



The Montessori Method of Education

1. What is Montessori?

Montessori is an approach to the education of children. It is a way of looking at, and understanding, children. It is a view of how children develop and learn which has been translated into a systematic method of education based upon careful scientific study. The Montessori educational system is unique in that it has successfully undergone continued development for over seventy years and has been used effectively with mentally retarded, physically handicapped, normal, and gifted children in different countries around the world. Perhaps the most significant reason, for its success is that it is a comprehensive method of education resulting from an integration of research on development, learning, curriculum, and teaching.

2. What is the idea behind the Montessori approach to the education of children?

Montessori is an approach to education based upon the principle that schooling should work with the nature of the child instead of against it. Therefore, education should be based upon scientific study of the child and a resulting understanding of the processes of development and learning.

3. What is the Montessori understanding of the nature of the child?

Dr. Montessori felt that her greatest discovery was that children like to work as well as play. In fact, children have a natural drive to work in order to develop. The child's great task is to create an adult. As a result, children are not content unless they have an opportunity to develop and learn.

4. How does Montessori's understanding of the child influence her view of education?

Since Montessori schools are based upon the principle that "...the child, not the teacher, is the construction of man, and of society...", it is felt that the, "human teacher can only help the great work that is being done..." "Education is not what the teacher gives; education is a natural process spontaneously carried out by the human individual, and is acquired not by listening to words, but by experiences upon the environment." Therefore, the teacher's job is to provide the materials and environment which will aid development and to be ready to respond when help is needed.

5. What is Dr. Montessori's view of education?

Dr. Montessori felt that education should no longer consist only of imparting knowledge, it must instead take a new path seeking the release of human potentialities. However, it must not be forgotten that, "if education is to be an aid to civilization, it cannot be carried out by emptying the schools of knowledge, of character, of discipline, of social harmony, and above all of freedom."

6. How is a Montessori program different from other programs?

A Montessori program is different from other educational programs in a number of ways.

- a) **Teaches to individuals instead of to groups.** In many other classrooms, lessons are presented to the whole class and sometimes to small groups. In Montessori schools the general rule is reversed. Most of the time the teacher presents lessons to individuals. Other children can watch if they are interested. In this way, the teacher can address the specific needs of a child and can respond to that individual child's interest and level of understanding. The child does not have to sit through something that he or she is not ready for. This individual attention also helps the teacher be much more familiar with the child. Thus, the teacher understands the child more fully and better provides for that child.
- b) **Children learn through practicing tasks rather than through listening and having to remember.** In many non-Montessori classrooms children are expected to learn by listening to the teacher. Work is usually with paper and pencil. In a Montessori classroom, on the other hand, children learn by practicing with apparatus which embodies the concept to be mastered. For example, when learning about shapes such as triangles, squares, circles, etc., instead of listening to a teacher talk about the shapes and watching her draw them in the chalk board the children trace real figures and make designs. They fit different shapes together to make patterns. They make fine discriminations by fitting shapes into the correct corresponding holes.
- c) **The Montessori curriculum is much broader than many other programs.** The Montessori program teaches more than just the basics. First of all, it has exercises to develop the child's basic capacities-his or her ability to control movement (motor development), and to feel and have emotions (affective or emotional development). In this way, the program helps the child become a competent learner. This develops independence and responsibility. In addition, the curriculum also helps the child develop a strong foundation in language and math, and an in-depth study of physical and cultural geography, zoology, botany, physical science, history and art. Children further learn practical skills for everyday life such as cooking, carpentry, and sewing. But more than this, they learn how to be contributing members of a social community.
- d) **With regard to discipline, in a Montessori program the emphasis is on self-discipline** developed through helping a child learn how to appropriately meet needs rather than discipline through the use of rewards and punishments.
- e) **In a Montessori classroom the organization of the room allows children easy access to a variety of learning experiences.** The room is specifically organized to appear attractive and orderly. Materials are displayed on shelves.
- f) **The materials in a Montessori classroom are carefully designed and thoroughly researched** to fit the developmental needs and characteristics of children.
- g) **Montessori teachers are trained to teach respect and positive values** through their modeling as well as through the way they teach.

