

Montessori in Malaysia

Maria Montessori, MD divided the child's academic development into areas, targeted at developing the WHOLE child, not just some areas.

She believed that everything we learn comes via our senses, so she created material or apparatus which refined and honed these senses, and then, once they are fully refined, to use these senses to learn math, language, geography, history, science, music, movement, creative art and craft.

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In Malaysia, unfortunately, there is no governing body for Montessori schools as there are in the US and UK. We see many kindergartens mushrooming up all over town with signboards declaring that they are "Montessori" schools, when in actual fact probably only 2 in 10 actually are.

As for the rest of them, they probably call themselves that because either the principal or some of the teachers is montessori trained, or because they sport several pieces of Montessori material on their shelves.

There are certain criterion for a school to be truly Montessori. First, there are no classrooms; just several large work areas with lots of floor space and some tables and chairs.

Teachers (or directresses, as they are called) are trained in the Montessori theory and should know how to use each and every piece of apparatus. There should be not more than 10 children to a teacher. Children are not segregated by age groups, they are segregated by choice of what material they are working with at the time.

Learning by rote, memorizing & chanting is unheard of, and teaching on the board is almost not used at all. Children are never forced into learning something, instead, the teacher makes the demonstration of the apparatus look so interesting and appealing that the child will not be able to stop himself from wanting to explore it. Each child works at his own pace, only moves on once he has mastered whatever he was exploring previously.

If you desire a Montessori school for your child, visit the school at least once with your child, and try asking if you and your child can observe for a day. Watch how classes are conducted, and enroll only if both you and your child are happy. If your child's attention is held (even for a short while) when the teacher talks and sings; if he is enticed watching other children playing with the material, and readily leaves your side to have a go at it, then the school is probably right for you. If he clings to you, but is still interested in the activity he sees, he probably needs more settling in time – try leaving him for half an hour at first, increasing the time by fifteen minutes everyday, until he eventually stays for the whole session.

Many parents worry that their child will not be able to cope with the rigid primary school system here, after having so much freedom in choice of activity and work pace. To be honest, children adapt to change much better than adults. They assimilate themselves easily to any environment, and most of the time, their anxieties come from the vibes emanated by their parents. So, relax and your child will relax too.

Ultimately, whatever choice of early education you pick for your child, you need to remember that you are still the most important person in his little world. The best teachers will not be able to work wonders on your child if you do not exclaim over his drawings once in a while, or let him teach you a song he learnt at school.