

# Montessori

## Early Childhood Years

Maria Montessori (1870 – 1952), an Italian physician, educator, and innovator, developed an educational method that builds on the way children naturally learn. As she observed young children in her first schools (Casa dei Bambini), she came to understand that they possessed an innate ability to absorb information from their surroundings. She named this quality the “absorbent mind.” As the child soaks up every aspect of the environment, including the languages they hear and the culture that surrounds them, they learn “sensorially,” through all the senses.

This developmental period focuses on learning to become independent. The learning environment should support this natural drive, enabling the child to become competent and confident. In a Montessori classroom, the child is guided toward making their own choices, so that they can work on what interests them, within appropriate limits. The child thus begins to develop an authentic sense of self.

The Montessori approach treats learning as a holistic process, embracing the development of the whole individual by addressing the physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual needs of the child.

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## The Early Childhood Years

AGES 2½ – 6



# Characteristics of the Montessori Early Childhood Program

## Social, Emotional, and Spiritual Development

In a Montessori environment, children learn in mixed-age groups, typically with a 3-year developmental span within each classroom. This enables the older, more socially advanced and capable children to become role models for the younger ones. A feeling of community develops as younger children are aided by older ones and as older children learn patience, nurturance, and leadership skills through their experiences with younger children. In a mixed-age classroom, children can choose friendships based on common interest, not just age.



Respect for self, for others, and for the environment is nurtured to guide the children toward self-discipline. As children are treated with respect by adults, they learn to treat themselves and others with respect.

## Physical and Motor Development

To become independent, children must develop motor coordination and control. The freedom of movement found in the Montessori Early Childhood environment allows children the opportunity to learn to control their bodies in a defined space.

The activities of the Practical Life curriculum instill care for oneself, for others, and for the environment. These everyday-living exercises include pouring, sweeping, tying, zipping, and buttoning. Through these tasks and experiences, children learn to concentrate, coordinate their movements, and develop

fine- and large-motor skills. Practical Life activities are the foundation of all future academic work because they promote concentration, order, and the completion of a work cycle.

Sensorial materials are designed to enable young children to identify and refine information obtained through their senses. As they are seeing, smelling, tasting, hearing, touching, and further exploring the sensorial properties of these materials, children begin to classify and eventually name objects and attributes in their environment, such as colors, shapes, dimensions, and textures.

## Cognitive Development

Because the young child's mind is in such a rapid phase of development, this is the ideal time to assist the development of neural brain pathways. Maria Montessori observed that young children are in a "sensitive period" for absorbing language, both spoken and written. The Montessori Early Childhood classroom is therefore rich in oral language opportunities—listening to stories, reciting poems, singing, and conversing with others. Introduction of the Montessori "sandpaper letters" associates each spoken sound with its symbol (letter), while providing tactile, auditory, and visual connections that support the development of writing and, eventually, reading.

Young children are intrigued by numbers—knowing "how much" or "how many" provides another dimension for understanding the world. The Montessori math materials and lessons help children to develop an understanding of these concepts through the manipulation of sequential hands-on materials. This builds a secure foundation of math principles, skills, and problem-solving abilities.

The Montessori materials provide a bridge from the known to the unknown, allowing children to evolve gradually from concrete, experience-based learning toward increasingly abstract thought. Each Early Childhood Montessori material is a concrete representation of a single concept, such as texture, length, or quantity. For example, the "pink tower" is made up of ten graduated wooden cubes that vary only by size—not by color, pattern, or any other detail that could distract the child from focusing on stacking the cubes from largest to smallest. The "self-correcting" design of the materials allows for any error made in their use to be obvious to the child without the intervention of a teacher. Errors are viewed as a necessary and helpful part of the learning process.

Science, geography, history, art, and music are all integrated into the Early Childhood environment and are presented in sensorial ways with specially designed materials as well as the opportunity for real-life experiences. In geography materials, children not only learn the names and locations of countries but also about people and cultures. They develop a sense of respect for differences and an understanding that we share similar needs. Watching and caring for classroom pets and plants creates an interest in science lessons and a reverence for life. Art and music give the children an opportunity for creative and joyful self-expression.

## Impact of a Montessori Education on the Child

Children educated through the Montessori Method become capable, confident learners who not only know how to learn but also develop a lifelong love of learning. The strong foundation built early in life fosters self-assured adults who are motivated to make meaningful contributions.