- h) The Montessori method of helping a child as through a process of showing a child what to do in a positive manner.** Montessori teaches attempt to avoid “put downs” or sarcastic comments, and try not to humiliate or embarrass the child.
- i) The Montessori program is systematic and carefully sequenced according to principles of development.** Every activity is carefully thought out to build upon previous preparation and to lead the intelligence on to a higher activity.
- j) The Montessori program is designed to develop independence and responsibility.** The organization of the classroom, the method of teaching, and the practical life lessons are oriented toward helping the child become a self-sufficient and disciplined individual.
- k) The routine of the Montessori program is based upon the principle of freedom of choice** rather than a set times for prescribed activities. Since everything in the Montessori environment is something planned that is worthwhile and educational, the child can be free to choose.
- l) In Montessori programs children are viewed as positive beings whose primary aim is the work of constructing an adult.** Rewards and punishments, therefore, can only get in the way. Development and learning by themselves are adequate motivators. Likewise, children do not need to be appealed to through fantasy, bright colors, or gimmicks, as these things come between the child and real learning. Therefore, joy is discovered and experienced in the real world through the study of nature, science, math, music, reading, history and geography rather than in a world of comics, cartoons, and fantasy.

7. How does a Montessori education benefit children?

Experience and research both indicate that children attending Montessori schools tend to be competent, self-disciplined, socially well adjusted, and happy.

Competence: Children in Montessori schools are often several years above grade level in their basic skills. Also, since the Montessori education is comprehensive, children are often exceptionally knowledgeable in a number of other areas as well.

Self Discipline: Montessori schools are well known for children’s development of self-discipline. Children choose to work long and hard. They treat materials and others with respect. They display patience and resistance to temptation and the ability to attend for long periods.

Social Adjustment: Montessori school children usually strike a visitor as friendly, empathetic, and cooperative. The classroom is a cheerful social community where children happily help each other. It is not uncommon to see a child offer to help another child. Also, learning social grace and courtesy are a part of the Montessori curriculum.

Happiness: Most parents of children in a Montessori school comment on how much their children love school.

8. Who was Dr. Montessori and how did she come to establish her educational method?

Dr. Maria Montessori, internationally renowned child educator, was originally a medical doctor who brought the scientific methods of observation, experimentation, and research to the study of children, their development and education. As a doctor, Montessori came to believe that many of the problems of the children she was working with were educational rather than medical. In examining education she felt that children were not achieving their potential because education was not based upon science. Her first step, then, was to attempt to abandon preconceived ideas about education and to begin to study children, their development and the process of learning through scientific methods of observation and experimentation. In doing so, she made what she considered to be a number of startling discoveries. Through her research, she discovered that children possessed different and high qualities than those we usually attribute to them. Among these qualities are:

- a) Amazing Mental Concentration** Previously it was believed that children had short attention spans. Dr. Montessori was amazed to observe the length of time that very young children would choose to attend to tasks which interested them.
- b) Love of Repetition** On their own, children would choose to practice things they were trying to master over and over again. For example, once a child decides to learn how to tie shoes, the child may tie and untie shoes many times, continuing the repetition until the task is mastered.
- c) Love of order** Whereas we normally think of children as messy, Dr. Montessori found that children have a natural inclination for organization and orderliness. This natural inclination can be helped and developed if provision is made to foster it.
- d) Freedom of choice** Children like to choose things they do. If materials are set out for children so that they have easy access to them, children will choose, take and replace them with without the need of assistance from an adult.
- e) Children Prefer Work to Play** One of the greatest surprises for Dr. Montessori was the discovery that children preferred work to play. Sometimes adults tend to think children only want to play and not to work. However, Dr. Montessori found that play was a substitute for what the children really wanted to do, but couldn’t. For example, children like to play “house”. They may pretend to cook, to bake pies, to clean house, etc. however, if given a choice, the children prefer to be in the real kitchen with their mother (or father) learning how to prepare “real” food.
- f) No Need for Reward and Punishment.** Montessori discovered that children are intrinsically motivated to work. No one wants to be problem. So, they do not need external rewards and punishments. What they do need is help. The adult can help the child by showing the child how to do what he or she is trying to accomplish. Accomplishment, competence, and being a contributing member of a society are rewarding in themselves, and it is reward enough.
- g) The Children Refuse Sweets.** Children often show an indifference to the allurements of sweets when placed in conflict with the interest of the mind.
- h) Lovers of Silence** Whereas it is easy to think of children as noisy, Montessori discovered that children enjoy finding out how quiet they can be. The children like to listen to silence and to soft sounds. It is like a game to see if they can move a chair without making a sound.
- i) Sense of Personal Dignity** Children have a deep sense of personal dignity just as adults do. They want to be capable and held in high regard. They want to be able to do things for themselves. They can get embarrassed and can feel ashamed. A child would rather tie his own shoes than have tied for him.
- j) Desire to Read and Write** In the beginning, Dr. Montessori didn’t believe that young children of four and five years of age should be involved in reading and writing. However, the children showed such interest that she provided some beginning materials. She was astonished by how the children seeped to “burst spontaneously” into writing and then reading if provided with the right materials.

