories and methods. Ironically, the Montessori approach cannot be implemented as a series of piecemeal reforms. It requires a complete restructuring of the school and the teacher's role. Only recently, as our understanding of child development has grown, have we re-discovered how clear and sensible was her insight. Today there is a growing consensus among psychologists and developmental educators that many of her ideas were decades ahead of their time. As the movement gains support and begins to spread into the American public school sector, one can readily say that Montessori, begun almost 100 years ago, is a remarkably modern approach.

## Why Do They Call It a "Children's House?"

In her research, Dr. Montessori noted specific characteristics associated with the child's interests and abilities at each plane of development. She argued that a school carefully designed to meet the needs and interests of the child will work more effectively because it doesn't fight human nature. Montessori taught teachers how to "follow the child" through careful observation, allowing each student to reveal her strengths and weaknesses, interests and anxieties, and strategies that work best to facilitate the development of her human potential.

This focus on the "whole child" led Dr. Montessori to develop a very different sort of school from the traditional adult-centered classroom. To emphasize this difference, she named her first school the "Casa dei Bambini" or the "Children's House."

There is something profound in her choice of words, for the Montessori classroom is not the domain of the adults, but rather it is a carefully prepared environment designed to facilitate the development of the children's independence and sense of personal empowerment. This is the children's community. They move freely within it, selecting work that captures their interest. Even very small children assist with the care of the environment. When they are hungry, they prepare their own snacks. They go to the bathroom without assistance. When something spills, they help each other carefully clean up.

Four generations of parents have been amazed to see small children in Montessori classrooms cut raw fruits and vegetables, sweep and dust, carry pitchers of water and pour liquids with barely a drop spilled. The children normally go about their work so calmly and purposely that it is clear to even the casual observer that they are the 'masters of the house.'

Montessori's first "Children's House," opened in 1907, was made up of 60 inner-city children who largely came from dysfunctional families. In her book, *The Montessori Method*, Dr. Montessori describes the transformation that took place dur-

ing the first few months, as the children evolved into a "family." They prepared and served the daily meals, washed the pots and dishes, helped the younger children bathe and change their clothes, swept, cleaned, and worked in the garden. These very young children developed a sense of maturity and connectedness that helped them realize a much higher level of their potential as human beings.

While times have changed, the need to feel connected is still as strong as ever. In fact, for today's children it is probably even more important. Montessori gives children the message that they belong — that their school is like a second family. Many Montessori students describe their experience in words quite similar to these written by Frances Merenda, a 1990 graduate of the Barrie School in Silver Spring, Maryland.

*"I started in Montessori at age 2. I'm a product of the entire system. I did well in the lower grades and upper school. But still, many people wondered if I had been prepared for college, whether I could "make it" in a "real school." The skepticism of so many acquaintances was so disconcerting that I never bothered to step back and see what 15 years of trust, respect, teaching, and learning had done for me. When I went off to college at Northwestern University, I left my support system and community behind and entered a world that was much colder and uncaring. At first, I deeply missed that sense of belonging. I didn't realize that Barrie had not only given me a second family, but had also taught me how to build new friendships, support systems, and community wherever I go. Now, at Northwestern, I have used my years of experience in community building to cultivate secure relationships with people I have come to know. Barrie did more for me than just prepare me academically for college, it prepared me for anything to which I chose to apply myself. I feel prepared for life and I wouldn't want it any other way."*

# The Prepared Environment

Montessori classrooms tend to fascinate children and their parents. They are normally bright, warm, and inviting, filled with plants, animals, art, music, and books. There are interest centers filled with intriguing learning materials, mathematical models, maps, charts, fossils, historical artifacts, computers, scientific apparatus, perhaps a small natural-science museum, and animals that the children are raising.

Montessori classrooms are commonly referred to as a prepared environment. This name reflects the care and attention that is given to creating a learning environment that will reinforce the children's independence and intellectual development.

You would not expect to find rows of desks in a Montessori classroom. The rooms are set up to facilitate student discussion and stimulate collaborative learning. One glance and it is clear that children feel comfortable and safe.

The Montessori classroom is organized into several curriculum areas, usu-



ally including: language arts (reading, literature, grammar, creative writing, spelling, and handwriting), mathematics and geometry, everyday living skills, sensory awareness exercises and puzzles, geography, history, science, art, music, and movement. Most rooms will include a classroom library. Each area is made up of one or more shelf units, cabinets, and display tables with a wide variety of materials on open display, ready for use as the children select them.

Students are typically found scattered around the classroom, working alone or with one or two others. They tend to become so involved in their work that visitors are immediately struck by the peaceful atmosphere.

It may take a moment to spot the teachers within the environment. They will normally be found working with one or two children at a time, advising, presenting a new lesson, or quietly observing the class at work.

## Why do Montessori schools group children together in such large multi-age classes?



A typical Montessori class is made up of 25 to 35 children, more or less evenly divided between boys and girls, covering a three-year age span. This practice has been a hallmark of the Montessori approach for almost 100 years. Classes are normally taught by a certified Montessori educator teaching with one or more assistants or by two Montessori teachers.

Classes tend to be stable communities, with only the oldest third moving on to the next level each year. With two-thirds of the children returning each fall, Montessori encourages a very different level of relationship between children

and their peers, as well as between children and their teachers.

The levels usually found in a Montessori school correspond to the developmental stages of childhood: Infant (birth through 18 months); Toddler (18 months to age 3); Early Childhood (age 3 to 6); Lower Elementary (age 6 to 8); Upper Elementary (age 9 to 11); Middle School (age 12 to 14); and Secondary (age 15 to 18). At each level, the program and curriculum are logical and highly consistent extensions of what has come before.

Many pre-schools are proud of their very small group sizes, and parents often wonder why Montessori classes are so much larger.

Schools that place children together into small groups assume that the teacher is the source of instruction; a very limited resource even in a small class. These schools reason that as the number of children decreases, the time that teachers have to spend with each child increases. Ideally, we would have a one-on-one tutorial situation.

But the best 'teacher' of a three year old is often another child who is just a little bit older and has mastered a skill. This process is good for both the tutor and the younger child. In the Montessori approach, the teacher is not the primary focus.

Montessori encourages children to learn from each other. By having enough children in each age group, all students will find others at, above, and below their present level of development. This also makes Montessori schools economically more viable, allowing schools to attract teachers with far greater training and experience.

Some parents worry that by having younger children in the same class as older ones, one age group or the other will be shortchanged. They fear that the younger children will absorb the teachers' time and attention, or that the importance of covering the kindergarten curriculum for the five year olds will prevent them from giving the three and four year olds the emotional support



and stimulation that they need. My experience has convinced me that both concerns are misguided and I can't imagine teaching in any other way.

There are several distinct advantages to the Montessori classroom model.

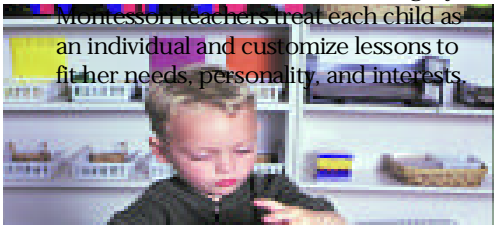
In a well run and established Montessori class children are typically far more independent and self-disciplined. One factor that makes this possible is that each teacher's class of students doesn't leave at the end of the school year.

