

Introduction to Montessori Philosophy and Practice

The discoveries of Dr. Maria Montessori, MD, can help parents and teachers in many situations. Hers are lessons of observation, understanding, and wisdom. Her advice was always: "Follow the child". Her discoveries led to a revolution, not only in childbirth and the handling of the newborn, but in the teaching of children from preschool throughout high school.

Montessori Teachers

The most important consideration, in deciding to set up a Montessori class, is the training of the teacher. A non-Montessori-trained teacher can no more be expected to teach "Montessori" than a biologist could be expected to teach French. Using the Montessori *method* to teach is extremely challenging, but equally exciting and rewarding.

Being a Montessori teacher is a wonderful profession for anyone who loves to be present for the miracle of the development of children.

We know that allowing for the work of the inner guide is the hardest part of working in the classroom. It is easy to emphasize our own agenda; to weigh the academics disproportionately, to push for the quick solution, to substitute our will for the child's will. It is so difficult to keep from over directing, to observe without judgment, to wait for the child to reveal herself. Yet, over and over again, when we do honor that inner guide, the personality unfolds in a way that surprises –that goes beyond what we could direct or predict.

--Dr. Sharon Dubble, Ph.D., Montessori teacher

Montessori schools have proven successful all over the world, with all kinds of children (wealthy, poor, gifted, normal, learning disabled, blind, etc.) and environments (from refugee camps and slums to elegant schools in beautiful homes).

There are many kinds of Montessori teacher training, from correspondence courses (valuable to parents, but not for a teacher in charge of a whole class) to three year, 0 – 12, graduate school programs.

Specific Elements of Montessori Philosophy on Which the Educational Method is Based

The following class specific elements assume that the teacher has had the most exacting Montessori teacher-training course available.

■ Multi-aged Grouping, Based on Periods of Development:

Children are grouped in three-year age spans and have the same teacher for three to six years. There is constant interaction, problem solving, child-to-child teaching, and socialization.

■ The Human Tendencies:

The practical application of the Montessori method is based on *human tendencies* – which Dr. Montessori studied in detail – tendencies to explore, move, share with a group, to be independent and make decisions, create order, develop self-control, abstract ideas from experience, use the creative imagination, work hard, repeat, concentrate, and perfect one's efforts and creations.

■ The Process of Learning:

There are three stages of learning: (Stage 1) Introduction to a concept by means of a lecture, lesson, something read in a book, etc. (Stage 2) Processing the information, developing an understanding of the concept through work, experimentation, and creation. (Stage 3) "Knowing", to possessing an understanding of, demonstrated by the ability to pass a test with confidence, to teach another, or to express with ease. Stage two is the most important and the longest step with its emphasis on developing, working, experimenting, creating, transforming. This enables the child to really *learn* and remember what he learned.

■ Indirect Preparation:

The steps of learning any concept are well analyzed by the adult and are systematically offered to the child. A child is always learning something that is indirectly preparing him to learn something else, making education a joyful discovery instead of drudgery.

■ The Prepared Environment:

Since information passes from the environment directly to the child, not through the teacher, the preparation of this environment is vital. It is the role of the teacher to prepare and continue to adapt the environment, to link the child to it through well-thought-out lessons, and to facilitate the child's exploration and creativity. Children often surpass the level of knowledge of the teacher in all areas and learn to find answers.

■ Observation:

Scientific observations of the child's development are constantly carried out and recorded by the teacher. These observations are made on the level of concentration of each child, the introduction to and mastery of each piece of material, the social development, physical health, etc.

■ Work Centers:

The environment is arranged according to subject area. The children are always free to move around the room and to continue to work on a piece of material with no time limit.

■ **Teaching Method:**

Children learn directly from the environment and from other children, more than from the teacher. The teacher is trained to teach one child at a time, with a few small groups and almost no lessons given to the whole class. She is facile in the basic lessons of math, language, the arts and sciences, and in guiding a child's research and exploration capitalizing on his interest in and excitement about a subject. Large groups occur only at the beginning of a new class or in the beginning of the school year.

■ **Class Size:**

The most successful 3 to 6 or 6 to 12 classes are of 30 to 35 children with one teacher and one non-teaching assistant. This provides the most variety of personalities, learning styles, and work being done at one time. This class size is possible because the children stay with the same teacher for three to six years.

■ **Basic Lessons:**

A well-trained Montessori teacher spends a lot of time during teacher training practicing the many basic lessons with material in all areas. She must pass a written and oral exam on these lessons in order to be certified. She is trained to recognize a child's readiness – according to age, ability, and interest – for a specific lesson, and is prepared to guide individual progress. Although the teacher plans lessons for each child for each day, she will bow to the interests of a child following a passion.

■ **Areas of Study Linked:**

All subjects are interwoven. For example, history, art, music, math, astronomy, biology, geology, physics, and chemistry are not isolated from each other and a child studies them in any order he chooses, moving through all in a way unique for each child. At any one time in a day all subjects –math, language, science, history, geography, art, music, etc. – will be available to be studied at all levels.

■ **The Schedule:**

There is uninterrupted work time every day. Adults and children respect concentration and do not interrupt someone who is busy at a task. Groups form spontaneously.

■ **Assessment:**

There are no grades or other forms of reward or punishment, subtle or overt. Assessment is by the teachers' observations and record keeping. The test of whether or not the system is working lies in the accomplishment and behavior of the children, their happiness, maturity, kindness, and love of learning and work.

■ **Requirements for age 3 to 6:**

There are no academic requirements of this age, but children are exposed to amazing amounts of knowledge and often learn to read, write, and calculate beyond what is usually thought possible for a child of this age.

■ **Requirements for age 6 to 12:**

There are no curriculum requirements except those set by the state, or college entrance requirements, for specific grades. These requirements take a minimum of time. Students design contracts with the teacher to balance their work and to become responsible for their own time management and education. The work of the 6 to 12 class includes subjects usually not introduced until high school.

■ **Learning Styles:**

All intelligences and styles of learning – musical, bodily kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, intuitive, and the traditional linguistic and logical-mathematical – are nurtured. This method is recommended by Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner in his theory of multiple intelligences.

■ **Character Education:**

Education of character is considered more important than academic education. Children learn to take care of themselves, their environment, each other – cooking, cleaning, building, gardening, moving gracefully, speaking politely, being considerate and helpful, doing social work in the community, etc.

■ **The Results of Learning in This Way:**

Dr. Montessori speaks of the first *Casa dei Bambini* (Children's House) in Rome, illustrating the important discovery and the core of all Montessori work today – when the environment meets all of the needs of children they become, without any manipulation by the adult, physically healthy, mentally and psychologically fulfilled, extremely well-educated, and brimming over with joy and kindness toward each other: When the children had completed an absorbing bit of work, they appeared rested and deeply pleased. It almost seemed as if a road had opened up within their souls that led to all their latent powers, revealing the better part of themselves. They exhibited a great affability to everyone, put themselves out to help others, and seemed full of good will.