

Montessori 101: Some Basic Information that Every Montessori Parent Should Know

Every Year thousands of young children begin their education in Montessori schools around the world. Their parents ask, "Just what is this thing called Montessori?" Their questions are well founded, because Montessori schools are normally very different from the schools most of us attended when we were young.

Those of us who have spent years around Montessori children know that Montessori works! Parents new to Montessori have to sort through a host of conflicting impressions. When friends ask them to tell them about their children's new Montessori school, most parents honestly don't know where to begin.

"It all looked so nice when we visited the school last spring. But to tell the truth, most of what the school told us about how Montessori works sailed right past us! After all, it really is a bit uh to take in all at once, all this talk about the planes of development, sensitive periods, and prepared environments. And just what is it that we're suppose to call Samantha's teachers? Are they directresses, mentors, facilitators, or are they 'guides'? Gosh, I wonder if they ever just teach?"

It all seems so terribly complicated, especially when people seem to have such different impressions of Montessori. Some rave about it, while others think that you must be crazy to put your child in a Montessori school. Some people are firmly convinced that Montessori is too rigid and that it robs children of their creativity; others object that it is completely unstructured and without academic standards.

"Isn't Montessori the sort of school where they allow the children to do whatever they want? Perhaps it will work for Sally, but I'm afraid that if my Danny were left to his own devices, he'd never choose to do a lick of work! He needs order, structure, a small-class size, and discipline!"

For more than thirty, years, I've tried to help parents sort all this out so they could reassure themselves that Montessori isn't going to leave their children academically handicapped and unable to make it in the real world. It's still not easy to put Montessori into context when the rest of the world seems so completely committed to a very different approach to raising children.

Montessori 101 was written to help parents begin to discover and reconfirm what Montessori children know - Montessori works!

The Many Faces of Montessori in North America

There are perhaps 4,000 Montessori schools in the United States and Canada and thousands more around the world. Montessori schools are found throughout Western Europe, Central and South America, Australia, New Zealand, and much of Asia.

The movement is widespread in countries such as the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Ireland, India, Sri Lanka, Korea and Japan, and it is beginning to mushroom in Eastern Europe, the republics of the former Soviet Union, and China.

There is tremendous diversity within the community of Montessori schools. Despite the impression that all Montessori schools are the same, perhaps a franchise like McDonald's, no two Montessori schools are the same.

Across the United States and Canada, we can find Montessori schools in almost every community. They are found in church basements, converted barns, shopping centres, former public schools, and on expansive campuses with enrollments of hundreds of children and the air of stature and stability

We can find them in suburban and inner city public-school systems. Montessori schools are often found in charming homes - the outcome of the individual vision of the owner/director. Many are found in affluent communities, but just as many serve working-class neighbourhoods and the poor. We can find Montessori in Head Start programs, child care centres in our inner cities, migrant workers' camps, and on Indian reservation.

Some Montessori schools pride themselves on remaining faithful to what they see as Dr. Maria Montessori's original vision, while others appreciate flexibility and pragmatic adaptation. Each school reflects its own unique blend of facilities, programs, personality, and interpretation of Dr. Montessori's vision.

Most Montessori schools begin with three year olds and extend through the elementary grades. Every year more schools open middle-school programs at one end; infant-toddler programs at the other.

Montessori schools offer a wide range of programs. Many are focussed on meeting the needs of the working family. Others describe themselves as college-preparatory programs. Public Montessori programs pride themselves on serving all children, while many independent schools work hard to find the perfect match of student, school, and family values. The Montessori Foundation and International Montessori Council celebrate the diversity to be found among Montessori schools. Just as each child is unique, so are the schools that we create unique communities of parents and teachers.

What makes Montessori schools different?

Montessori schools are not completely different from other schools. Over the last century, Dr. Maria Montessori's ideas have had a profound and growing influence on education around the world. However, while individual elements of her programs are finding their way into more classrooms every year, there is a cumulative impact that we see when schools fully implement the entire Montessori model which creates something quite distinct. Here are a few key points to consider as you look at Montessori schools more closely:

Montessori schools begin with a deep respect for children as unique individuals. They work from a deep concern for their social and emotional development.

Montessori schools are warm and supportive communities of students, teachers, and parents. Children don't get lost in the crowd!

Montessori consciously teaches children to be kind and peaceful.

Montessori classrooms are bright and exciting environments for learning.

Montessori classes bring children together in multi-age groups, rather than classes comprised of just one grade level. Normally they span three age levels. Children stay with their teachers for three years. This allows teachers to develop close and long-term relationships with their pupils, allows them to know each child's learning style very well, and encourages a strong sense of community among the children. Every year more non-Montessori schools adopt this highly effective strategy.

Montessori classrooms are not run by the teachers alone. Students are taught to manage their own community and develop uncanny leadership skills and independence.

Montessori assumes that children are born intelligent, they simply learn in different ways and progress at their own pace. The Montessori approach to education is consciously designed to recognize and address different learning styles, helping students learn to study most effectively. Students progress as they master new skills, moving ahead as quickly as they are ready.