Children normally enter at age three and stay for a full three-year cycle, when they move on to the first year of the Montessori 6-9 year-old class. With two-thirds of the students returning each September, the classroom culture is surprisingly stable.

Each child is a unique individual; no two are the same. Even with the smallest teacher-pupil ratios, each will have her own interests, abilities, strengths and weaknesses. Each child learns at her own pace and will be ready for any given lesson in her own time, not on the teacher's schedule of lessons.

Each child has her own learning style.

Montessori teachers treat each child as an individual and customize lessons to fit her needs, personality, and interests.



## Those Mysterious Montessori Materials: The Road from Concrete to Abstract Thinking

All children and most adults learn best through direct experience and the process of investigation and discovery. Most students do not retain or truly grasp much of what they "learn" through memorization.

Asking a child to sit back and watch a teacher perform a process or experiment is like asking a one-year-old not to put everything into his mouth. Children

Since Montessori allows children to progress through the curriculum at their own pace, there is no academic reason to group children according to one grade level.

In a mixed-class, children can always find peers who are working at their current level. Working in one class for two or three years allows students to develop a strong sense of community with their classmates and teachers. The age range also allows the especially gifted child the stimulation of intellectual peers, without requiring that she skip a grade and feel emotionally out of place.

To accommodate the needs of individual learners, Montessori classrooms have to include curriculum to cover the entire span of interests and abilities up through the oldest and most accelerated students in the class. This creates a highly enriched learning environment.

In multi-level classrooms, younger children are constantly stimulated by the interesting work in which the older ones are engaged.

At the same time, in multi-level classrooms, older students serve as tutors and role models for the younger ones, which helps them in their own mastery (we learn things best of all when we teach them to someone else) and leaves them beaming with pride.

need to manipulate and explore everything that catches their interest. It is ironic that most schools still teach primarily through lecture, textbooks, and workbooks, with students still spending their days at a desk praying for the bell to ring.

Dr. Montessori recognized that concrete learning apparatus makes learning much more rewarding. The Montessori learning materials are not the method itself; they are simply tools that we use to stimulate the child into logical thought and discovery. The Montessori materials are provocative and simple, each carefully designed to appeal to children at a given level of development.

An important concept is that for each age level of the Montessori curriculum there is an extensive collection of carefully defined educational materials that are the equivalent of the chapters in a traditional

*"One of my most enduring memories of being a Montessori child is the sense of family I had with my classmates and teacher. Unlike traditional schools, where I would have moved into a new class with a new teacher every year, I had a wonderful continuity. When I moved up from the 3 to 6 class to elementary, I moved up with a group of students with whom I had been in class for three years already. We stayed together for the next six years. Today, nearly twenty years later, I can tell you where my classmates are and what they are doing. Better still, my teacher, Mrs. Fleck and I are still very close. In fact, her grandson was in my very first class when I became a Montessori teacher!"*

*When I left Montessori, I never found another experience like that in the private and public schools I attended. There, I felt that I was just a name on the roll rather than an important individual. In my Montessori class, we were each separate and special people, and together we made up a very special family. This is an experience that will remain with me always."*

— Dorothy Hamilton Porcher  
Montessori Child, Montessori Teacher

textbook. Each material isolates and teaches one concept or skill at a time. In developing the materials, Dr. Montessori carefully analyzed the skills and concepts involved in each subject and noted the sequence in which children most easily master them. She then studied how children seemed to be able to most easily grasp abstract concepts and designed each element to bring the abstract into a clear and concrete form.



The materials are displayed on low, open shelves that are easily accessible to even the youngest children. They are arranged to provide maximum eye appeal without clutter. Each has a specific place on the shelves, arranged from the upper left-hand corner in sequence to the lower right, following their sequence in the curriculum. The materials are arranged in sequence from the most simple to the most complex and from the most concrete to those that are most abstract. Because of the order with which they are arranged in the environment, children can find precisely what they need whenever they wish.

Each of the Montessori materials is designed to allow children to work independently with only the lightest level of introduction and ongoing support from the teachers. This is made possible by a

built-in design element, the "Control of Error," which allows students to determine for themselves if they have done each exercise correctly.

The materials can be used repeatedly at different developmental levels. Each material has multiple levels of challenge. Lessons are brief introductions, after which the children repeat the exercise over many days, weeks or months until they attain mastery. Interest leads them to explore variations and extensions inherent within the design of the materials at many levels over the years.

For example, the Trinomial Cube, which presents a complex and challenging three-dimensional puzzle to the five year old, is used to introduce the elementary child to the algebraic concept of the exponential powers of polynomials.



## A Typical Day

**I**n Montessori, the school day is not divided into fixed time periods for each subject. Teachers call students together as they are ready, for lessons individually or in small groups.

A typical day's work is divided into "fundamentals" that have been assigned by the faculty and self-initiated projects and research selected by the student. Students work to complete their assignments at their own pace — typically with care and enthusiasm. Teachers closely monitor their students' progress, keeping the level of challenge high. Teacher feedback to students and par-

ents helps students learn how to pace themselves and take a great deal of personal responsibility for their studies, both of which are essential for later success in college and in life.

We encourage students to work together collaboratively, and many assignments can only be accomplished through teamwork.

Students constantly share their interests and discoveries with each other. The youngest experience the daily stimulation of their older friends and are naturally spurred on to be able to "do what the big kids can do."

