

## **Montessori 101: Montessori Basics For Parents**

**by Tim Seldin**

### **What makes Montessori different?**

The Montessori approach is often described as an "education for life." When we try to define what children take away from their years in Montessori, we need to expand our vision to include more than just the basic academic skills.

Normally, Americans think of a school as a place where one generation passes down basic skills and culture to the next. From this perspective, a school only exists to cover a curriculum, not to develop character and self-esteem. But in all too many traditional and highly competitive schools, students memorize facts and concepts with little understanding, only to quickly forget them when exams are over.

Recent studies show that many bright students are passive learners. They coast through school, earning high grades, but rarely pushing themselves to read material that hasn't been assigned, ask probing questions, challenge their teacher's cherished opinions, or think for themselves. They typically want teachers to hand them the "right answer." The problem isn't with today's children, but with today's schools. Children are as gifted, curious, and creative as they ever were, when they're working on something that captures their interest and which they have voluntarily chosen to explore.

Montessori schools work to develop culturally literate children and nurture their fragile sparks of curiosity, creativity, and intelligence. They have a very different set of priorities from traditional schools, and a very low regard for mindless memorization and superficial learning. Montessori students may not memorize as many facts, but they do tend to become self-confident, independent thinkers who learn because they are interested in the world and enthusiastic about life, not simply to get a good grade.

Montessori believed that there was more to life than simply the pursuit of wealth and power. To her, finding one's place in the world, work that is meaningful and fulfilling, and developing the inner peace and depth of soul that allows us to love are the most important goals in life.

### **The Children's House**

In her research, Dr. Montessori noted specific characteristics associated with the child's interests and abilities at each plane of development. She argued that a school carefully designed to meet the needs and interests of the child will work more effectively because it doesn't fight human nature. Montessori taught teachers how to "follow the child" through careful observation, allowing each student to reveal her strengths and weaknesses, interests and anxieties, and strategies that work best to facilitate the development of her human potential.

This focus on the "whole child" led Dr. Montessori to develop a very different sort of school from the traditional adult-centered classroom. To emphasize this difference, she named her first school the "Casa dei Bambini" or the "Children's House."

There is something profound in her choice of words, for the Montessori classroom is not the domain of the adults in charge, but rather it is a carefully prepared environment designed to facilitate the development of the children's independence and sense of personal empowerment. This is the children's community. They move freely within it, selecting work that captures their interest, rather than participating in all-day lessons and projects selected by the teachers.

In a very real sense, even very small children are responsible for the care of their own child-sized environments. When they are hungry, they prepare their own snack and drink. They go to the bathroom without assistance. When something spills, they help each other carefully clean things up. Four generations of parents have been amazed to see small children in Montessori classrooms cut raw fruits and vegetables, sweep and dust, carry pitchers of water and pour liquids with barely a drop spilled. The children normally go about their work so calmly and purposely that it is clear to even the casual observer that they are the masters in this environment: a "Children's Community."

Montessori's first "Children's Community," opened in 1907, was made up of 60 inner-city children who largely came from dysfunctional families. In her book, *The Montessori Method*, Dr. Montessori describes the transformation that took place during the first few months, as the children evolved into a "family." They prepared and served the daily meals, washed the pots and dishes, helped the younger children bathe and change their clothes, swept, cleaned, and worked in the garden. These very young children developed a sense of maturity and connectedness that helped them realize a much higher level of their potential as human beings.

While times have changed, the need to feel connected is still as strong as ever. In fact, for today's children it is probably even more important. Whether it's an inner-city child or a child from an affluent suburb, the sense of community has all but disappeared from our children's lives. Families regularly move from house to house and from town to town. Grandparents usually live in other cities or other states. Both parents work out of necessity, and when they are at home, they are very, very busy. The "latch-key" child has become the norm for this generation. Many children have the sense that they do not belong to anything or anybody, which is why gangs, which give a sense of belonging, have always had a certain appeal for some children.

