

What Is "Montessori," Anyway?

Maria Montessori: The Woman Behind The Name

Maria Montessori was a medical doctor, born in Italy in 1870, whose interest in the mentally retarded led her to develop a highly successful concrete and sensory-based teaching approach that helped them to learn. Later, she applied her discoveries to normal but impoverished children from the slums of Rome, and her success with these children was even more remarkable. Soon, people from all over the world came to her "Children's House" (Casa de Bambini) to learn from her. She devised specialized materials, a teaching method, and later a philosophy of education that is internationally known, based on her careful observation of the child. She observed that children had a need for order that is different from our own. She also observed that children go through sensitive periods during which there is a special window of opportunity open for their learning.

Montessori offers
"freedom within structure."

The Montessori Philosophy

Underlying Maria Montessori's method was a philosophy based on the dignity and spiritual worth of the child. The basis of the Montessori philosophy of education is that all children carry unseen within them the person they will become. In order to develop their unique potential, they must have freedom—freedom to explore, freedom to be creative, freedom to choose. This freedom is achieved through order and self-discipline.

Highlights of Montessori:

- Respect for the dignity of each child
- Freedom of choice within structure and limits
- "Follow the lead of the child": each unfolds at his own pace
- The environment is "prepared"
- The teacher is a catalyst
- Learning is sensory-based
- Children "act on the environment" using their hands
- Work and accomplishment bring joy and satisfaction

Respect For The Child

The Montessori philosophy is based on a deep respect for the child, particularly the individuality of each child. We respect the child and we nurture the adult he is to become.

The Absorbent Mind

Every child has an inner need to grow physically, emotionally and mentally (cognitively). Maria Montessori used the term "a child's absorbent mind" to label this inner motivation to learn. She observed that children propel themselves towards greater learning, no matter what their differences.

The WHOLE Child

Maria Montessori was concerned with the development of the *whole* child--body, mind and spirit. Everything in the Montessori classroom is structured to support growth in every area for a child.

The Three Elements: Teacher, Child, Prepared Environment

The Montessori approach to education involves a three-way interaction between the child, the prepared environment, and the teacher. Through this interaction, the natural process of learning

occurs for a young child. Maria Montessori believed that "education is not something that the teacher does...it is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being. It is not acquired by listening to words, but (from) experiences in which the child acts on the environment."

Montessori is Sensory-Based

Maria Montessori observed that children *learn by doing*. She designed her materials so that children in the classroom may manipulate ("act upon") them and learn through self-discovery. Every piece of

Montessori equipment has its basis in sensory discrimination. This means that children touch, see, taste, hear, and feel the materials. They then learn to classify and categorize their experiences, which lead them to understand different concepts. As young children grow, they develop sensitivities for the more intellectual pursuits of mathematics and language. But even these materials have their basis in sensory discrimination. Being an acute observer, Dr. Montessori learned what recent brain research has shown us: the development of a child's senses precedes the development of higher thinking capacities.

Following The Lead Of The Child

Maria Montessori found that every child has his own unique pace of development. The Montessori approach is based on trusting this natural process and "following the child's lead," rather than directing it. Presentations are given to children on an individual basis, or in small groups of two or three, as the child is interested in a material and the teacher sees a readiness to absorb the information.

Sensitive Periods

During a "sensitive period," a child is drawn to a material and a unique window of opportunity is open to him or her to easily absorb that information. For instance, a child may suddenly begin exploring numerals (math area) and soon the

During this time, a child may material over and over again, grasping the knowledge. It is hurried or interrupted during

A "Sensitive Period" is a unique window of opportunity for a child.

information just "clicks". He is naturally working on important that he not be this work. He needs to

repeat it often. Sometimes, another child may want a turn with the material that the child is using. In a Montessori classroom, we would not talk about sharing in this situation. Instead, we would allow the first child to develop concentration skills by continuing to use the material, and we would encourage the second child to watch, thereby developing patience and learning through observation.

The "Prepared Environment"

In order to help children with the monumental task of mastering all the sights and sounds and sensory impressions that bombard them, Maria Montessori developed what she called "the prepared environment." The prepared environment maintains an order—or framework—through which children can evaluate and classify their sensory input. The prepared environment allows a child to explore at her own speed, according to her own capabilities and her own interests.