Montessori students rarely rely on texts and workbooks. Why? Because many of the skills and concepts that children learn are abstract, and texts simply don't bring them to life. Also, in the case of reading, many reading series fail to collect first rate and compelling stories and essays; instead, Montessori relies upon hands-on concrete learning materials and the library where children are introduced to the best in literature and reference materials.

Learning is not focussed on rote drill and memorization. The goal is to develop students who really understand their schoolwork.

Montessori students learn through hands-on experience, investigation, and research. They become actively engaged in their studies, rather than passively waiting to be spoon fed.

Montessori challenges and sets high expectations for all students, not only those considered "gifted."

Students develop self-discipline and an internal sense of purpose and motivation. After graduation from Montessori, these values serve them well in high school, college, and in their lives as adults.

Montessori schools normally reflect a highly diverse student body, and their curriculum promotes mutual respect and a global perspective.

Students develop a love for the natural world. Natural science and outdoor education is an important element of our children's experience.

The Montessori curriculum is carefully structured and integrated to demonstrate the connections among the different subject areas. Every class teaches critical thinking, composition, and research. History lessons link architecture, the arts, science, and technology.

Students learn to care about others through community service.

Montessori teachers facilitate learning, coach students along, and come to know them as friends and mentors.

Students learn not to be afraid of making mistakes; they come to see them as natural steps in the learning process.

Montessori students learn to collaborate and work together in learning and on major projects. They strive for their personal best, rather than compete against one another for the highest grade in their class.

Selecting a Montessori School for Your Child

Although most Montessori schools try to remain faithful to their understanding of Dr. Montessori's insights and research, they have all, to some degree, been influenced by the evolution of our culture and technology.

Perhaps the more relevant question in selecting a Montessori school is to consider how well it matches your sense of what you want for your child. No one educational approach can be right for every learner. The wisest goal is to seek out the best fit, not only between the student and the school, but also between the parents' values and goals for their child's education and what a given school can realistically deliver. I believe that finding the right school for mom and dad is as important as finding the right school for the child.

In the end, the selection of a Montessori school comes down to a matter of personal style and preference. If you visit a school and find yourself in harmony with its ambiance and practice, it will represent at least one example of what you define to be a good school.

In determining which school is best, we all have to trust our eyes, ears, and gut instincts. Nothing beats personal observation. The school that one parent raves about, may be completely wrong for another's child. Conversely, another parent may have decided that "Montessori doesn't work," while it clearly is working very well for your family. Rely on your own experience, not hearsay from other parents.

How can I know if I've found a "real" Montessori school?

Characteristics of an Authentic Montessori School

*Dr. Nancy McCormick Rambush, founder of the American Montessori Society and co-founder of the Montessori Foundation, identified the following characteristics of an "authentic" Montessori school:**

* The following ideas are excerpted from *The Authentic American Montessori School: A Guide to the Self-Study, Evaluation, and Accreditation of American Schools Committed to Montessori Education*, by Dr. Nancy McCormick Rambush and Dr John Stoops, published in 1992 by the Commission of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools and the American Montessori Society

The Montessori Learning Environment (A Child-Centred Environment):

The focus of activity in the Montessori setting is on children's learning, not on teachers' teaching. Generally students will work individually or in small, self-selected groups. There will be very few whole-group lessons.

A Responsive, Prepared Environment:

The environment should be designed to meet the needs, interests, abilities, and development of the children in the class. The teachers should design and adapt the environment with this community of children in mind, rapidly modifying the selection of educational materials available, the physical layout, and the tone of the class to fit the ever changing needs of the children.

A Focus on Individual Progress and Development:

Within a Montessori program, children progress at their own pace, moving on to the next step in each area of learning as they are ready. While the child lives within a larger community of children, each student is viewed as a universe of one.

Montessori Learning Activities/Hands-On Learning:

In Montessori, students rarely learn from texts or workbooks. In all cases, direct, personal, hands-on contact with either real things under study or with concrete models that bring abstract concepts to life allow children to learn with much deeper understanding.

Spontaneous Activity:

It is natural for children to wiggle, touch things, and explore the world around them. Any true Montessori environment encourages children to move about freely, within reasonable limits of appropriate behaviour. Much of the time they select work that captures their interest and attention, although teachers also strive to draw their attention and capture their interest in new challenges and areas of inquiry. And even within this atmosphere of spontaneous activity, students do eventually have to master the basic skills of their culture, even if they would prefer to avoid them.

Active Learning:

In Montessori classrooms, children not only select their own work most of the time, but also continue to work with tasks, returning to continue their work over many weeks or months, until finally the work is "so easy for them" that they can teach it to younger children. This is one of many ways that Montessori educators use to confirm that students have reached mastery of each skill.

Self-Directed Activity:

One of Montessori's key concepts is the idea that children are driven by their desire to become independent and competent beings in the world, to learn new things, and master new skills. For this reason, outside rewards to create external motivation are both unnecessary and potentially can lead to passive adults who are dependent on others for everything from their self-image to permission to follow their dreams. In the process of making independent choices and exploring concepts largely on their own, Montessori children construct their own sense of individual identity and right and wrong.