Along with whatever else Montessori gives our children, it definitely gives them the message that they belong - that their school is like a second family. Studies on the moral and emotional development of children strongly suggest that while there are probably a few children in every thousand who are truly little "gangsters" at heart, a child's sense of moral reasoning and sense of self are directly related. Children will normally grow up to be productive, happy, positive individuals if given the right emotional environment. It seems clear that our attitudes about people, the ability to overcome our tendency to be egocentric, our willingness to share, to compromise, to resolve conflicts non-violently, and our ability to discover a basic sense of self-worth are not qualities that human beings develop spontaneously but rather through years of experience with caring people, who convince us that we belong and give us the opportunity to practice and master these skills of everyday living. As in all things, children learn to be kind and compassionate.

### **Montessori Schools Are Based on the Principles of Respect and Independence**

Montessori schools believe very strongly that intelligence is not fixed at birth, nor is the human potential anywhere near as limited as it sometimes seems in traditional education. The validity of these beliefs has been confirmed by the research of Piaget, Gardner, Coleman, and many others. We know that each child is a full and complete individual in her own right. Even when she is very small, she deserves to be treated with the full and sincere respect that we would extend to her parents. Respect breeds respect, and creates an atmosphere within which learning is tremendously facilitated. Success in school is directly tied to the degree to which children believe that they are capable and independent human beings. If they knew the words, even very young children would ask: Help me learn to do it for myself!

By allowing children to develop a meaningful degree of independence and self-discipline, Montessori sets a pattern for a lifetime of good work habits and a sense of responsibility. Students are taught to take pride in doing things for themselves carefully and well.

### **Montessori Teaches Children to Think and Discover for Themselves**

Montessori schools are designed to help each student discover and develop her unique talents and possibilities. They treat each child as a unique individual learner. In Montessori, children learn at their own pace, and learn in the ways that work best for them as individuals. The goal is to be flexible and creative in addressing each student as a unique individual.

Learning the right answers may get a child through school, learning how to become a life-long, independent learner will take her anywhere! Montessori teaches children to think, not simply to memorize, feed back, and forget. Rather than present students with loads of right answers, Montessori educators keep asking the right questions, and lead them to discover the answers for themselves. Learning becomes its own reward, and each success fuels a desire to discover even more. Older students are encouraged to do their own research, analyze what they have found, and come to their own conclusions. Teachers encourage children to think for themselves and become actively engaged in the learning process.

### **The Importance of Freedom of Movement and Independently Chosen Work**

Young children touch and manipulate everything in their environment. In a sense, the mind is hand made, because through movement and touch, the child explores, manipulates, and builds up a storehouse of impressions about the physical world around her. Children learn by doing, and this requires movement and spontaneous investigation. Montessori children are free to move about, working alone or with others at will. They may select any activity and work with it as long as they wish, so long as they do not disturb anyone or damage anything and they put it back where it belongs when they are finished.

Many exercises, especially at the early childhood level, are designed to draw the child's attention to the sensory properties of objects within her environment: size, shape, color, texture, weight, smell, sound, etc. Gradually she learns to pay attention, seeing more clearly small details in the things around her. She has begun to observe and appreciate her environment. This is a key in helping the child discover how to learn.

Freedom is a second critical issue as the child begins to explore. Our goal is less to teach her facts and concepts, but rather to help her fall in love with the process of focusing her complete attention on something and solving its riddle with enthusiasm and even joy. Work assigned by the adult rarely results in such enthusiasm and interest as does work that a child freely chooses for herself. The prepared environment of the Montessori class is a learning laboratory in which the child is allowed to explore, discover, and select her own work. The independence that the child gains is not only empowering on a social and emotional basis, but it is also intrinsically involved with helping the child become comfortable and confident in her ability to master the environment, ask questions, puzzle out the answer, and learn without needing to be spoon-fed by an adult.

### **A Carefully Prepared Environment**

Montessori classrooms tend to fascinate both children and their parents. They are normally bright, warm, and inviting, filled with plants, animals, art, music, and books. There are interest centers filled with intriguing learning materials, fascinating mathematical models, maps, charts, fossils, historical

artifacts, computers, scientific apparatus, perhaps a small natural-science museum, and animals that the children are raising. Montessori classrooms are commonly referred to as a prepared environment. This name reflects the care and attention that is given to creating a learning environment that will reinforce the children's independence and intellectual development.

