



Montessori Education: Questions and Answers

*Our aim is not merely to make the child understand,
and still less to force him to memorize, but so to touch
his imagination as to enthuse him to his inmost core.*

Maria Montessori

What is Montessori?

Montessori is a philosophy with the fundamental tenet that a child learns best within a social environment which supports each individual's unique development.

How Did it Begin?

Dr. Maria Montessori, the creator of what is called "The Montessori Method of Education," based this new education on her scientific observations of young children's behavior. As the first woman physician to graduate from the University of Rome, Montessori became involved with education as a doctor treating children labeled as retarded. Then in 1907 she was invited to open a child care center for the children of desperately poor families in the San Lorenzo slums of Rome.

She called her school Casa dei Bambini --"A Children's House," and based the program on her observations that young children learn best in a homelike setting, filled with developmentally appropriate materials that provide experiences contributing to the growth of self-motivated, independent learners.

Montessori's dynamic theories include such revolutionary premises as:

1. Children are to be respected as different from adults and as individuals who are different from one another.
2. Children create themselves through purposeful activity.
3. The most important years for learning are from birth to age six.
4. Children possess unusual sensitivity and mental powers for absorbing and learning from their environment, which includes people as well as materials.

She carried her message throughout the world, including the United States as early as 1912. After an enthusiastic first response, interest in the US waned until a reintroduction of the method in the mid-1950's, followed by the organization of the American Montessori Society in 1960. In January, 2007 we celebrated the centennial of Montessori Education worldwide.

*It is true, we cannot make a genius; we can only give each
individual the chance to fulfill his potential possibilities to
become an independent, secure, and balanced human being.*

Maria Montessori

What Makes Montessori Education Unique?

1. The “Whole Child” Approach. The primary goal of a Montessori program is to help each child reach his/her full potential in all areas of life. Activities promote the development of social skills, emotional growth, and physical coordination as well as cognitive preparation. The holistic curriculum, under the direction of a credentialed teacher, allows the child to experience the joy of learning, affords time to enjoy the process, insures the development of self-esteem, and provides the experiences from which children create their knowledge.
2. The “Prepared Environment.” The Montessori classroom is geared to the size, pace, interests and developmental stage of the 3 to 6 year-old and offers many opportunities for self-directed learning in a comfortable environment that allows risk-taking as well as collaborative learning.
3. The Montessori Materials. Dr. Montessori’s observations of the kinds of things which children enjoy and go back to repeatedly led her to design a number of multisensory, sequential and self-correcting materials which facilitate the learning of skills, and lead to learning of abstract concepts.
4. The Teacher. Originally called a “Directress,” or “guide” the Montessori teacher functions as designer of the environment, resource person, role model, demonstrator, record-keeper and meticulous observer of each child’s behavior and growth.

The teacher acts as a facilitator of learning. Extensive training -- a minimum of a full year following the baccalaureate degree is required for a full AMI/AMS credential, including student teaching under supervision -- is specialized for the age group with which a teacher will work, i.e., infant and toddler, early childhood (three-six yrs.), elementary(six-twelve yrs.) or secondary level.

How Does it Work?

Each Montessori class, from toddlers through high school, operates on the principle of freedom within limits. Every program has its set of ground rules which differs, from age to age, but is always based on core Montessori beliefs: respect for each other, the work, and for the environment.

Children are free to work at their own pace with materials they have chosen, either alone or with others. The teacher relies on his or her observations of the children to determine which new activities and materials he/she may introduce to an individual child or to a small or large group. The aim is to encourage active, self-directed learning and small group collaboration within the classroom.

The three-year age span in each class provides a family-like grouping where learning can take place naturally. More experienced children share what they have learned while reinforcing their own learning. Because this peer group learning is intrinsic to Montessori, there is often more conversation --language experience --in the Montessori classroom than in conventional early education settings.

How is Creativity Encouraged?

Creativity flourishes in an atmosphere of acceptance and trust. Montessorians recognize that each child from toddler to teenager learns and expresses himself in a very individual way.

Music, art, storytelling, movement, and drama are part of every Montessori program. In addition, there are other things particular to the Montessori environment which encourage creative development: many materials which stimulate interest and involvement; an emphasis on the sensory aspect of experience; and the opportunity for both verbal and nonverbal modes of learning.

What Happens When a Child Leaves Montessori?

Montessori children are unusually adaptable. They have learned to work independently and in groups. Since they have been encouraged to make decisions from an early age, these children often are problem-solvers who can make choices and manage their time well.

They have also been encouraged to exchange ideas and to discuss their work freely with others, learning good communication skills that ease the way in new settings.

Research has shown that the best predictor of future success is a sense of self-esteem. Montessori programs, based on self-directed, non-competitive activities, help children develop good self-images and the confidence to face challenges and change with optimism.

A child's work is to create the man he will become.

Maria Montessori