Freedom with Limits:

Montessori children enjoy considerable freedom of movement and choice; however, their freedom always exists within carefully defined limits on the range of their behaviour. They are free to do anything appropriate to the ground rules of the community, but they are redirected promptly and firmly if they cross over the line.

Intrinsic Motivation to Learn:

In Montessori programs, children do not work for grades or external rewards, nor do they simply complete assignments given them by their teachers. Children learn because they are interested in things and because all children share a desire to become competent and independent human beings.

Montessori's Communities of Learners (Mixed-Age Groups):

Montessori classrooms gather together children of two, three, or more age levels into a family group. Children remain together for several years, with only oldest students moving onto the next class at year end.

Family Setting:

Montessori classrooms are communities of children and adults. As children grow older and more capable, they assume a great role in helping to care for the environment and meeting the needs of younger children in the class. The focus is less on the teachers and more on the entire community of children and adults, much like one finds in a real family.

Cooperation and Collaboration, Rather than Competition:

Montessori children are encouraged to treat one another with kindness and respect. Insults and shunning behaviour tends to be much more rare. Instead we normally find children who have a great fondness for one another and who are free from the one-upmanship and needless interpersonal competition for attention and prestige. Because children learn at their own paces, and teachers refrain from comparing students against one another.

To Awaken and Nurture the Human Spirit (The Child as a Spiritual Being):

Montessori saw children as far more than simply scholars. In her view, each child is a full and complete human being, the mother or father of the adult man or woman she will become. Even very young, the child shares with the rest of humanity hopes, dreams, fears, emotions and longing.

From her perspective, this goes beyond mental health to the very core of one's inner spiritual life. Montessori consciously designs social communities and educational experiences that cultivate the child's sense of independence, self-respect, love of peace, passion for self-chosen work done well, and ability to respect and celebrate the individual spirit within people of all ages and the value of all life.

Universal Values:

Montessori deliberately teaches children not only appropriate patterns of polite behaviour, but seeks to instill basic universal values within the core of the child's personality. These values include self-respect, acceptance of the uniqueness and dignity of each person we meet, kindness, peacefulness, compassion, empathy, honour, individual responsibility, and courage to speak from our hearts.

Global Understanding:

All Montessori schools are, to a large degree, international schools. They not only tend to attract a diverse student body representing many ethnic backgrounds, religions, and international backgrounds, but they actively celebrate their diversity. The curriculum is international in its heritage and focus, and consciously seeks to promote a global perspective.

Service to Others:

Montessori's spiritual perspective leads Montessori schools to consciously organize programs of community service ranging from daily contributions to others within the class or school setting, to community outreach programs that allow children and adults to make a difference in the lives of others. The fundamental idea is one of stewardship.³

The Montessori Teacher**Authoritative:**

The teacher is firm at the edges and empathetic at the centre, the kind of adult who responds empathetically to children's feelings, while setting clear and consistent limits.

Observer:

The Montessori teacher is a trained observer of children's learning and behaviour. These careful observations are recorded and used to infer where each student is, in terms of his or her development, and leads the teacher to know when to intervene in the child's learning with a new lesson, a fresh challenge, or a reinforcement of basic ground rules.

An Educational Resource:

Montessori teachers facilitate the learning process by serving as a resource to whom the children can turn as they pull together information, impressions, and experiences.

Role Model:

Like all great teachers, the Montessori educator deliberately models the behaviours and attitudes that she is working to instill in her students. Because of Montessori's emphasis on character development, the Montessori teacher normally is exceptionally calm, kind, warm, and polite to each child.

What Do Montessori Teachers Do?**Respectfully Engage the Learner:**

The Montessori teacher recognizes that her role is not so much to teach as to inspire, mentor, and facilitate the learning process. The real work of learning belongs to the individual child. Because of this, the Montessori educator remains conscious of her role in helping each child to fulfill his potential as a human being and of creating an environment for learning within which children will feel safe, cherished, and empowered.

Facilitate the "Match" between the Learner and Knowledge:

Montessori teachers are trained to identify the best response to the changing interests and needs of each child as a unique individual. Because they truly accept that children learn in many different ways and at their own pace, Montessori educators understand that they must "follow the child," adjusting their strategies and timetable to fit the development of each of their pupils.

Environmental Engineer:

Montessori teachers organize appropriate social settings and academic programs for children at their own level of development. They do this to a large degree through the design of the classroom, selection and organization of learning activities, and structure of the day.

Accreditation

Often one sign of a school's commitment to professional excellence is its membership in one of the professional Montessori societies, such as the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI), the American Montessori Society (AMS), or the newly organized International Montessori Council (IMC).

These organizations also offer schools the opportunity to become accredited. There are several dozen other smaller organizations as well. Further, it is important to remember that many schools chose not to affiliate with any national organization. They are independent.