



A handbook for Montessori Parents

“Education is not something which a teacher does, but it is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being.”

- Dr. Maria Montessori

Goals of Montessori Education

- To Stimulate a child's innate love of learning
- To provide a nurturing, co-operative learning environment
- To incorporate all the senses in the learning experience
- To consider the development of the whole child
- To encourage respect for self, others and the environment.

Fostering a love of learning

Montessori is an education for life, a learning process where children are encouraged to develop as individuals, at their own pace and in a safe environment.

Worldwide the Montessori philosophy has proved to be successful with children from diverse cultural, religious and language backgrounds.

Montessori is both a philosophy of child development and a rationale for guiding such development. It is based on a child's innate need to develop intellectual and physical abilities. It provides a carefully prepared environment to meet and direct this need.

The Montessori approach to learning is child-centred and is based on mutual respect and co-operation.

The educator in a Montessori environment is more of a guide and facilitator respecting the concentration and varied learning styles of the children. The innate creativity of the child is realized in all areas of the curriculum.

Montessori education is about learning to balance responsibility with freedom of choice. It offers all the children the opportunity to develop their full potential in a non-competitive environment.

Montessori educators strive to promote:

- self-confidence and self-esteem
- a sense of achievement and self worth
- a sense of responsibility for themselves and for their actions
- independence and adaptability
- co-operation with others and a sense of community
- respect for the rights and needs of others
- concentration and perseverance in task completion
- innovation and self-motivation

Classroom programme

Through years of patient observation, Maria Montessori realized that children pass through four planes of development. Therefore, the children in a Montessori school go through four cycles – 1st cycle 3-6 years; 2nd cycle 6-9 years; 3rd cycle 9-12 years; 4th cycle 12-15 years.

Each Montessori prepared environment is usually a community of approximately 25 children, where each child learns to interact socially in a wide variety of ways. There is a 3-year age and gender mix that approximates a family grouping.

The older children teach the younger children, thereby increasing their confidence and social skills. They learn a sense of responsibility through being class leaders. This builds their self-image. The younger children are inspired to more advanced work through observation of the older ones. Because of the variety of levels in the environment, each child can work at their own pace.

The learning programme also facilitates the development of a close and caring class community.

Montessori pre-school (3-6 years)

This prepared environment is designed to give the children a three-hour work period five days a week. As in a family all the children are free to help each other. They are free to move around the environment, talk and work with materials that have been presented to them.

There are five work areas in this environment:

1. Practical Life

These materials provide the link between home and school. They develop co-ordination, concentration and independence. These materials provide activities such as polishing, washing, pouring, food preparation, sewing, dressing and social skills.

2. Sensorial

Sensorial materials are designed to help children become more perceptive, to understand concepts and focus on the details of the world around them. Sensorial activities involve grading, pairing, sequencing, matching shapes, touch, taste, colour and sound.

3. Language

The language materials increase vocabulary, explore the sounds and syntax of the English language and help the children to read and write. The teaching of English begins with stories, speaking and drama games, through to working with the sandpaper letters, writing with the movable alphabet and then on to reading.

4. Mathematics

All mathematics concepts are taught first in the concrete. Hands-on materials create an enjoyable introduction to the basic concepts, four rules of number, algebra and geometry. Pre-primary children learn to count and are then introduced to the decimal system and fractions. From this firm base children have no difficulty moving into abstraction.

5. Culture

This area of the environment provides children with an introduction to history, geography, natural sciences, art, music and drama. The concrete materials include globes, puzzle maps for geography, bells for music and simple science experiments.

First Cycle

Children in the first cycle (pre-school) gradually develop a new level of emotional and social maturity, which indicates their readiness to enter the 2nd cycle. To make this transition easy, the children are encouraged to gradually spend more time in what will be their new classroom where materials and teaching overlap with the 1st cycle. In this way a gentle and gradual transition into the 2nd cycle is achieved.

Second and Third Cycles

The Montessori 2nd cycle is designed for children between ages 6-9 years. The 3rd cycle is designed for children for children between ages 9-12 years.

The children continue to learn from one another in their prepared environment, which caters for their developmental needs.

The children do a lot of research alone, in co-operative groups and as a class. As they study astronomy, geology, physics, biology, history and geography, they begin to see the inter-connectedness of everything.

Mathematics and language form an important and vital part of their experiential learning. Concrete didactic materials facilitate understanding of the Montessori curriculum.