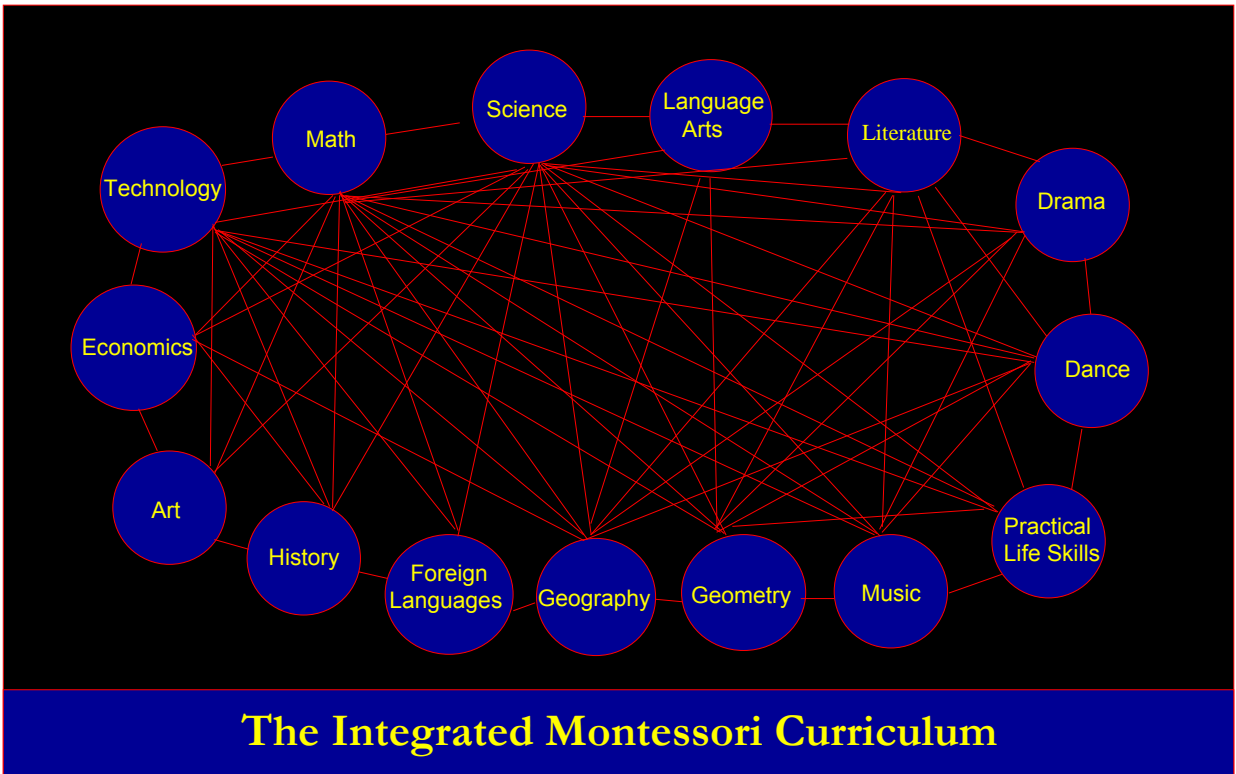
## The Montessori Curriculum

**M**ontessori offers a rigorous and innovative academic program. The curriculum is organized into a spiral of integrated studies, rather than a traditional model in which the curriculum is compartmentalized into separate subjects, with given topics considered only once at a specific grade level. In the early years, lessons are introduced simply and concretely and are reintroduced several times over succeeding years at increasing degrees of abstraction and complexity.

The course of study uses an integrated thematic approach that ties the separate disciplines of the curriculum together into studies of the physical universe, the world of nature, and the human experience.

Literature, the arts, history, social issues, political science, economics, science and the study of technology all complement one another. This integrated approach is one of Montessori's great strengths.

As an example, when students study ancient Greece, they also study Greek mythology, read stories and novels set in the Grecian world, create authentic costumes, build models of Greek buildings, and explore Grecian art. They study the climate, ecosystems, flora, fauna, and natural resources of the world of the ancient Greeks. And they prepare plays, celebrate festivals, and restage their own version of historical events.



## The Spiral of the Montessori Curriculum

- Everything is interrelated. One lesson leads to many others.
- The child moves from the concrete toward abstract understanding.
- We always work from the big picture to increasing detail.
- Every three years major themes in the curriculum are studied again in greater depth and abstraction.

Very Abstract Work

Very Concrete Work



**Age 9-12**

**Age 6-9**

**Age 3-6**

Very Complex Studies

Very Simple Studies

Very Complex Studies

# How Can Montessori Teachers Meet the Needs of So Many Different Children?



**M**ontessori teachers do more than present curriculum. The secret of any great teacher is helping learners get to the point that their minds and hearts are open and they are ready to learn, where the motivation is not focused on getting good grades but, instead, involves a basic love of learning. As parents know their own children's learning styles and temperaments, teachers, too, develop this sense of each child's uniqueness by developing a relationship over a period of years with the child and her parents.

Dr. Montessori believed that teachers should focus on the child as a person, not on the daily lesson plan. Montessori nurtures and inspires the human potential, leading children to ask questions, think for themselves, explore, investigate, and discover. Our ultimate objective is to help them to learn how to learn independently, retaining the curiosity, creativity, and intelligence with which they were born. Montessori teachers don't simply present lessons; they are facilitators, mentors, coaches, and guides.

Traditional teachers tell us that they "teach students the basic facts and skills that they will need to succeed in the world." Studies show that in many classrooms, as much as 40 percent of the day may be spent on discipline and classroom management. Montessori educators play a very different role.

Wanting to underscore the very different role played by adults in her schools, Dr. Montessori used the title "directress" instead of "teacher." In Italian, the word implies the role of the coordinator or administrator of an office or factory. Today, many Montessori schools prefer to call their teachers "guides."

Whatever they're called, Montessori teachers are rarely the center of attention, for this is not their class; it is the "Children's House."

Normally Montessori teachers will not spend much time working with the whole class at once. Their primary role is to prepare and maintain the physical, intellectual, and social/emotional environment within which the children will work. Certainly, a key aspect of this is the selection of intriguing and developmentally appropriate opportunities for learning to meet the needs and interests of each child in the class.

## Montessori Guides Have Five Basic Goals:

- to awaken the child's spirit and imagination;
- to encourage his normal desire for independence and high sense of self-esteem;
- to help him develop the kindness, courtesy, and self-discipline that will allow him to become a full member of society;
- to help children learn how to observe, question, and explore ideas independently;
- and, having created a spirit of joyful learning, to help the child to master the skills and knowledge of their society.

Montessori guides rarely present a lesson to more than a handful of children at one time, and they limit lessons to brief, efficient presentations. The goal is to give the children just enough to cap-

ture their attention and spark their interest, intriguing them so that they will come back on their own to work with the materials.

Montessori guides closely monitor their students' progress, keeping the level of challenge high. Because they normally work with each child for two or three years, guides get to know their students' strengths and weaknesses, interests, and anxieties extremely well. Montessori guides often use the children's interests to enrich the curriculum and provide alternate avenues for accomplishment and success.

## Montessori Teaches Children to Think and Discover for Themselves

Montessori schools are designed to help children discover and develop their talents and possibilities.

While learning the right answers may get a child through school, learning how to become a lifelong, independent learner will take her anywhere! Montessori teaches children to think, not simply to memorize, feed back, and forget.

Rather than present students with the right answers, Montessori educators tend to ask the right questions and challenge them to discover the answers for themselves. Older students are encouraged to do their own research, analyze what they have found, and come to their own conclusions.

## Respect and Independence: The Foundation of the Montessori Approach

Montessori does not believe that intelligence is fixed at birth, nor is the human potential anywhere near as limited, as it sometimes seems in traditional education. The validity of these beliefs has been confirmed by the research of Piaget, Gardner, Coleman, and many others.

We know that each child is a full and complete individual in her own right. Even when she is very small, she deserves to be treated with the full and sincere respect that we would extend to her parents. Respect breeds respect and creates an atmosphere within which learning is tremendously facilitated.

Success in school is directly tied to the degree to which children believe that they are capable and independent human beings. If they knew the words, even very young children would ask: *Help me learn to do it for myself!*

By allowing children to develop a meaningful degree of independence and self-discipline, Montessori sets a pattern for a lifetime of good work habits and a sense of responsibility. Students are taught to take pride in doing things well.

### Freedom of Movement and Independently Chosen Work

Children touch and manipulate everything in their environment. In a very real sense, the adult mind is hand made, because it is through their movement, exploration, and manipulation that children build up a storehouse of impressions about the physical world. Children learn by doing, and this requires movement and spontaneous investigation.

Montessori children are free to move about, working alone or with others at will. They may select any activity and work with it as long as they wish, so long as they do not disturb anyone, damage anything, and put it back where it belongs when they are finished.

