

Montessori: What does it mean?

By Joe Bruno

Montessori is a name you'll hear many times when looking for preschool programs for your children. Maria Montessori did not copyright or patent the name because of her belief in the unfolding of education and her desire to see Montessori utilized as a method rather than as a system. Many misconceptions exist about Montessori education, some from a misinterpretation of Maria Montessori's work, and others from hearsay.

Maria Montessori, born in 1870, was the first woman granted a medical degree by an Italian university. She began her medical career by assessing the physical needs of disabled children. Influenced by the work of Seguin and Itard in France, Montessori designed materials and techniques, which allowed the disabled children to work in areas previously considered beyond their capacity. She concluded that if disabled children could reach the same academic level as other children, something was drastically wrong with the educational techniques of the time.

In 1907, Montessori began working with children in the slums. She was amazed by their remarkable, almost effortless ability to absorb knowledge from their surroundings and essentially teach themselves. This simple and profound truth inspired her pursuit of educational reform, curriculum development, methodology, psychology, teaching, and teacher training.

Her method is based on children's tendencies to explore and manipulate objects in the environment; to repeat an activity many times in order to perfect movement; to develop an inner sense of order from the existing environment; to choose their own activities; to adapt to their native culture by imitating activities seen around the household; and to learn almost effortlessly

when they choose an activity in which they're truly interested.

Montessori realized that children up to 6 years old have a genius capacity for mental absorption, which she called the Absorbent Mind. Children's ability to absorb the native tongue, to perfect movement, and to internalize order will never again be so acute.

From her observations, she designed the Montessori classroom around three basic agents: children's natural tendencies, the environment, and the adult or guide. It is the subtle interplay of these three elements that enable the creative life force of the child to unfold in a peaceful and unstressed manner.

A prepared environment is essential to a child's ability to operate independently. There is often misunderstanding about structure and lack of structure in a Montessori classroom. The environment is highly structured with beautiful objects placed in an orderly manner around the room. Extending out from all directions are open shelves with bright arrangements of solid geometric shapes, knobbed puzzle maps, metal templates, and paints and pencils of all colors. The room invites activity. Independence is shaped by the clear availability and self-corrective aspects of the materials. Within this structure, children can explore and use the materials on a variety of different levels, thus fulfilling their need for spontaneous creative discovery.

All this takes place in a room with a variety of ages. When children enter the "casa" at 2 ½ to 3 years, they interact with 4- to 6-year-olds who have been there for years. They spontaneously teach each other, which creates a bond between the age levels. The 3-year-olds can learn by watching a 6-

year-old, and after 3 years, they naturally assume a leadership role.

The aspect of the Montessori classroom called “practical life” may be considered the link to the young child’s home environment. The child spontaneously seeks order and independence through movement and purposeful activities, which have been observed around the home.

Materials are child-sized, which allow the child to become more independent through precise movements. Children are allowed to work uninterrupted at their own pace in order to complete their work and gain inner satisfaction. Upon completion of an activity, children return materials to the same place on the shelf for use by others. Practical life centers the child in an atmosphere where “please” and “thank you” and a polite offer of “do you need help with your work?” are the mainstays of conversation. A child is treated with respect and is, therefore, respectful.

Teaching mathematics through manipulation of rod bead counters and games helps the child visualize the structure of our numeration system. Materials are sequenced to enhance discovery of mathematical conditions. Any information arrived at independently is better retained.

Reading and writing are keys to uncover, converse and synthesize information. Sandpaper letters and alphabet cutouts enable the children to link sounds to symbols and their combinations into words. Montessori-educated children often write before they read, which allows the words to truly become their own. As the reading of words improves, they are presented with pictures and labels for objects in the room such as plants, countries, geometric figures, and landforms. Soon after they master phonetic reading, phonograms (sh, ai, ch, etc.) and sight words come into play. From the very beginning, reading and writing are tied to culture.

Art, music, and geography pervade the classroom environment and become an integrating link between all subject areas. Grace and courtesy lessons are essential to the free social flow in the classroom.

Learning to say “excuse me” when carrying a tray through a crowded room helps the children have direct experience in the use of social graces.

When looking for a Montessori school, it is important to shop around with a critical eye. Observe many schools before making your choice. Look for a calm, yet busy atmosphere where the underlying order is solid, but does not inhibit the spontaneous interaction of the creative learning environment. The room should be bright and cheerful, and the shelves should have an uncluttered look.

Always remember Montessori is just a name. In theory, however, it is a common-sense approach to aid children to be independent and self-fulfilled through intrinsic experience and the satisfaction of becoming one’s own teacher.