A modified work contract system is often used in primary environments. The child is responsible for ensuring that his/her work is completed and correctly presented. This teaches time management – an important life skill. In this way each child begins to develop his/her own work patterns.

In a Montessori environment the teacher observes, oversees, advises and assists where necessary. The teacher will present in small groups, large groups and to individual children as applicable. She is always monitoring the individual needs of the children in the class.

Social awareness is fostered throughout the primary years. Class meetings and discussions are held to help the children learn from interaction with their peers. As the children mature, the teacher adopts more of an advisory role during these meetings and discussions.

Outdoor activities

The outdoor environment plays an important part on the children's development. Concepts introduced in the inside environment are applied to the wider outdoor environment.

A range of exciting outdoor play equipment fosters large muscle development.

In the primary cycles specific physical skills are introduced such as ball skills, swimming and team games.

Outings

The children's experience within the environment is broadened by taking them on outings into the wider community. These outings include visits to museums, art galleries, concerts, historical exhibits, fossil remains and national parks.

Visitors with special skills are often invited to share their experiences with the children in their classrooms.

Music and Drama

These subjects should form an important part of a Montessori school curriculum and should be presented both as groups and as individual activities.

Montessori middle and high schools (12-15 years; 15-18 years)

Maria Montessori envisioned a secondary programme for Montessori called the Erdkinder programme (Children of the Earth), and while the ideal was to have children between 12 and 15 leave their homes and "work the land" – modern Montessori secondary programmes have adopted a slightly different approach.

In keeping with the traditional separation of primary and high schools in South Africa, the children from 9-12 years move into a new environment. Some Montessori schools simply call their 12-18 programme "high school". Another breakdown is to have a middle school, which encompasses grades 7-9, and then high school which includes grades 10-12. These three year age groups are consistent with Montessori's planes of development. As children in South African schools, and indeed around the world spend their last years preparing for school leaving exams, the Montessori emphasis completes its curriculum during the middle school phase.

The development of middle school children is addressed on three broad levels – service to the community, earning money by operating and managing a small business (often linked to 'land' work), and personal development – all of which enshrine the Montessori Erdkinder principles.

Explanation of key terms used in Montessori

Concrete Experiences

In Montessori schools children rarely learn from textbooks, workbooks or worksheets. Direct, hands-on contacts with either the real thing under study or concrete didactic materials that bring abstract concepts to life allow children to learn with deeper understanding.

Cosmic education

Dr Montessori observed that cosmic education allows children from 6-12 years to gain understanding of the world. This is a period in their lives when they should be exposed to all branches of the sciences. It is a period in their lives when all aspects of learning should be presented to them.

The absorbent mind

Between the ages of birth to three the child absorbs knowledge from the environment. Montessori compares the child to a sponge that absorbs water from its surroundings. The child has the capacity during this period to teach him/herself. Gradually the child moves from the unconscious to the conscious realm.

The normalized child

The normalized child is able to function appropriately in the environment. The characteristics of the normalized child are:

- Self-discipline
- Focus
- Independence
- Order
- Self-motivation
- Love of learning
- Love of silence
- Concern for others
- Happiness
- Contentment

Integrated curriculum

All subject areas are interwoven. The child is given the bigger picture. Montessori directors/directresses are trained to integrate all subject areas and to display a wide range of interests.

Curiosity and Motivation

The only valid impulse to learning is self-motivation. There are no external rewards. The environment revolves around self-discovery and leadership.

Inner discipline

Children are exposed to physical and mental order. The development of this order is aided by the prepared environment. Patterns of concentration and thoroughness develop early in the 3-6 year cycle. This produces a child who is confident, disciplined and competent.

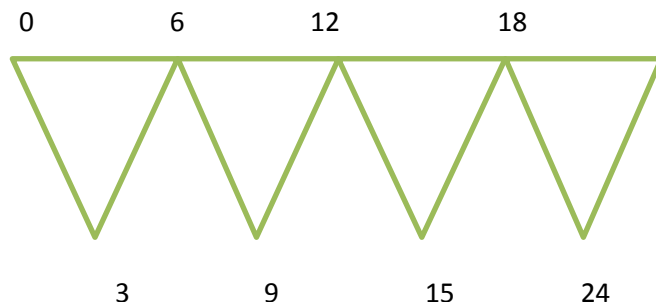
Sensitive periods

These are periods of time when a child is especially sensitive to learning a specific skill (e.g. talking, walking and reading). They vary from child to child but always happen in the same order. Once passed, they are gone forever. The Montessori classroom is scientifically designed to utilize the child's sensitive periods.