Many exercises, especially at the early childhood level, are designed to draw their attention to the sensory properties of objects within the environment: size, shape, color, texture, weight, smell, sound, etc. Gradually children learn to pay attention, seeing more clearly small details in the things around them. They begin to observe and appreciate their environment, which is a key in helping them discover how to learn.

Freedom is a second critical issue as children begin their journey of discovery. Our goal is less to teach them facts and concepts, but rather to help them fall in love with the process of focusing their complete attention on something and solving its riddle with enthusiasm.

Work that has been assigned by adults rarely leads to such enthusiasm and interest as does work that children freely choose for themselves. The Montessori classroom is a learning laboratory in which children are allowed to explore, discover, and select their own work.

Children become comfortable and confident in their ability to master the environment, ask questions, puzzle out the answer, and learn without needing to be spoon fed by an adult.

## What is the most important thing that children get from Montessori?

**T**he Montessori approach is often described as an “education for life.” When we try to define what children take away from their years in Montessori, we need to expand our vision to include more than just the basic academic skills.

Normally, Americans think of a school as a place where one generation passes down basic skills and culture to the next. From this perspective, a school only exists to cover a curriculum, not to develop character and self-esteem.

But in all too many traditional and highly competitive schools, students memorize facts and concepts with little understanding, only to quickly forget them when exams are over. Studies show that many bright students are passive learners. They coast through school, earning high grades, but rarely pushing themselves to read material that hasn't been assigned, ask probing questions, challenge their teacher's cherished opinions, or think for themselves. They typically want teachers to hand them the “right answer.”

The problem isn't with today's children, but with today's schools. Children are as gifted, curious, and creative as they ever were, when they're working on something that captures their interest and which they have voluntarily chosen to explore.

Montessori schools work to develop culturally literate children and nurture their fragile sparks of curiosity, creativity, and intelligence. They have a very different set of priorities from traditional schools, and a very low regard for mindless memorization and superficial learning.

Montessori students may not memorize as many facts, but they do tend to become self-confident, independent thinkers who learn because they are interested in the world and enthusiastic about life, not simply to get a good grade.

Montessori believed that there was more to life than simply the pursuit of wealth and power. To her, finding one's place in the world, work that is meaningful and fulfilling, and developing the inner peace and depth of soul that allows us to love are the most important goals in life.

Helen Keller, inspired by Montessori, wrote:

*“I believe that every child has hidden away somewhere in his being noble capacities which may be quickened and developed if we go about it in the right way, but we shall never properly develop the higher nature of our little ones while we continue to fill their minds with the so-called basics. Mathematics will never make them loving, nor will accurate knowledge of the size and shape of the world help them to appreciate its beauties. Let us lead them during the first years to find their greatest pleasure in nature. Let them run in the fields, learn about animals, and observe real things. Children will educate themselves under the right conditions. They require guidance and sympathy far more than instruction.”*

Montessori schools give children the sense of belonging to a family and help them learn how to live with other human beings.

To reduce these principles to the most simplistic form, Dr. Montessori proposed that we could make peace by healing the wounds of the human heart and by producing a child who is independent, at peace with herself, and secure. Dr. Montessori envisioned her movement as essentially leading to a reconstruction of society.

Montessori schools are different, but it isn't just because of the materials that are used in the classrooms. Look beyond the pink towers and golden beads, and you'll discover that the classroom is a place where children really want to be — because it feels a lot like home.

## What Outcomes Can We Look for If We Give Our Child a Montessori Education?

There are eight primary aspects to what we normally look for in children who have grown up with a Montessori education:

**Academic Preparation:** Montessori prepares students both for higher education and for life. On an academic level, Montessori helps students attain skills that allow them to become independently functioning adults and life-long learners.

**Intrinsic Motivation:** Innate desire drives Montessori children to engage in activities for enjoyment and satisfaction.

**Internalized Ground Rules and the Ability to Work with External Authority:** Montessori students are normally comfortable with ground rules that set the boundaries for their interactions within the school community. Because these ground rules become internalized, Montessori students normally learn to behave appropriately whether or not teachers are present.

**Social Responsibility:** Montessori children tend to be quite sensitive to the rights and needs of others. They tend to make a positive contribution to their community.

**Autonomy:** Montessori students tend to become self-directed, composed and morally independent.

**Confidence and Competence:** Montessori students tend to become confident, competent, self-reflective, and, thereby, successful. They are generally not afraid of failure and learn from mistakes.

**Creativity and Originality of Thought:** Montessori students normally become confident in expressing their own ideas and creativity. They recognize the value of their own work, respect the creative process of others and are willing to share their ideas regardless of the risk of rejection. Montessori students tend to take great satisfaction in self-expression.

**Spiritual Awareness:** Montessori students are often exceptionally compassionate, empathetic, and sensitive to the natural world and the human condition.

- ▲ Attachment to reality
- ▲ Love of silence and of working alone
- ▲ Sublimation of the possessive instinct
- ▲ Obedience
- ▲ Independence and initiative
- ▲ Spontaneous self-discipline
- ▲ Joy
- ▲ The power to act from real choice and not just from idle curiosity

## Help ... Our Montessori school wants to "normalize" our child!!!

ormalization is a term that causes a great deal of confusion and some concern among many new Montessori parents. Normalization is a terrible choice of words. It suggests that we are going to help children who are not normal to become "normal." This is not what Dr. Montessori meant. Normalization is Montessori's name for the process that takes place in Montessori classrooms around the world, through which young children learn to focus their intelligence, concentrate their energies for long periods, and take tremendous satisfaction from their work.

One mother put it this way: "My child just does not act the same now that he's been in Montessori a while. He usually runs from one thing to another. In Montessori, he looks interested, sometimes puzzled, and often completely absorbed. I think of normalization as a kind of satisfaction that he seems to take from what he calls hard work."

In his book, *Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work*, E.M. Standing described the following characteristics of normalization in the child between the age of three and six:

- ▲ A love of order
- ▲ A love of work
- ▲ Profound spontaneous concentration

Kay Futrell in her classic little book, *The Normalized Child*, describes Dr. Montessori's amazement when the 60 frightened and ill-disciplined inner-city children of her first Children's House began to respond to the new environment.

*"What followed seemed incredible even to Dr. Montessori, for the deprived children blossomed under this freedom, and the possibility of doing work suited to their needs. They revealed to her not only their enormous capacity for intellectual accomplishment, but a strange character of sweetness and serenity. They displayed a truly uncorrupted spirit, scorning rewards and punishment, and finding their joy in the prodigious work which involved them. They came from these labors refreshed, as from a creative experience, and as they worked, they grew in inner discipline and peace.*

*The sight of these children who displayed the truly "normal" characteristics of childhood, was the force which motivated Montessori for the remainder of her life. This secret of childhood she pursued with all the vitality of the genius who found her 'raison d'être,' and from her tireless observations and efforts, evolved her perception of the child's psychic personality.*

*As she traveled from country to country, lecturing, training teachers, helping to establish school after school, this same phenomenon was observed wherever conditions promoting its growth were perfectly realized.*

*This normalized child is the image which Montessori teachers keep uppermost in their minds. This is what we are striving for, what we hope to achieve. However, this child will only appear only if we conscientiously prepare ourselves and our classrooms and if we can build on the proper preparation in the child's home."*

Normalization is another word for what we call *Montessori's Joyful Scholars*.