You would not expect to find rows of desks in a Montessori classroom. The rooms are set up to facilitate student discussion and stimulate collaborative learning. One glance and it's clear that children feel comfortable and safe. Students are typically found scattered around the classroom, working alone or with one or two others. They tend to become so involved in their work that visitors are immediately struck by the peaceful atmosphere. It may take a moment to spot the teachers within the environment. They will be found working with one or two children at a time, advising, presenting a new lesson, or quietly observing the class at work.

### **The Montessori Curriculum**

The Montessori classroom is organized into several curriculum areas, usually including: language arts (reading, literature, grammar, creative writing, spelling, and handwriting), mathematics and geometry, everyday living skills, sensory awareness exercises and puzzles, geography, history, science, art, music, and movement. Most rooms will include a classroom library. Each area is made up of one or more shelf units, cabinets, and display tables with a wide variety of materials on open display ready for use as the children select them.

The Montessori curriculum is organized into a spiral of integrated studies, rather than a traditional model in which the curriculum is compartmentalized into separate subjects, with given topics considered only once at a specific grade level. In the early years, lessons are introduced simply and concretely and are reintroduced several times over succeeding years at increasing degrees of abstraction and complexity.

The course of study uses an integrated thematic approach that ties the separate disciplines of the curriculum together into studies of the physical universe, the world of nature, and the human experience. Literature, the arts, history, social issues, political science, economics, science and the study of technology all complement one another. This integrated approach is one of Montessori's great strengths. As an example, when students study Africa, they also read African folktales, create African masks and make African block print dashikis in art, learn Swahili songs in music and traditional folk dances, and study the ecosystems, flora, fauna, and natural resources. Montessori schools offer a rigorous and innovative academic program.

### **The Montessori Materials: A Road from the Concrete to the Abstract**

A basic element of the Montessori approach is the simple observation that children learn most effectively through direct experience and the process of investigation and discovery. In her studies of child development, Dr. Montessori noted that most children do not learn by memorizing what they hear from their teachers or read in a text; instead, they learn from concrete experience and direct interaction with the environment. Asking a child to sit back and watch us perform a process or experiment is like asking a one-year-old not to put everything in his mouth. Children need to manipulate and explore everything that catches their interest. Anyone who has raised a child knows that this is true just from daily experience. It's ironic that most schools today still teach primarily through lecture, textbooks, and workbooks. Most students still spend their days sitting behind a desk praying for the recess bell to ring.

Dr. Montessori recognized that concrete learning apparatus makes learning much more rewarding. The Montessori learning materials are not the method itself; they are the tools that we use to stimulate the child into logical thought and discovery. They are provocative and simple, each carefully designed to appeal to children at a given level of development. Each material isolates and teaches one thing or is used to present one skill at a time as the child is ready. Montessori carefully analyzed the skills and concepts involved in each subject and noted the sequence in which children most easily master them.

The materials are displayed on low, open shelves that are easily accessible to even the youngest children. They are arranged to provide maximum eye-appeal without clutter. Each has a specific place on the shelves, arranged from the upper left-hand corner in sequence to the lower right, following their sequence in the curricular flowchart. The materials are arranged in sequence from the most simple to the most complex and from the most concrete to those that are most abstract.

### **Montessori classes are made up of a two- or three-year age span**

Many pre-schools are proud of their very small group sizes, sometimes as low as five children to one adult, and parents often wonder why Montessori classes are so much larger. Schools with the smaller groups assume that the teacher is the source of instruction, a very limited resource. They reason that as the number of children decreases, the time that teachers have to spend with each child increases. Ideally, we would have a one-on-one tutorial situation. But the best teacher of a three-year-old is often another child who is just a little bit older and has mastered a skill. This process is good for both the tutor and the younger child. In this situation, the teacher is not the primary focus. The larger group size puts the focus less on the adult and encourages children to learn from each other. By having enough children in each age group, all students will find others at their developmental level.

