

# Introduction to Montessori

*From the American Montessori Society, amshq.org*

The Montessori Method of education, developed by Dr. Maria Montessori, is a child-centered educational approach based on scientific observations of children from birth to adulthood. Dr. Montessori's Method has been time tested, with over 100 years of success in diverse cultures throughout the world.

It is a view of the child as one who is naturally eager for knowledge and capable of initiating learning in a supportive, thoughtfully prepared learning environment. It is an approach that values the human spirit and the development of the whole child – physical, social, emotional, cognitive.

## Hallmarks of Montessori

Components necessary for a program to be considered authentically Montessori include multi-age groupings that foster peer learning, uninterrupted blocks of work time, and guided choice of work activity. In addition, a full complement of specially designed Montessori learning materials are meticulously arranged and available for use in the aesthetically pleasing environment.

The teacher, child, and environment create a learning triangle. The classroom is prepared by the teacher to encourage independence, freedom within limits, and a sense of order. The child, through individual choice, makes use of what the environment offers to develop himself, interacting with the teacher when support and/or guidance is needed.



Multi-age groupings are a hallmark of the Montessori Method: younger children learn from older children; older children reinforce their learning by teaching concepts they have already mastered. This arrangement also mirrors the real world, where individuals work and socialize with people of all ages and dispositions.

Dr. Montessori observed that children experience sensitive periods, or windows of opportunity, as they grow. As their students develop, Montessori teachers match appropriate lessons and materials to these sensitive periods when learning is most naturally absorbed and internalized.

In early childhood, Montessori students learn through sensory-motor activities, working with materials that develop their cognitive powers through direct experience: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, and movement. In the elementary years, the child continues to organize his thinking through work with the Montessori learning materials and an interdisciplinary curriculum as he passes from the concrete to the abstract. He begins the application of his knowledge to real-world experiences.

This organization of information – facts and figures – prepares the child for the world of adolescence, when thought and emotion evolve into understanding more abstract, universal concepts, such as equity, freedom, and justice.

## Benefits of Montessori



Montessori education offers our children opportunities to develop their potential as they step out into the world as engaged, competent, responsible, and respectful citizens with an understanding and appreciation that learning is for life.

- **Each child is valued as a unique individual.** Montessori education recognizes that children learn in different ways, and accommodates all learning styles. Students are also free to learn at their own pace, each advancing through the curriculum as he or she is ready, guided by the teacher and an individualized learning plan.
- **Beginning at an early age, Montessori students develop order, coordination, concentration, and independence.** Classroom design, materials and daily routines support the individual's emerging "self-regulation" (ability to educate one's self, and to think about what one is learning), toddlers through adolescents.
- **Students are part of a close, caring community.** The multi-age classroom – typically spanning 3 years – recreates a family structure. Older students enjoy stature as mentors and role models; younger children feel supported and gain confidence about the challenges ahead. Teachers model respect, loving kindness, and a belief in peaceful conflict resolution.
- **Montessori students enjoy freedom within limits.** Working within parameters set by their teachers, students are active participants in deciding what their focus of learning will be. Montessorians understand that internal satisfaction drives the child's curiosity and interest and results in joyous learning that is sustainable over a lifetime.
- **Students are supported in becoming active seekers of knowledge.** Teachers provide environments where students have the freedom and the tools to pursue answers to their own questions.
- **Self-correction and self-assessment are an integral part of the Montessori classroom approach.** As they mature, students learn to look critically at their work, and become adept at recognizing, correcting, and learning from their errors.



Given the freedom and support to question, to probe deeply, and to make connections, Montessori students become confident, enthusiastic, self-directed learners. They are able to think critically, work collaboratively, and to act boldly – a skill set for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Montessori Classrooms

To grasp the essence of Montessori education, just step inside a classroom.



Beautiful, inviting, and thoughtfully arranged, the room embodies each element of Maria Montessori's revolutionary approach.

Natural lighting, soft colors, and uncluttered spaces set the stage for activity that is focused and calm. Learning materials are displayed on accessible shelves, fostering independence as students go about their work.