## Will My Child Be Able to Adjust to Traditional School after Montessori?



Montessori children by the end of age five are normally curious self-confident learners who look forward to going to school. They are normally engaged, and enthusiastic.

What teacher wouldn't give her left arm for a room filled with children like that? Well, truthfully over the years we've found some who consider these children "disruptive."

Disruptive? A polite, independent Montessori child, disruptive? Well, first off, let's remember that Montessori children are real human beings, and not all children who attend Montessori fit the idealized description. However, enough do that the generalization is often fairly accurate.

Montessori children, by age six, have spent three or four years in a school where they were treated with honesty and respect. While there were clear expectations and ground rules, within that framework their opinions and questions were taken quite seriously. Unfortunately, there are still some teachers and schools where children who ask questions are seen as challenging authority. You can imagine an independent Montessori child asking his new teacher, "But why do I have to ask each time I need to use the bathroom?" or "Why do I have to stop my work right now?"

We also have to remember that children are different. One child may be very sensitive or have somewhat special needs that might not be met well in a teacher-centered traditional classroom. Other children can go anywhere. In general, there is nothing inherent in Montessori that causes children to have a hard time if they are transferred to traditional schools. Some will be bored. Others may not understand why everyone in the class has to do the same thing at the same time. But most figure the new setting out fairly quickly, make new friends, and succeed within the definition of success understood in their new schools.

Naturally, there are trade-offs. The curriculum in Montessori schools is often much more enriched and accelerated than many found in other nursery and elementary schools in the United States. The values and attitudes of the children and teachers may also be quite different. Learning will often be focused more on adult assigned tasks done more by rote than with enthusiasm and understanding.

There is an old saying that if something is working, don't try to fix it. This leads many families to continue their children in Montessori at least through the sixth grade. As more Montessori high schools are opened in the United States, it is likely that this trend will continue.

But other families, for financial or other reasons, don't plan to have their children continue in Montessori. They often ask if there is any particular age level at which Montessori children tend to find the transition particularly difficult? There is no absolute answer, because of individual differences in children and the next schools that are available to them. But in general, we strongly recommend that parents plan to keep their children in Montessori at least through the end of kindergarten. Every year, in the winter issue of *Tomorrow's Child*, we prepare an article that considers the reasons behind this in greater detail.

Ideally, families should consider a commitment through at least elementary school, although, I can make a strong case that it is during the difficult middle-school years that children most need what Montessori has to offer.

## Does Montessori Prepare Children for the Real World?

In a word, **yes!** Here's why. Montessori helps children master the intellectual skills and knowledge that are basic to our culture and technology. As Montessori students master one level of academic skills they are able to apply themselves to increasingly challenging work across the academic disciplines. They tend to be reflective scholars. They write, speak, and think clearly and thoughtfully. They have learned how to learn by doing real things in the real world — experiential learning. They have learned how to integrate new concepts, analyze data, and think critically. Children who grow up in Montessori schools tend to be culturally literate, well educated, and highly successful in university and later life.

Montessori develops intrinsic motivation: the innate desire that drives students to engage in an activity for enjoyment and satisfaction.

Montessori cultivates creativity and originality: Montessori students are normally exceptionally creative in their thinking and confident in self-expression. They recognize the value of their own ideas, respect the creative process of others, and are willing to explore ideas together in search of truth or new solutions.

Montessori students tend to be extraordinarily self-confident and competent. They perceive themselves as successful people but are not afraid of making and learning from their mistakes.

Montessori students do not see themselves as "children," but as young members of the world. They tend to look up to teachers and other adults as mentors, friends, and guides, rather than as unwelcome taskmasters who place limits on their freedom.

Children who grow up in Montessori rarely feel the need to rebel and act out. Although even Montessori children will explore the limits and test their parents' resolve, they basically follow an inner creed of self-respect.

They accept limits and tend to follow common sense. Moreover, they have a tendency to reach out consciously to their friends and the larger community,





seeking ways to help others and make a positive contribution to the world.

Montessori children are not easily influenced by their peer group to do anything stupid. Like all of us, children who grow up in Montessori schools want to have friends and are affected by their interests and attitudes. On the other hand, in addition to having grown up in a culture that consistently teaches and follows universal values of kindness, honor, and respect, Montessori children tend to think for themselves.

Montessori students are often spiritually alive, exceptionally compassionate, empathetic, and sensitive to the natural world and the human condition.

Montessori children tend to be terrific kids. They have all the values and attitudes that pay off in college and the real world. They aren't afraid of hard work. They are eager to learn, think, and explore new ideas. They enjoy people and know how to develop strong friendships. They generally follow the rules and act responsibly. They live from a basic sense of self-respect and rarely get themselves into self-destructive situations. They tend to be self-disciplined and fairly well organized. They tend to meet deadlines, come to class prepared, and actually enjoy their classes. They are the average college professor's dream come true!

In the world after college, they tend to become lifelong learners, creative and energetic employees, and quite often entrepreneurs. Montessori students tend to grow up to be people of great character; someone you can trust and on whom you can depend. They have warmth, humanity, and compassion. Their lives tend to reflect both joy and dignity. This is the sort of men and women we hope our children will grow up to be.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### Isn't Montessori elitist?

Montessori is an educational philosophy and approach that can be found in all sorts of settings, from the most humble to large, well equipped campuses. In general, Montessori schools consciously strive to create and maintain a diverse student body, welcoming families of every ethnic background and religion, and using scholarships and financial aid to keep their school accessible to deserving families. Montessori is also found in the public sector as magnet public-school programs, Headstart centers, and as charter schools.

### Is Montessori opposed to competition?

No. Dr. Montessori simply observed that competition is an ineffective tool to motivate children to learn and work hard in school.

Traditionally schools challenge students to compete with each other for grades, class rankings, and special awards. For example, tests are graded on a curve developed from the performance of the students in that class. Students are constantly measured against their classmates, rather than considered for their individual progress.

In Montessori schools, students learn to collaborate with each other rather than mindlessly compete. Students discover their own innate abilities and develop a strong sense of independence, self-confidence, and self-discipline. In an atmosphere in which children learn at their own pace and compete only against themselves, they learn not to be afraid of making mistakes. They quickly find that few things in life come easily, and they can try again without fear of embarrassment.

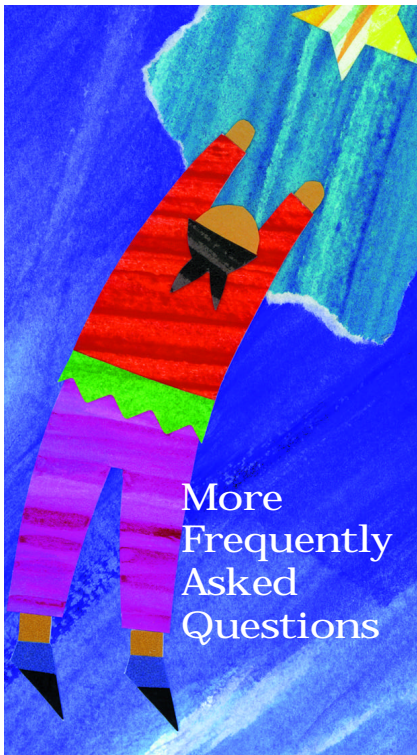
Dr. Montessori argued that for an education to profoundly touch a child's heart and mind, he must be learning because he is curious and interested, not simply to earn the highest grade in the class.