Montessori classes are organized to encompass a two- or three-year age span, which allows younger students to experience the daily stimulation of older role models, who in turn blossom in the responsibilities of leadership. Students not only learn "with" each other, but "from" each other. Some parents worry that by having younger children in the same class as older ones, one group or the other will be shortchanged. They fear that the younger children will absorb the teachers' time and attention, or that the importance of covering the kindergarten curriculum for the five-year-olds will prevent them from giving the three- and four-year-olds the emotional support and stimulation that they need. Both concerns are misguided. Working in one class for two or three years allows students to develop a strong sense of community with their classmates and teachers. The age range also allows the especially gifted child the stimulation of intellectual peers, without requiring that she skip a grade and feel emotionally out of place.

### **A Different Daily Schedule**

Days are not divided into fixed time periods for each subject. Teachers call students together as they are ready for lessons individually or in small groups. A typical day's work is divided into "fundamentals" that have been assigned by the faculty and self-initiated projects and research selected by the student. Students work to complete their assignments at their own pace - typically with care and enthusiasm. Teachers closely monitor their students' progress, keeping the level of challenge high. Teacher feedback to students and parents helps students learn how to pace themselves and take a great deal of personal responsibility for their studies, both of which are essential for later success in college and in life. We encourage students to work together collaboratively, and many assignments can only be accomplished through teamwork. Students constantly share their interests and discoveries with

each other. The youngest experience the daily stimulation of their older friends, and are naturally spurred on to be able to "do what the big kids can do."

### **How Montessori Teachers Meet the Needs of So Many Different Children**

Montessori teachers do more than present curriculum. The secret of any great teacher is helping learners get to the point that their minds and hearts are open and they are ready to learn, where the motivation is not focused on getting good grades but, instead, involves a basic love of learning. As parents know their own children's learning styles and temperaments, teachers, too, develop this sense of each child's uniqueness by developing a relationship over a period of years with the child and her parents. Dr. Montessori believed that teachers should focus on the child as a person, not on the daily lesson plan. Montessori nurtures and inspires the human potential, leading children to ask questions, think for themselves, explore, investigate, and discover. Our ultimate objective is to help them to learn how to learn independently, retaining the curiosity, creativity, and intelligence with which they were born. Montessori teachers don't simply present lessons; they are facilitators, mentors, coaches, and guides.

Traditionally, teachers tell us that they "teach students the basic facts and skills that they will need to succeed in the world." Studies show that in many classrooms, as much as 40 percent of the day may be spent on discipline and classroom management. Montessori educators play a very different role. Wanting to underscore the very different role played by adults in her schools, Dr. Montessori used the title "director" or "directress" instead of "teacher." In Italian, the word implies the role of the coordinator or administrator of an office or factory. Today, many Montessori schools prefer to call their teachers "guides."

Whatever they're called, Montessori teachers are rarely the center of attention, for this is not their class; it is the "Children's House." Normally Montessori teachers will not spend much time working with the whole class at once. Their primary role is to prepare and maintain the physical, intellectual, and social/emotional environment within which the children will work. Certainly, a key aspect of this is the selection of intriguing and developmentally appropriate opportunities for learning to meet the needs and interests of each child in the class.

#### **Montessori guides have four principle goals:**

to awaken the child's spirit and imagination;

to encourage his normal desire for independence and high sense of self-esteem;

to help him develop the kindness, courtesy, and self-discipline that will allow him to become a full member of society; and

to help the child learn how to observe, question, and explore ideas independently.

Montessori teachers rarely present a lesson to more than a handful of children at one time, and they limit lessons to brief, efficient presentations. The goal is to give the children just enough to capture their attention and spark their interest, intriguing them enough that they will come back on their own to work with the materials. Lessons center around the most clear and simple information necessary for the children to do the work on their own: the name of the material, its place on the shelf, the ground-rules for its use, and some of the possibilities inherent within it. Montessori guides closely monitor their students' progress, keeping the level of challenge high. Because they normally work with each child for two or three years, guides get to know their students' strengths and weaknesses, interests, and

anxieties extremely well. Montessori guides often use the children's interests to enrich the curriculum and provide alternate avenues for accomplishment and success.