The environment is purposefully arranged for the child with specially designed materials.

Many materials are self-teaching and most are self-correcting.

In the prepared environment, shelves are open, which encourages children to freely choose and explore. Montessori classroom materials are designed to meet the needs of young children's sensitive periods. Many are beautifully made of wood and neutral colors.

Children focus on *how* they do what they do in a Montessori classroom. They focus on their *own* growth and development—not how they do in relation to others. They help one another to achieve mutual success, rather than competing among themselves. Without the stress of competition, children are freer to experience the natural joy that is intrinsic to learning.

The Hand Is Teacher Of The Child

The prepared environment is structured to allow children to use many different materials independently, although the teachers will demonstrate them. Maria Montessori believed that children's hands are their chief teachers, since they learn by doing. Children develop concentration and good working skills by focusing attention on the task they are performing with their hands. She valued children's efforts, and she did not attempt to correct them. She believed they were learning by self-discovery. For this reason, many of her materials are self-correcting. For example, the knobbed cylinders will only fit back into the block in the correct order.

"Jobs" and "Work"

Maria Montessori knew the intrinsic value of "work." It is the *inner* pleasure of a job well done that brings

A child's play is his "work."
The Montessori materials are called "jobs."

us a sense of accomplishment. A child will need this to sustain him in his work for his entire life. Maria Montessori understood that a child's play is his work, and for this reason she called her Montessori materials "jobs." She believed that we should not make children dependent on adult praise for what they do because it robs them of their own deeper feeling of satisfaction. A child's delight in the process of discovery is more important than the outcome. So when we talk about a child's artwork, we say, "You used red and green and made long horizontal lines," rather than placing a judgment that it's "good" or "pretty."

Montessori teachers are facilitators who open doors and then stand aside.

The Teacher Is A Catalyst

In a Montessori classroom, the teacher is the catalyst that activates the relationship between the child and the "prepared environment." She shows the child, she does not tell him. She helps the child focus his attention, she demonstrates materials to him, and then she allows him to work on his own. She shows respect for the child by not getting in the way of his self-discovery. A Montessori teacher does not push a child, but rather follows the child's lead. By constantly observing, she stays aware of the needs and abilities of each child. She will "invite" a child to learn by introducing new materials appropriate to his or her stage. She nurtures the child's natural

unfolding through modeling and demonstrating.

Freedom Within Limits

The Montessori classroom is a steppingstone to the larger world. Children must eventually learn to live within a society that has rules and laws. The Montessori classroom has clear expectations for behavior that children learn to follow. The Montessori promotes success by making children aware they first enter the classroom, rather than the rules when they have broken them. introduced to ground rules during an the group discusses them. Sometimes, they

Classroom Rules

- 1.) We use friendly hands.
- 2.) We use walking feet.
- 3.) We only call people by their names.

philosophy of the rules when informing them of Children are orientation and decide on additional rules together.

Exercises of Grace & Courtesy

We say hello, we shake hands, we say, "I'm sorry," we say "please" and "thank you," we clean up after ourselves, we practice our table manners, and at Snack Time, we wait until everyone is served. Then we say, "Bon appetite. We may eat."

Respect For Self and Others

Many people comment on the remarkably respectful atmosphere of the Montessori classroom. Teachers model respect of children, and children model respect for each other. One of the most important aspects of a Montessori

environment is children learning about each other. Through their daily interactions, they develop a true sense of community. They learn to respect each other's needs and to value each other's work. They learn to solve problems together peaceably. They learn tolerance and an appreciation of differences. They share a care and concern for others and for their environment. They learn that we are all linked by common needs and feelings.

Learning "The Montessori Way"

Children have many opportunities for free choice during their day, but they must follow the order and structure of the classroom. When they first enter school, children are introduced to the practices of the classroom. They are shown how to work at the table or how to get a rug and work on the floor. They are shown the proper way to carry a pencil and scissors, how to take materials from the shelf, and then return them to the same place. They learn not to touch another person's job, and they are shown how to observe another child at work and not intrude upon her. They are introduced to pushing in their chair when they get up. These things are done for the comfort and safety of the group. Children learn that they may move from one room to another, but they must first clean up and put their job away. They may work alone or in groups. They may choose any job they want, but they may not choose *not* to work at all.

