

Why Montessori

The name "Montessori" is after Maria Montessori, an Italian lady who was born in 1870. From what I've read, she seems to be a Jill-of-all-trades; her excellence at Physics and Math drew her to pursue an Engineering degree, halfway through, she decided medicine would be her preferred choice – and when she graduated she became Italy's first ever lady doctor.

Her early work in anthropology, philosophy and psychology lead to an interest in human development and education – and when she discovered children, especially ones with special needs, seemed to respond well to her methods, she devoted most of her life to the study of early childhood education.

Her theories and the materials used are amazing – I find it hard to believe that all those ideas came from one person. Her ideas and material are still used today – most are still applicable although times have changed a great deal.

Defining Montessori

The material that the children work with are immaculately designed, and simply beckon to the child to try it out, once it is demonstrated by the teacher. The amount of information learnt by a child through material exploration is phenomenal, but the beauty of it all is that the child does not realize he is learning, he learns through play and repeated activity cycles with the material, learning something new each time.

When a child first enters a Montessori nursery at 2 ½ , he is taught how to perform everyday tasks, like pouring water, folding, dressing himself (handling buttons, zips, buckles, and even laces!), using cutlery, tongs, a blunt knife. They also learn to walk along a straight line, hop, skip and jump. These activities build confidence, improve dexterity, hand-eye coordination and well as balance and poise.

"Practical Life" activity (as these are called) is every much as important as other, more academic subjects. They not only help the child take his place in his family as a "chore-helping" member, but working with practical life material in class seems to serve as a "de-stresser" or a winding down activity after a long period of academic activity.

Each child works at their own pace, there is no rush to catch up with anyone/anything, making the environment pressure free and relaxed. For this reason, children are not segregated by age, they simply move around comfortably in the work area, choosing to work with material on the floor or sitting at a table. This kind of classroom a vertical grouped class which means children of all ages are in the same area.

The teacher directs each child's activity, leaving him to explore the material for himself after a simple demonstration, but making sure he has mastered each type of activity and understands the concept to be learnt by it before he moves on to the next activity. This method is used for each subject; math, language, etc. Each day, the child works with a piece of material for each subject, moving on only when he is ready.

A child usually leaves a montessori kindergarten with a strong foundation in all subjects especially reading and maths. The syllabus is extensive. The child gets an insight to world and continent maps, & different land forms in Geography. The evolution of the species in History. The different classification of animals, life cycles, parts of the body in Zoology. Leaves, plants, trees, parts of flowers, photosynthesis in Botany. To add, subtract, multiply and divide large numbers up to thousands in Maths. And even get a glimpse of binomial and trinomial equation theories.

All this - effortlessly, AND with the child's full cooperation.

This article first appeared in Bonda Magazine April 2002 and was written by Jelita Rubina Kayani