9. What is a Montessori preschool like?

Children love a Montessori preschool. They like the opportunity to be with other children of their own age and they like having so many interesting things to do. The room is attractive, with many carefully designed materials and activities for the children to choose from. The children are free to engage themselves in activities that interest them. They can work by themselves, or with a friend, or a group of friends. They can spend as much time as needed in any activity. They have opportunities to do things they see their parents do at home. They can prepare food such as grating carrots, peeling potatoes, cutting bananas, cracking nuts, or squeezing oranges. They can do carpentry such as hammering, nailing, and sawing. They can learn to tie shoes, work a zipper, use snaps and buttons. They can listen to music, sing, dance, and learn to play an instrument. They can paint, draw, work with clay, learn to sew, make masks for puppets. They can learn to count or make words. They can look at books about all the wondrous things in the world around them. They can look at a globe and look at pictures taken of different parts of the world, they can run, climb, play games, and have fun with their friends. They can sit on a knee and hug a teacher.

10. Is the Montessori method being used in public schools?

The Montessori method is now being used in many public, as well as private schools. An increasing number of public school teachers are discovering the Montessori method of education. Many teachers find that Montessori provides support for what they have intuitively been attempting or wanting to do. These teachers are excited about Montessori because it gives them specific materials and techniques which make it easier to work with children in the way they want.

11. What is Montessori elementary classroom like?

A Montessori classroom is an exciting place to be. There are many interesting books on a wide assortment of topics. Books on insects, plants, animals, different countries, history, etc. However, textbooks, workbooks and ditto sheets are not used. Instead, children work with many different concrete materials which help them to learn through an active process. In using these materials the children may make their own books, draw their own maps of time lines, and develop their own projects. As a result, the classroom is a busy, happy place to be. Since the classroom is well organized, with the intention of making all the materials visible and accessible for the children, the children can find what they want and work without having to wait for the teacher. Some children may be reading while others are doing math. Some people may be studying about ants while others are listening to classical music on headphones. The children are all engaged in purposeful activity which leads and develops the intelligence. The materials set out in the room have been carefully designed with an educational purpose in mind. Because of this, the children are free to move from activity to activity. They don't need to wait for assignments from the teacher. Meanwhile, the teacher is free to help individuals or small groups. The teacher is not tied to a routine of having to present a series of large group lessons to the whole class. The classroom, set out the materials, and then observe the children and determine how to help the teacher. The teacher does not need to test the children because it is easy to see how the children are doing by observing their activities. In this way the teacher can have immediate, up-to-date information about any child without time being taken away from learning and without threat of failure being imposed upon the child. Without the threat of failure, and with so many intriguing things to do, discipline problems disappear and a friendly, cooperative social community forms. Cooperation rather than competition becomes the tone of the the room and adversary relationships fade away, becoming friendships.

12. Up to what age is the Montessori program designed?

There are Montessori materials which are designed for use of children up to around 12 years of age. Whereas most Montessori schools are preschools, there are an increasing number of Montessori elementary schools which work with children through the sixth grade. There are a few Montessori junior and senior high school programs. Dr. Montessori did discuss the education of children up to the college level. However, she specifically designed materials only through the elementary school years. This was because she felt specially designed materials were only needed for the younger children since the older children would have the competence to learn with materials commonly available.

13. What is taught in a Montessori program?

In a Montessori program, children have the opportunity to learn the same subjects they would learn in any other program. At the preschool level children develop social, emotional, motor, and perceptual skills, and begin to learn how to read and do math. They become more involved with history, geography, and science. They learn some handwork as well as practical life skills. In elementary school, the curriculum is comprehensive. Parents are usually impressed with both the depth and breadth of the curriculum. Children master the basics early and can therefore spend more time developing skills and learning other subject areas.

14. Is a Montessori program expensive to set up and run?

It is expensive to set up a program from scratch, however, significant difference between receiving Montessori materials and other standard educational tools is that the Montessori materials generally don't need to be replaced as often. Quality in design, purpose, and craftsmanship make material that should last indefinitely if it is not abused. There are Montessori materials, made in the 1920's and used every day by the children, which have passed through three generations of teachers and are still beautiful and in use today.