Montessori children compete with each other every day, both in class and on the playground. Dr. Montessori, herself an extraordinary student and a very high achiever, was never opposed to competition on principle. Her objection was to using competition to create an artificial motivation to get students to achieve.

Montessori schools allow competition to evolve naturally among children, without adult interference unless the children begin to show poor sportsmanship. The key is the child's voluntary decision to compete, rather than having it imposed on him by the school.

### Is it true that Montessori children never play?

All children play. They explore new things playfully. They watch something of interest with a fresh, open mind. They enjoy the company of treasured adults and other children. They make up stories. They dream. They imagine. This impression stems from parents who don't know what to make of the incredible concentration, order, and self-discipline that we commonly see among Montessori children. Montessori students also tend to take the things they do in school seriously. It is common for them to respond that "this is my work," when adults ask what they are playing with. They work hard and expect their parents to treat them and their work with respect. But it is joyful, playful, and anything but drudgery.



### Is Montessori opposed to fantasy and creativity?

You will not normally find play kitchens, dress-up corners and dolls in a Montessori class for children under age six, because children are using real tools and doing real things, instead of pretending. However, fantasy and creativity are important aspects of a Montessori child's experience.

Montessori classrooms incorporate art, music, dance, and creative drama throughout the curriculum.

Imagination plays a central role as children explore how the natural world works, visualize other cultures and ancient civilizations, and search for creative solutions to real life problems.

In Montessori schools, the arts are normally integrated into the rest of the curriculum. They are modes of exploring and expanding lessons that have been introduced in science, history, geography, language arts, and mathematics.

Art and music history and appreciation are woven throughout the history and geography curricula. Traditional folk arts are used to extend the curriculum as well. Students participate in singing, dance, and creative movement with teachers and music specialists. Students' dramatic productions make other times and cultures come alive.

### What if a child doesn't feel like working?

While Montessori students are allowed considerable latitude to pursue topics that interest them, this freedom is not absolute. Within every society there are cultural norms; expectations for what a student should know and be able to do by a certain age. Experienced Montessori teachers are conscious of these standards and provide as much structure and support as is necessary to ensure that students live up to them. If for some reason, it appears that a child simply needs time and support until he or she is developmentally ready to catch up, Montessori teachers provide it non-judgmentally.

### Is Montessori opposed to homework, tests, and grades?

Many parents have heard that Montessori schools do not believe in homework, grades, and tests. This is really a misunderstanding of Montessori's insights.

#### Homework

Most Montessori schools do not assign homework at all below the elementary level. When it is assigned to older children it rarely involves page after page of busywork, but meaningful, interesting assignments that expand on the topics that the children are pursuing in class. Many assignments invite parents and children to work together.

Homework should never become a battleground between adult and child. One of our goals as parents and teachers should be to help the children learn how to get organized, budget time, and follow through until the work is completed. Ideally, home challenges will give parents and children a pleasant opportunity to work together on projects that give both parent and child a sense of accomplishment. They are intended to enrich and extend the curriculum.

Homework doesn't need to be boring! Montessori challenges children to think, explore, and pursue tangible projects that give them a sense of satisfaction. Homework is intended to afford students the opportunity to practice and reinforce skills introduced in the classroom.

Moreover, there is a certain degree of self-discipline that can be developed within the growing child through the

process of completing assignments independently.

Many elementary Montessori classes send home packets of "At Home Challenges" for each age group in the class. The children have an entire week to complete them. When the week is over, teachers will normally sit down with the children to review what worked, what they enjoyed, and what they found difficult or unappealing.

Depending on the child's level, assignments normally involve some reading, research, writing, and something tangible to accomplish. They may be organized into three groups: 1) Things to be experienced, such as reading a book, visiting the museum, or going to see a play; 2) Things to learn, stated in terms of skills and knowledge, such as "See if you can learn how to solve these problems well enough that you can teach the skill to a younger student; and 3) Things to be submitted, such as a play, essay, story, experiment, or model.

When possible, teachers will normally build in opportunities for children to choose among several alternative assignments. Sometimes teachers will prepare individually negotiated weekly assignments with each student.

#### Tests

Montessori children usually don't think of our assessment techniques as tests so much as challenges. Early childhood Montessori teachers observe their children at work or ask them to teach a lesson to another child to confirm their knowledge and skill. Most elementary Montessori teachers will give their students informal, individual oral exams or have the children demonstrate what they have learned by either teaching a lesson to another child or by giving a formal presentation. The children also take and prepare their own written tests to administer to their friends. Students are normally working toward mastery, rather than being graded using a standard letter grade scheme.

#### Standardized Tests

Very few Montessori schools test children under the first or second grades; however, most regularly give elementary students quizzes on the concepts and skills that they have been studying. Many schools ask their older students to take annual standardized tests.

While Montessori students tend to score very well, Montessori educators

frequently argue that standardized testing is inaccurate, misleading, and stressful for children. The ultimate problem with standardized tests in our country is that they have often been misused, misunderstood, and misinterpreted in other schools. Tests can be fairly useful when seen as a simple feedback loop, giving both parents and school a general sense of how students are progressing.

Although standardized tests may not offer a terribly accurate measure of a child's basic skills and knowledge, in our culture, test-taking skills are just another practical life lesson that children need to master.

### Reporting Student Progress

Because Montessori believes in individually paced academic progress, and encourages children to explore their interests rather than simply complete work assigned by their teachers, we don't assign grades or rank students within each class according to their achievement.

At the elementary level, students will often prepare a monthly self-evaluation of the previous month's school work. When completed, they will meet with the teachers, who will review it and add their comments and observations.

In many Montessori schools, children compile a collection of their work that is pulled together in a portfolio of the year's work.

Most schools schedule family conferences two or three times a year to review their children's portfolios and self-evaluations and go through the teachers' assessment of their children's progress.

Typically once or twice a year Montessori teachers will prepare a written narrative evaluation of the student's work, social development, and mastery of fundamental skills.

### What about children with special needs?

Every child has areas of special gifts, a unique learning style, and some areas that can be considered challenges. Each child is unique. Montessori is designed to allow for differences. It allows students to learn at their own pace, and is quite flexible in adapting for different learning styles. In many cases, children with mild physical handicaps or learning disabilities may do very well in a Montessori classroom setting. On the other hand, some children do much better in smaller, more structured class-

rooms. Each situation has to be carefully evaluated individually to ensure that the program can successfully meet a given child's needs and learning style.

### Is Montessori right for my child?

Most Montessori educators would agree that Montessori is a good fit for most children but may not be the right match for their parents.

Everything depends on what your family believes to be true about your children and important in their education.

Do you believe that children should be treated with dignity and respect and be encouraged to be independent, self-confident, and self-disciplined?

Do you believe that the best way to discipline is by being consistent, modeling the correct behavior, and by consciously teaching children how to do things correctly?

Do you believe that education should be enchanting, intriguing, and delightful, rather than traditionally structured and highly competitive?