Elementary level Montessori students rarely work from textbooks. Instead they learn to use the library and internet to gather information into reports and presentations to share with their friends. Naturally they also do a great deal of hands-on project-oriented learning that makes their studies come alive. Dr. Montessori often spoke of "spontaneous activity in learning."

### **Homework, Tests, and Grades**

Many parents have heard that Montessori schools do not believe in homework, grades, and tests. This is really a misunderstanding of Montessori's insights. Whenever students voluntarily decide to learn something, they tend to engage in their work with a passion and attention that few students will ever invest in tasks that have been assigned. This doesn't mean that they can do whatever they want academically, possibly electing to learn to read and possibly not. Montessori students have to live within a cultural context, which for us involves the mastery of skills and knowledge that we consider basic. Montessori gives students the opportunity to choose a large degree of what they investigate and learn, as well as the ability to set their own schedule during class time.

This freedom of choice sometimes causes parents to worry about whether their children will be able to cope if they transfer to another school. For many families, homework, grades, and test results are the only objective evidence that can tell them how well their children are doing in comparison to children attending traditional schools. The ongoing impact of a Montessori program and its long-term outcomes are not always visible and clear to parents. Many struggle to understand how Montessori works, but all too often they come away confused and worried that they might be setting their children up for failure when they transfer to a traditional classroom. This leads some parents to have ambivalent thoughts about their long-term relationship with Montessori. They will stay as long as their children are happy and "doing well," but parents may plan to transfer them to a traditional school when they reach the age when their education "really counts."

Even very supportive parents may worry whether their investment in Montessori is going to pay off, and they look for evidence as to whether or not it is really working. Montessori guides reassure parents every year that their fears are misguided, and that children who transfer from Montessori programs normally make a smooth adjustment to their new schools and typically end up as honor students. Even when their children are very young, parents don't want to hear that Montessori schools don't believe in report cards, workbooks, homework, or tests. No matter how impressed they may be with Montessori, few parents can place trust any in school when it involves their children's future. They expect to be kept informed about their children's progress and the classroom program.

Montessori educators, on the other hand, frequently argue that testing is inaccurate, misleading, and stressful for children. Further, they argue that tests are not necessary, since any good teacher who works with the same children for three years and carefully observes their work, knows far more about their progress than any paper and pencil test can reveal; however, in our culture, test-taking skills are just another practical life lesson that children need to master. Many elementary Montessori programs regularly give students quizzes on the concepts and skills that they have been studying, and many schools use standardized tests, either annually or every other year with students over first grade.

The problem with tests is how they have been used and interpreted in other schools, rather than as a means to challenge students to demonstrate skills and knowledge. When tests are used as a feedback loop, at times indicating that a student needs a new lesson and more practice, instead of a

mark of shame and failure, then they can be quite useful. Children will face standardized tests throughout their education, and they certainly need to develop good test taking skills.

## **Competition**

In Montessori, students learn to collaborate with each other rather than mindlessly compete. Students discover their own innate abilities and develop a strong sense of independence, self-confidence, and self-discipline. In an atmosphere in which children learn at their own pace and compete only against themselves, they learn to not be afraid of making mistakes. They quickly find that few things in life come easily, and they can try again without fear of embarrassment. Children compete with each other every day both in class and on the playground.

Montessori, herself an extraordinary student and a very high achiever, was never opposed to competition on principle. Her objection was to using competition to create an artificial motivation to get students to achieve. She argued that for an education to profoundly touch a child's heart and mind, he must be learning because he is curious and interested, not simply to earn the highest grade in the class. Montessori allows competition to evolve naturally among children, without adult interference unless the children begin to show poor sportsmanship. The key is the child's voluntary decision to compete, rather than having it imposed on him by the school.

***Tim Seldin is the President of the Montessori Foundation. He is the Headmaster Emeritus of the Barrie School, Co-Founder of the Institute for Advanced Montessori Studies, and co-author of two books, The World In The Palm Of Her Hand and Celebrations of Life.***