How Does It Work?

A teacher will ask a child if he would like to do the red rods, for example, and he is free to decline or suggest another job. When the teacher is working with one child, she may invite another child to join them in their work. But she will do so only after she has asked the permission of the first child.

The Four Areas In Montessori

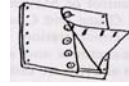
The basic Montessori equipment is divided into four main areas: Practical Life, Sensorial, Language and Mathematics. Each area occupies a different section of the room.

◆ Practical Life

Care of the Person,
Care of the Environment,
Exercises of Grace & Courtesy

Practical Life is one of the first areas a young child is drawn to explore. These activities parallel the activities of daily living. These are some of the most important jobs in the classroom because they meet the child's need for movement, balance and coordination. They develop poise and confidence. Some exercises focus on care of the self, such as blowing your nose. Other exercises teach social skills to help children relate to peers and adults (i.e. saying "please" and "thank you" and using table manners). Practical Life activities help children cope with day-to-day situations, become self-reliant, and develop a positive self-image.

Practical Life Jobs:

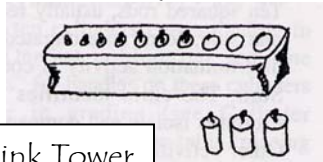


- Buttoning, snapping, tying
- Pouring, spooning, mixing (both liquids and dry ingredients)
- Squeezing sponges, sweeping
- Clipping clothespins, folding napkins
- Hammering, setting the table
- Serving another child snack
- Using tongs, tweezers, droppers, basters
- Arranging flowers, polishing silver



◆ Sensorial

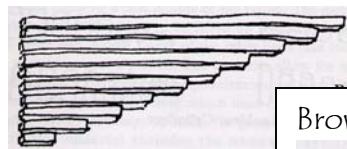
Knobbed Cylinders



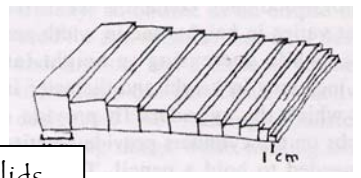
Pink Tower



Red Rods



Brown Stair



Geometric Solids



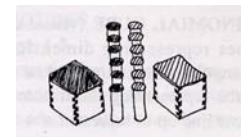
Geometric Cabinet



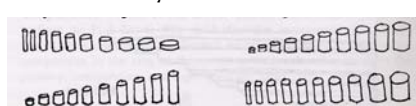
Color Tablets



Sound Boxes

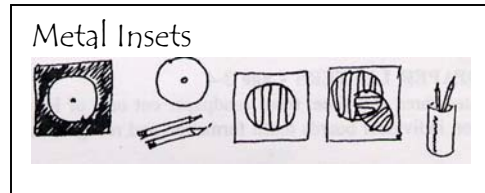


Knobless Cylinders

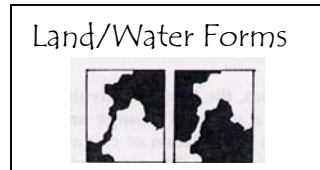
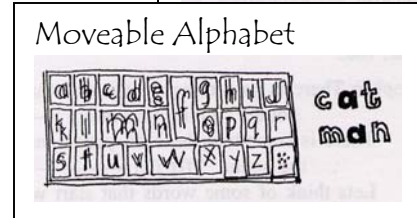
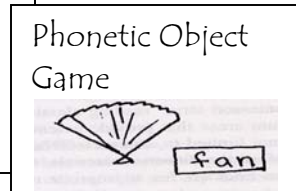
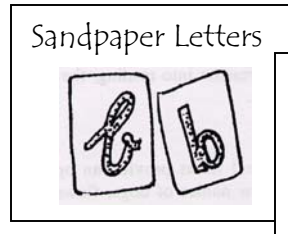


◆ Language

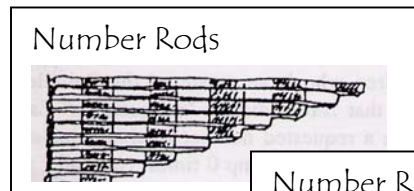
The child begins his language work by first analyzing sounds and paying attention to the sequence of sounds in the names of objects familiar to him. Much conversation and vocabulary-building precedes work with written letters in the Montessori classroom. Written letters are introduced in the form of the *Sandpaper Letters* so that a child hears the name and feels the shape of any sound he learns.