Everything is where it is supposed to be, conveying a sense of harmony and order that both comforts and inspires. In this safe and empowering environment, students find joy in learning.

## Classroom Design

The design and flow of the Montessori classroom create a learning environment that accommodates choice. There are spaces suited to group activity, and areas where a student can



settle in alone. Parts of the room are open and spacious, allowing a preschooler to lay out strands of beads for counting, or an elementary student to ponder a 10-foot-long Timeline of Life.

You won't find the customary rows of school desks; children work at tables or on the floor, rolling out mats on which to work and define their work space.

Nor are you likely to find walls papered with brightly colored images of cartoons and syndicated characters.

Rather, you might see posters from a local museum, or framed photographs or paintings created by the students themselves. There are well-defined spaces for each part of the curriculum, such as Language Arts, Math, and Culture. Each of these areas features shelves or display tables with a variety of inviting materials from which students can choose. Many classrooms have an area devoted to peace and reflection: a quiet corner or table with well-chosen items – a vase of daisies, a goldfish bowl – to lead a child to meditative thought.

And always there are places to curl up with books, where a student can read or be read to.

Each classroom is uniquely suited to the need of its students.

Preschool rooms feature low sinks, chairs, and tables; a reading corner with a small couch (or comfy floor cushions); reachable shelves; and child-sized kitchen tools – elements that allow independence and help develop small motor skills. In upper-level classrooms you're likely to see large tables for group work, computers, interactive whiteboards, and areas for science labs.



Above all, each classroom is warm, well-organized, and inviting, with couches, rugs, and flowers to help children and youth feel calm and at home.

## Montessori Learning Materials



A hallmark of Montessori education is its hand-on approach to learning. Students work with specially designed materials, manipulating and investigating until they master the lesson inside.

Beautifully crafted and begging to be touched, Montessori's distinctive learning materials are displayed on open, easily accessible shelves. They are arranged (left to right, as we read in Western languages) in order of the sequence in the curriculum, from the simplest to the most complex.

Each material teaches a single skill or concept at a time – for example, the various “dressing frames” help toddlers learn to button, zip, and tie; 3-

dimensional

grammar symbols help elementary students analyze sentence structure and style. And, built into many of the materials is a mechanism (“control of error”) for providing the student with some way of assessing his or her progress and correcting mistakes, independent of the teacher.

The concrete materials provide passages to abstraction, and introduce concepts that become increasingly complex. As students progress, the teacher replaces some materials with others, ensuring that the level of challenge continues to meet their needs.



## The Teacher as “Guide”



The Montessori teacher, child, and environment may be seen as a learning triangle, with each element inextricably linked, and a vital part of the whole. The teacher thoughtfully prepares a classroom environment with materials and activities that entice her students to learn. She may guide her students to new lessons and challenges, but it is the child's interaction with what the environment has to offer that enables learning to occur. Because the teacher isn't meant as the focus of attention, she can often be difficult to spot. Typically you'll find her

sitting on the floor or at a table, observing her students as they work and making notations about their progress, or consulting with an individual or a small group.



## Multi-Age Groupings

A Montessori class is composed of students whose ages typically span 3 years. Ideally, members stay with the class, and teacher, for the entire cycle, forging a stable community and meaningful bonds.

It is common to see students of different ages working together. Older students enjoy mentoring their younger classmates – sometimes the best teacher is someone who has recently mastered the task at hand. Younger students look up to their big “brothers” and “sisters,” and get a preview of the alluring work to come.

## A Caring Community



The Montessori classroom radiates harmony and respect.

Members address each other respectfully and in modulated tones. There are no raised voices; no rude or hurtful behavior. There is a busy hum of activity, yet also a profound respect for silence.

Students show grace and courtesy, and an interest in the welfare of others. "Let me help!" is a common classroom refrain.

Students work together as stewards of their environment. They take turns caring for classroom pets and plants; do their part to maintain order, such as by returning materials to the shelves after use; and help keep outdoor spaces groomed and litter-free.

How to live in community, to learn independently, to think constructively and creatively: These are the lessons of the Montessori classroom that remain with its students as they make their way in the world.