Sensitive Periods	
Age	Sensitivity
0 – 18 months	Movement
0 - 3 years	Absorbent mind
1 1/2 – 4 years	Attraction to small objects
1 1/2 – 3 years	Language development
1 1/2 years	Carrying heavy objects
	Growth of attention
2 – 4 years	Refinement of movement
	Concern with trust and reality
2 – 6 years	Awareness of order
	Good Manners
3 – 6 years	Susceptibility to adult influence
3 1/2 – 4 1/2 years	Writing
	Handling geometric shapes
2 – 4 years	Tactile sense
4 1/2 – 5 1/2 years	Reading
4 – 6 years	Numeracy
4 1/2 years	Second / third language

Four planes for development

Montessori called the four planes for development “the constructive rhythm of life”. It's a sequence of births, emergence and disappearance of stages of development relating to the sensitivities, tendencies and needs of man. Earlier planes always prepare for the ones to follow but they are always independent.



Didactic materials

These are hands-on manipulative scientifically designed and tested by Maria Montessori after much observation of the children. They are sequential, age-appropriate, self-correcting and easily accessible.

They are designed to test a child's understanding, stimulate the imagination and aid the move to abstraction.

Freedom

Freedom of movement and thought is required to allow the child to fully develop physical, intellectual and psychological powers.

Freedom is achieved through order and inner discipline. Freedom comes with responsibility.

The director/directress

Is a passive facilitator who supervises, nurtures, guides and observes the child. He/she maintains a classroom environment where the child can thrive. He/she encourages individual learning, intellectual curiosity, self-motivation, inner discipline, independence and freedom with responsibility.

Independence

For Montessori, the acquisition of independence, the nature of which changes at each of the child's different stages of development, was the most important part of the educational process. It is necessary for the child's normal development. All children have a need of determination to strive for independence. This enables them to do things for themselves. It is an essential part of "growing up".

Knowledgeable choices

Choices are necessary steps children need to take in order to develop independence, responsibility and the learning process. The way choices are given is of the utmost importance. Choices should provide success, they should be clear, limited and provide appropriate consequences.

Self – construction (auto-education)

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. They wish to learn and master new skills. For this reason, extrinsic rewards are unnecessary. Work is its own reward. In the process of making independent choices and exploring concepts largely on their own, Montessori children construct their own sense of self and right and wrong.

The parent's attitude

- Try to be a patient observer and a careful listener.
- Respect your child's individuality. Do not compare him to others, even other siblings.
- Respect all reasonable forms of activity in which your child participates and try to understand them. Never criticize.
- Place your confidence in the child. An adult's confidence in a child is in itself a compulsive force to learning.
- Free yourself as much as possible to be with your child when your child needs you.
- Give as few negative commands as possible.
- Your attitude towards mistakes must be both supportive and understanding.
- Rules are a necessary part of life. As soon as he is able to understand simple statements, the reasons for the various rules should be explained to him.
- Give your child freedom to act independently. Show him how to do those things for himself that he is capable of doing. Every unnecessary help is a hindrance.
- Try not to let your child risk failure until he has a reasonable chance of success.
- Most importantly, keep in mind your own limitations. You are first of all a mother or a father and must adapt your teaching in a way unique to yourself and to your child.

Misconceptions about Montessori

The word Montessori is often used, but commonly misunderstood. The widespread misunderstanding is caused by a lack of information on Maria Montessori and her original work.

- Montessori is not an accelerated learning programme, though academic achievements is often a result due to the fact that the Montessori method takes full advantage of the child's desire to learn. It empowers the child to master skills at their own pace, thus building their self-esteem.
- Montessori is not disorganized or undisciplined. Some parents complain that Montessori allows too much freedom or not enough. This paradox can be explained by appreciation of the true meaning of liberty. The freedom given to the child is to do what is right, not what is wrong. Montessori did not believe in absolute freedom. In fact she instructed her teachers to check the children whenever they displayed selfishness or lack of self-control. Freedom within the environment can only exist when rules are obeyed.
- Montessori is not rigidly structured and disciplined. The order within the environment is not arbitrary, but is a response to the child's needs for structured experiences as he tries to make sense of the world around him. Everything in the room has a permanent place. The materials are arranged along the shelves in order of difficulty. Order in the environment helps the child to work independently without needing an adult's assistance. The child knows how to select what is appropriate for his developmental level and personal needs.
- The order of a Montessori classroom is not the structure of a conventional classroom. There is no adherence to a timetable, no assigned seats, no compulsory break period, no graded placement of children by age and no putting up of hands before speaking.