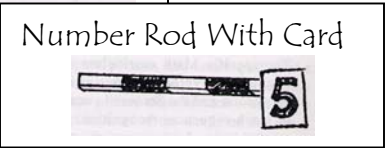
From here, a child can move on to word-building. Children use the *Metal Insets* in this area to develop the manipulative skills for writing. Maria Montessori had a strong sense of children "writing to read." Geography and science are also extensions of the Language area, and activities are presented for children to learn about their physical and cultural world through puzzles, displays, and experiments.



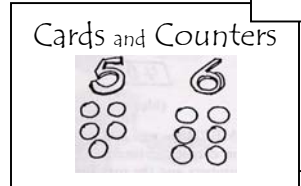
◆ Mathematics



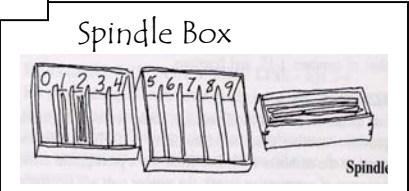
Many people believe Maria Montessori was most inspired in the Math area. She developed an array of wonderful materials to teach math concepts in a simple, concrete way. In the Montessori classroom, children first acquire a visual and tactile concept of numbers.



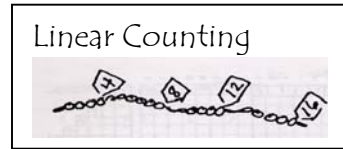
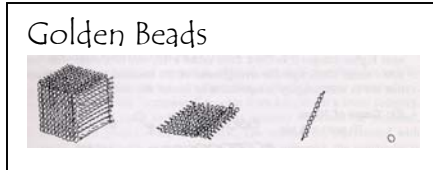
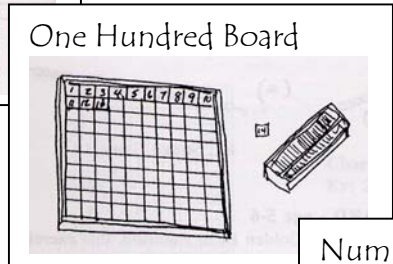
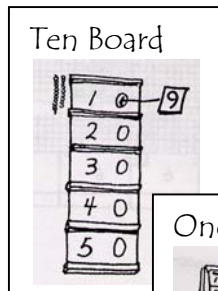
They begin with activities that teach sequence, recognition, and quantity of numbers 1 to 10. Once children understand quantity (how many objects make "nine") then they are introduced to the symbol "9" (using *Sandpaper Numbers*).



There are many counting jobs in the Montessori classroom, which give children the opportunity to experience reinforcement and learn from their mistakes. With practice, they go on to learn the decimal system, teens, hundreds, and thousands. They learn about the composition of numbers and



the operation of numbers, such as addition and subtraction. Later, Montessori teaches complex concepts like multiplication and division in a sensory way to older children. In the Math area, as in all other areas, a child progresses at his own rate, according to his own needs and interests.



After Montessori Preschool, Then What...?

When Children Go On To School

Many parents wonder if Montessori preschool will adequately prepare their child for further education. After 25 years of teaching experience and parent feedback, we can firmly and resolutely say, "Yes, indeed it does!" As Maria Montessori observed, the patterns of inner direction and concentration stay with children as they go on to higher learning. This is one of the great gifts of a Montessori early education. The joy of exploration and the inner satisfaction of completing challenging tasks set a positive attitude toward learning. Children with a Montessori foundation are confident in their ability to acquire knowledge, solve problems, and cope with new information and experiences. These form their blueprint for becoming a successful student in the years ahead.

They have learned how to:

- * acquire knowledge.
- * solve problems.
- * cope with new information and experiences.

"Montessori kids"
grow up
to become
CONFIDENT
students!