15. How are children disciplined in a Montessori program?

Most visitors to a Montessori program are amazed at how peaceful, pleasant, and well behaved the children are. Montessori programs are noted for the self-discipline of their children. The particularly interesting thing about this is that the method does not involve techniques of coercion or manipulation. The children do not think of their teachers as being strict or mean. Techniques of force or power are not used. Basically, what happens is that the children find their needs are being met. They like the teacher and the classroom. They sense the teacher cares about them and is a source of help. The teacher realizes that children want to be liked and want to be accepted members of the group. Therefore, a child having acceptable behavior lessens and finally disappears. This makes the classroom a very pleasant place for both the children and the teacher. The keys to this process are:

a) An environment prepared to meet the children's needs.

b) A teacher trained in positive, constructive methods of helping children.

16. How do children from a Montessori program compare with children from other programs?

Children from a Montessori program are often several years ahead of grade level. They like school and are usually interested in everything. Typically, they are friendly, generous, cooperative, and respectful of both property and others.

17. What happens to children when they leave a Montessori Program?

Children from a Montessori program usually fit in well wherever they go after attending a Montessori program. They are respectful, cooperative, self-disciplined, and independent learners; they are well prepared to get along successfully in any program. Competence is a firm foundation for success.

18. Are Montessori Programs recognized?

The Montessori Method of education is well known. There are thousands of Montessori schools throughout the world. There are an increasing number of public school teachers and administrators becoming interested in the Montessori method of education, many new textbooks in the field of child development and education are referring to the important contribution of Dr. Montessori to the field of children's education.

19. Why should parents consider a Montessori education for their child?

The educational advantages a child receives in life are very important. The child's personality, outlook, and intelligence are in the process of being formed. In order for the child to fully actualize his or her potential, it is critical that the child be provided the resources and assistance necessary for learning a development to occur. This help can only be provided if it is based upon an adequate understanding of the child and the processes of growth and development. This information, and the necessary tools for helping development, is given to Montessori teachers in Montessori teacher training programs.

20. How are Montessori teachers trained?

Montessori teachers are trained through demonstration and the provision for opportunity practice. The Montessori curriculum is organized around specific teaching materials which are developmentally sequenced. Students then practice the techniques they have seen demonstrated until they have mastered the material well enough to use it with the children. The students absorb an understanding of child development and education through observation and explanation of the practice they see demonstrated. Further in-depth study of theory is provided through a tutorial program of guided reading, lessons, and assignments. In this way, teachers learn the use of specific materials, and techniques for helping children learn and envelop. At the same time they develop a theory of learning, development, curriculum, and teaching which supports, and is consistent with, the practice they are learning.

21. What are the Montessori teachers taught?

Montessori teachers specifically shown how to teach children to read, write, and do math. In addition, they are taught how to help children become independent, responsible, self-disciplined and cooperative. The teachers are shown how to teach children practical skills such as carpentry and sewing, they are taught specifically how to teach children the various subject areas; sciences such as botany, zoology, and astronomy; the social sciences of history and geography; and such arts as music, dance and different forms of handwork. The teachers are also taught techniques and materials for helping development of such basic capacities as the control over movement and the development of the senses of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell.

22. Why is the Montessori method of education different from other methods?

The Montessori method of education is based upon careful research which is passed on to teachers through training. It is a dynamic system of education in which each generation of teachers has the opportunity to pass on the knowledge gained through training and experience to future generations. It is a system of education where the best is kept and improvements are added and passed on. It has been used in different cultures and countries around the world. But beyond this, the Montessori method of education is more than just a set of nicely designed materials, and it is more than a few useful techniques. It is instead a comprehensive approach to working with children based upon research and careful training.

23. Are all Montessori programs the same?

Not every Montessori program is the same. Every Montessori program reflects the personalities of the adults running the program. Therefore, no two Montessori programs are exactly alike and each should be judged individually. In addition, as the Montessori method has grown in popularity, there has been an increase in the number of people offering teacher training. Each Montessori teacher training organization is somewhat different. When Dr. Montessori was alive there was only one international Montessori organization. Many countries had a national organization affiliated with the international one. Dr. Montessori designated Miss Homfray and Miss Child to be Co-Principals of a permanent Montessori teacher training center in London. This center later became known as St. Nicholas. Dr. Montessori then died in 1952. As interest in Montessori education continued to grow, St. Nicholas and some other national organizations become independent. Some people formed new organizations. In the early 1960's the American Montessori Society formed its own independent organization. Miss Homfray went on and helped establish a center in Ireland and later worked with a group of educators, former students, and fellow "Montessorian", and helped establish the Montessori World Educational Institute in the United States. Whereas the training varies with each organization, the inspiration from which each has sprung is the work of Dr. Montessori.