- Montessori children do adjust well to other schools' programmes. Obviously how well a child adjusts will generally depend on the quality and latitude of the Departmental or Independent schools he enters. The child however, will be well equipped because of the desire to learn that has been fostered throughout his Montessori training.
- An adjustment to grade 1 is necessary for all children regardless of what preschool education they have received.
- Parents also have an influence on their child's adjustment to Departmental or other Independent schools. They should observe the new school and then prepare their child for any changes they have noticed (e.g. teacher at the front of the classroom, fixed seating and set timetable).
- Even though the child will have to make some adjustments in certain areas (such as not being able to choose his own work), this is a small disadvantage compared to the advantages of a Montessori preschool education.
- Montessori herself, however, found that a concrete basis is needed at the beginning of the learning process. The development of the senses precedes that of superior intellectual activity. We can only give the child the power and the means for observation and these means are procured through education of the senses. The child then teaches himself (auto-education). Experience has shown that the child will disregard the apparatus and work without it when he is ready to do so.
- Montessori does encourage social development. In a Montessori school there are friendships and sharing. Children interact with each other and with the adults. Because there is no artificially induced competition, the children learn to co-operate with each other. There is usually a three-year age grouping so that the younger child may learn from an older one. The respect which the directress shows towards each child is a model for the children to follow in learning to respect each other.
- There are areas and activities provided for solitude and small and large group activities. However no child is coerced into joining a group activity.

GLOSSARY OF MONTESSORI TERMS

Absorbent mind

The ability and ease with which the young child learns, unconsciously, from his environment

Casa dei Bambini

"Children's House" or "House of childhood"; this was the name given the first schools using the Montessori method.

Control of error

The possibility inherent in the Montessori materials of making apparent the mistakes made by the child, thereby allowing him to see his errors after completing the exercises and to correct them.

Cosmic education

The attempt through use of the sensitive periods, to give the child the help needed to develop him/herself as a total being.

Cosmic task

To continue the work of creation by maintaining the environment to support future generations of all living species.

Cycles of activity

Those periods of concentration on a particular task that should be worked to completion.

Deviated child

The child who has not yet found him/herself and thus is restless and difficult to control. He/she finds adjustment difficult and often escapes into a fantasy world.

Didactic materials

The instructive materials used in teaching.

Director/directress

The name for the teacher in a Montessori school, who acts as observer and director of the child's learning activities.

Discovery of the child

Dr. Montessori's awareness and realization of the young child's abilities and his/her spontaneous love of work and learning.

Exposition into learning

The continuous and intense application of one kind of work exclusively for a period of time.

Formative years

The years from birth to six when the child is forming his/her personality.

Freedom

The child's free movements and experiences in an environment that provides discipline through liberty and respect for his/her rights.

Independence

The overcoming of obstacles and dependence on others in his/her attempt to gain freedom and self-development.

Inner guide

That, which enables the child to choose work which will best assist his/her development.

Isolation of difficulty

The concentration on one particular aspect of a task, or exercise in order to better understand it.

Liberty

The opportunity for activity within an educational framework of structure and discipline.

Normalised child

The child who adapts easily and has acquired the self-discipline and control necessary to a healthy life.

Order

The giving of a specific time, location and meaning to everything in the environment to help the child establish order in her mind and in her learning habits.

Practical life exercises

Those exercises through which the child learns to care of him/herself and his/her environment.

Prepared environment

An atmosphere created to enable the child to be free to learn through activity in peaceful and orderly surroundings adapted to the child's size and interests.

Psycho embryo

Those inherent patterns of mental functions.

Sensitive periods

Those periods of learning (to walk, talk, write etc.) during which a child is particularly sensitive to a specific stimulus.

Sensorial exercises

Those exercise pertaining to the development of the five senses and to providing a foundation for speech, writing and arithmetic by use of the sensorial materials.

Sensorial materials

The Montessori equipment designed to teach the child by means of focusing the mind on specific sensory responses.

Spiritual embryo

The newborn child with his potential for developing into a spiritual man.