

# What is Montessori?

Montessori is a comprehensive educational approach from birth to adulthood based on the observation of children's needs in a variety of cultures all around the world.

Beginning her work almost a century ago, Dr. Maria Montessori developed this educational approach based on her understanding of children's natural learning tendencies as they unfold in "prepared environments" for multi-age groups (0-3, 3-6, 6-9, 9-12, and 12-14).

The Montessori environment contains specially designed, manipulative "materials for development" that invite children to engage in learning activities of their own individual choice. Under the guidance of a trained teacher, children in a Montessori classroom learn by making discoveries with the materials, cultivating concentration, motivation, self-discipline, and a love of learning.

The prepared environments and the role of the teacher in the classroom distinguish Montessori from other educational approaches. For example, independent activity constitutes a considerable amount of the day while teacher-directed activity accounts for the remainder. The reverse percentages are generally true for traditional education. The special environments enable children to perform various tasks which induce thinking about relationships. The prepared environment also offers practical occasions for introducing social relationships through free interaction. The logical, sequential nature of the environment provides orderly structures that guide discovery: Theorems are discovered, not presented; spelling rules are derived through recognition of patterns, not merely memorized. Every aspect of the curriculum involves creative invention and careful, thoughtful analysis. In viewing learning outcomes at each Montessori level, it must be emphasized that why and how students arrive at what they know is just as important as what they know.

The Montessori preschool classroom is a "living room" for children. Children choose their work from among the self-correcting materials displayed on open shelves, and they work in specific work areas. Over a period of time, the children develop into a "normalized community," working with high concentration and few interruptions. Normalization is the process whereby a child moves from being undisciplined to self-disciplined, from disordered to ordered, from distracted to focused, through work in the environment. The process occurs through repeated work with materials that captivate the child's attention. For some children this inner change may take place quite suddenly, leading to deep concentration. In the Montessori preschool, academic competency is a means to an end, and the manipulatives are viewed as "materials for development."

In the Montessori preschool, five distinct areas constitute the prepared environment:

- ✚ Practical life enhances the development of task organization and cognitive order through care of self, care of the environment, exercises of grace and courtesy, and coordination of physical movement.
- ✚ The sensorial area enables the child to order, classify, and describe sensory impressions in relation to length, width, temperature, mass, color, pitch, etc.
- ✚ Mathematics makes use of manipulative materials to enable the child to internalize concepts of number, symbol, sequence, operations, and memorization of basic facts.
- ✚ Language arts includes oral language development, written expression, reading, the study of grammar, creative dramatics, and children's literature. Basic skills in writing and reading are developed through the use of sandpaper letters, alphabet cut-outs, and various presentations allowing children to link sounds and letter symbols effortlessly and to express their thoughts through writing.
- ✚ Cultural activities expose the child to basics in geography, history, and life sciences. Music, art, and movement education are part of the integrated cultural curriculum.

Studies are integrated not only in terms of subject matter but in terms of moral learning as well, resulting in appreciation and respect for life, moral empathy, and a fundamental belief in progress, the contribution of the individual, the universality of the human condition, and the meaning of true justice.

# Frequently Asked Questions.

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### **Q. Where did Montessori come from?**

A. Montessori education was founded in 1907 by Dr. Maria Montessori, the first woman in Italy to become a physician. She based her educational methods on scientific observation of children's learning processes. Guided by her discovery that children teach themselves, Dr. Montessori designed a "prepared environment" in which children could freely choose from a number of developmentally appropriate activities. Now, nearly a century after Maria Montessori's first casa dei bambini ("children's house") in Rome, Montessori education is found all over the world, spanning ages from birth to adolescence.

### **Q. What is the difference between Montessori and traditional education?**

A. Montessori emphasizes learning through all five senses, not just through listening, watching, or reading. Children in Montessori classes learn at their own, individual pace and according to their own choice of activities from hundreds of possibilities. Learning is an exciting process of discovery, leading to concentration, motivation, self-discipline, and a love of learning. Montessori classes place children in three-year age groups (3-6, 6-9, 9-12, and so on), forming communities in which the older children spontaneously share their knowledge with the younger ones. The inquiry method is used to help students come to their own understanding of concepts.

### **Q. Is Montessori good for children with learning disabilities? What about gifted children?**

A. Montessori is designed to help all children reach their fullest potential at their own unique pace. A classroom whose children have varying abilities is a community in which everyone learns from one another and everyone contributes. Moreover, multiage grouping allows each child to find his or her own pace without feeling "ahead" or "behind" in relation to peers. However, research has shown that children with attention deficit disorders *may be* distracted by the stimulation of the classroom.

### **Q. What ages does Montessori serve?**

A. There are more Montessori programs for ages 3-6 than for any other age group, but Montessori is not limited to early childhood. Many infant/toddler programs (ages 2 months to 3 years) exist, as well as elementary (ages 6-12), adolescent (ages 12-15) and even a few Montessori high schools.

### **Q. Are Montessori children successful later in life?**

A. Research studies show that Montessori children are well prepared for later life academically, socially, and emotionally. In addition to scoring well on standardized tests, Montessori children are ranked above average on such criteria as following directions, turning in work on time, listening attentively, using basic skills, showing responsibility, asking provocative questions, showing enthusiasm for learning, and adapting to new situations.