If so, Montessori may be right for you.

### But aren't there some children who just won't do well in Montessori?

The answer is both yes and no. Montessori schools are often successful with children who would challenge any school, including the highly distractible and impulsive ones of whom parents typically have the most concern. The reason why should be obvious; Montessori is designed to be flexible, adapting the program to meet the needs of each given child. It also allows children to move about, socialize independently (rather than work as part of a group), and progress at their own pace.

This doesn't mean though that every class and every Montessori teacher can meet the needs of every child. This is es-



pecially true if a child is violent, destructive, or excessively disturbing of the peace and order of the classroom. Each decision has to be made on a case by case basis.

### Why is there so much variation among Montessori schools?

Many people assume that "Montessori" schools are essentially alike. In reality, Montessori schools can differ dramatically, in size, facilities, programs, and emotional climate. They share a common philosophy and basic approach, but there may be tremendous variation among schools that use the name *Montessori*. There are more than 4,000 Montessori schools in North America, but every one is unique. Even within the same school, each class may look and feel quite different from the others, reflecting the interests and personalities of the teachers; however, certain characteristics will be found in all classes that are honestly following the Montessori approach.

Dr. Montessori was a brilliant student of child development, and the approach that has evolved out of her research has stood the test for more than 90 years in Montessori schools around the world. The Montessori approach has three great qualities: the model is replicable, it can be adapted successfully into all sorts of new situations, and it is sustainable (Montessori programs don't tend to self-destruct after a few years, as do many other educational reforms.) However, the only pure Montessori educator was Dr. Maria Montessori herself. The rest of us interpret and filter her ideas through our personalities and experience.

**A**lthough most Montessori schools try to remain faithful to their understanding of Dr. Montessori's insights and research, they have all, to some degree, been influenced by the evolution of our culture and technology.

Perhaps the more relevant question in selecting a Montessori school is to consider how well it matches your sense of what you want for your child. No one educational approach can be right for every learner. The wisest goal is to seek out the best fit, not only between the student and the school, but also between the parents' values and goals for their child's education and what a given school can realistically deliver. I believe that finding the right school for mom and dad is as important as finding the right school for the child.

In the end, the selection of a Montessori school comes down to a matter of personal style and preference. If you visit a school and find yourself in harmony with its ambiance and practice, it will represent at least one example of what you define to be a good school.

In determining which school is best, we all have to trust our eyes, ears, and gut instincts. Nothing beats personal observation. The school that one parent raves about, may be completely wrong for another's child. Conversely, another parent may have decided that "Montessori doesn't work," while it clearly is working very well for your family. Rely on your own experience, not hearsay from other parents.

### How can I know if I've found a "real" Montessori school?

#### Characteristics of an Authentic Montessori School

Dr. Nancy McCormick Rambush, founder of the American Montessori Society and co-founder of the Montessori Foundation, identified the following characteristics of an "authentic" Montessori school.\*

\* The following ideas are excerpted from *The Authentic American Montessori School: A Guide to the Self-Study, Evaluation, and Accreditation of American Schools Committed to Montessori Education*, by Dr. Nancy McCormick Rambush and Dr. John Stoops, published in 1992 by the Commission on Elementary Schools of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools and the American Montessori Society.



## Selecting a Montessori School for Your Child

#### The Montessori Learning Environment (A Child-Centered Environment):

The focus of activity in the Montessori setting is on children's learning, not on teachers' teaching. Generally student will work individually or in small, self-selected groups. There will be very few whole-group lessons.

#### A Responsive, Prepared Environment:

The environment should be designed to meet the needs, interests, abilities, and development of the children in the class. The teachers should design and adapt the environment with this community of children in mind, rapidly modifying the selection of educational materials available, the physical layout, and the tone of the class to fit the ever changing needs of the children.

#### A Focus on Individual Progress and Development:

Within a Montessori program, children progress at the own pace, moving on to the next step in each area of learning as they are ready. While the child lives within a larger community of children, each student is viewed as a universe of one.

#### Montessori Learning Activities/Hands-On Learning:

In Montessori, students rarely learn from texts or workbooks. In all cases, direct, personal, hands-on contact with either real things under study or with concrete models that bring ab-

stract concepts to life allow children to learn with much deeper understanding.

**Spontaneous Activity:** It is natural for children to wiggle, touch things, and explore the world around them. Any true Montessori environment encourages children to move about freely, within reasonable limits of appropriate behavior. Much of the time they select work that captures their interest and attention, although teachers also strive to draw their attention and capture their interest in new challenges and areas of inquiry. And even within this atmosphere of spontaneous activity, students do eventually have to master the basic skills of their culture, even if they would prefer to avoid them.

**Active Learning:** In Montessori classrooms, children not only select their own work most of the time, but also continue to work with tasks, returning to continue their work over many weeks or months, until finally the work is "so easy for them" that they can teach it to younger children. This is one of many ways that Montessori educators use to confirm that students have reached mastery of each skill.

**Self-Directed Activity:** One of Montessori's key concepts is the idea that children are driven by their desire to become independent and competent beings in the world, to learn new things, and master new skills. For this reason, outside rewards to create external motivation are both unnecessary and potentially can lead to passive adults who are dependent on others for everything from their self-image to permission to follow their dreams. In the process of making independent choices and exploring concepts largely on their own, Montessori children construct their own sense of individual identity and right and wrong.

**Freedom within Limits:** Montessori children enjoy considerable freedom of movement and choice; however, their freedom always exists within carefully defined limits on the range of their behavior. They are free to do anything appropriate to the ground rules of the community, but they are redirected promptly and firmly if they cross over the line.

**Intrinsic Motivation to Learn:** In Montessori programs, children do not work for grades or external rewards, nor

do they simply complete assignments given them by their teachers. Children learn because they are interested in things and because all children share a desire to become competent and independent human beings.

**Montessori's Communities of Learners (Mixed-Age Groups):** Montessori classrooms gather together children of two, three, or more age levels into a family group. Children remain together for several years, with only the oldest students moving on to the next class at years end.

**A Family Setting:** Montessori classrooms are communities of children and adults. As children grow older and more capable, they assume a great role in helping to care for the environment and meeting the needs of younger children in the class. The focus is less on the teachers and more on the entire community of children and adults, much like one finds in a real family.

**Cooperation and Collaboration, Rather than Competition:** Montessori children are encouraged to treat one another with kindness and respect. Insults and shunning behavior tends to be much more rare. Instead we normally find children who have a great fondness for one another and who are free from the one-up-manship and needless interpersonal competition for attention and prestige. Because children learn at their own pace, and teachers refrain from comparing students against one another.

**To Awaken and Nurture the Human Spirit (The Child as a Spiritual Being):** Montessori saw children as far more than simply scholars. In her view, each child is a full and complete human being, the mother or father of the adult man or woman she will become. Even when very young, the child shares with the rest of humanity hopes, dreams, fears, emotions, and longing.

From her perspective, this goes beyond mental health to the very core of one's inner spiritual life. Montessori consciously designs social communities and educational experiences that cultivate the child's sense of independence, self-respect, love of peace, passion for self-chosen work done well, and ability to respect and celebrate the individual spirit within people of all ages and the value of all life.

**Universal Values:** Montessori deliberately teaches children not only appropriate patterns of polite behavior, but seeks to instill basic universal values within the core of the child's personality. These values include self-respect, acceptance of the uniqueness and dignity of each person we meet, kindness, peacefulness, compassion, empathy, honor, individual responsibility, and courage to speak from our hearts.

**Global Understanding:** All Montessori schools are, to a large degree, international schools. They not only tend to attract a diverse student body representing many ethnic backgrounds, religions, and international backgrounds, but they actively celebrate their diversity. The curriculum is international in its heritage and focus, and consciously seeks to promote a global perspective.

**Service to Others:** Montessori's spiritual perspective leads Montessori schools to consciously organize programs of community service ranging from daily contributions to others within the class or school setting, to community outreach programs that allow children and adults to make a difference in the lives of others. The fundamental idea is one of stewardship.

### The Montessori Teacher

**Authoritative:** The teacher is firm at the edges and empathetic at the center, the kind of adult who responds empathetically to children's feelings, while setting clear and consistent limits.

**Observer:** The Montessori teacher is a trained observer of children's learning and behavior. These careful observations are recorded and used to infer where each student is, in terms of his or her development, and leads the teacher to know when to intervene in the child's learning with a new lesson, a fresh challenge, or a reinforcement of basic ground rules.

**An Educational Resource:** Montessori teachers facilitate the learning process by serving as a resource to whom the children can turn as they pull together information, impressions, and experiences.

**Role Model:** Like all great teachers, the Montessori educator deliberately models the behaviors and attitudes that she is working to instill in her students.

Because of Montessori's emphasis on character development, the Montessori teacher normally is exceptionally calm, kind, warm, and polite to each child.

### What Montessori Teachers Do

**Respectfully Engage the Learner:** The Montessori teacher recognizes that her role is not so much to teach as to inspire, mentor, and facilitate the learning process. The real work of learning belongs to the individual child. Because of this, the Montessori educator remains conscious of her role in helping each child to fulfill his potential as a human being and of creating an environment for learning within which children will feel safe, cherished, and empowered.

**Facilitate the "Match" between the Learner and Knowledge:** Montessori teachers are trained to identify the best response to the changing interests and needs of each child as a unique individual. Because they truly accept that children learn in many different ways and at their own pace, Montessori educators understand that they must "follow the child," adjusting their strategies and timetable to fit the development of each of their pupils.

**Environmental Engineer:** Montessori teachers organize appropriate social settings and academic programs for children at their own level of development. They do this to a large degree through the design of the classroom, selection and organization of learning activities, and structure of the day.

### Accreditation

Often one sign of a school's commitment to professional excellence is its membership in one of the professional Montessori societies, such as the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI), the American Montessori Society (AMS), or the newly organized International Montessori Council (IMC).

These organizations also offer schools the opportunity to become accredited. There are several dozen other smaller organizations as well. Further, it is important to remember that many excellent Montessori schools choose not to affiliate with any national organization. They are independent.

# Becoming a Montessori Teacher

**M**ontessori parents often make the best Montessori teachers. Montessori is not simply a method of teaching children to read; it is a philosophy of life. Often the very factors that drew enthusiastic parents to a Montessori school in the first place offer the possibility of a professional life beyond their roles as parents.

Every year thousands of Montessori parents approach their children's school, or are themselves approached, about the possibility of taking Montessori teacher training. A substantial number of Montessori teachers and administrators began as Montessori parents.

Montessori teacher training is available from several dozen centers and institutes across America and Canada. For the internationally minded, courses are available in many other countries as well.

Courses usually involve a year of study. In the US, many courses are organized into summer institutes, which can involve up to ten weeks of full-time study, followed by a supervised year-long practicum/student teaching experience. Some courses run during the school year. Most courses require a college degree; although, students who have yet to complete their undergraduate diploma may be able to take the Montessori teacher-training course and receive a certificate of completion when they have earned their college degree.

Tuition can range from \$4,000 to \$10,000, depending on the course. There are dozens of different Montessori societies and centers offering training. The quality can vary from mediocre to superb. One basic consideration is the credibility of the diploma received upon completion. Two of the largest and universally recognized Montessori societies that certify Montessori teachers are The American Montessori Society (AMS) and the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI). You should be aware that some Montessori schools will require teachers to hold one or the other of these two credentials.

Courses accredited by the AMS are often organized along the lines of a one or two summer-long institute, followed by a year of supervised student teaching. AMS programs follow a course of study which allows considerable flexibility and

adaptation. Courses accredited by AMI follow a much more standardized curriculum and normally require many more hours of classroom lecture and less time spent in student teaching. Each model has its loyal advocates, and selection of one over the other is a matter of personality and preference.

Teacher training is typically offered at the infant-toddler (birth to age 2), early childhood (ages 3-6), lower elementary (ages 6-9), upper elementary (ages 9-12), and secondary levels (ages 12-15 and ages 15-18).

Several organizations offer correspondence courses, which allow students to complete a portion of their studies on an independent basis. Some states or individual schools may not accept these credentials. If you are considering a correspondence course, it is always a good idea to check with several schools at which you would like to teach to determine if your training will meet their standards.

Salaries for Montessori teachers in independent schools are generally acceptable but normally below those offered by local public schools. Teachers generally report that lower salaries and benefits are more than offset by greater job satisfaction and freedom from the paperwork and bureaucracy found in many public-school systems. Salaries are often calculated on a scale based on degrees, experience, and duties. Montessori teachers are generally in short supply, and in many situations certified teachers will find several schools competing for their services.

For more information about Montessori teacher training programs, the following organizations may be able to help you find a program that meets your needs:

**Association Montessori Internationale/USA (AMI/USA)**  
410 Alexander St.  
Rochester, NY 14607  
Phone: 716-461-5920  
Fax: 716-461-0075

**The American Montessori Society (AMS)**  
281 Park Avenue So.  
New York, NY 10010  
Phone: 212-358-1250  
Fax: 212-358-1256

**International Montessori Society (IMS)**

912 Thayer Avenue #207  
Silver Spring, MD 20910  
301-589-1127

**Montessori Centre Internationale (MCI)**

[formerly St. Nicholas Montessori and London Montessori Centres]  
18 Balderton Street  
London, W1Y 0TG, UK  
Phone: 171-493-0165  
Fax: 171-629-7808

**Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education (MACTE)\***

Dr. Gretchen Warner, Exec. Director  
Univ. of Wisconsin-Parkside  
Box 2000  
Kenosha, WI 53141-2000  
Tel: Toll-free: 1-888-446-2283 Local: 414-595-3335 Fax 404-595-3332  
Email: warner@uwp.edu

**Montessori Institute of America (MIA)**

PO Box 18659  
Spokane, WA 99282-8659  
888-564-9556

**Montessori Educational Programs International (MEPI)**

5901 NW Waukomis Drive  
Kansas City, MO 64515  
816-741-6940

**Montessori World Educational Institute (MWEI)**

3025 Monterey Rd.  
Atascadero, CA 93422  
805-466-2872

**National Center for Montessori Education (NCME)**

3941 Covered Bridge  
Roswell, GA 30082  
Phone/Fax: 770-437-80055

\* MACTE is an umbrella organization that accredited Montessori teacher education programs.