



AMERICAN MONTESSORI SOCIETY
education that transforms lives

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Early Childhood

Dr. 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 (*case 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 he hears and the culture that surrounds him, he learns “sensorially,” through all of his senses.

Dr. Montessori recognized that the highest goal of a young child is reached when others “help me to do it myself.” Since development during this period focuses on learning to become independent, the corresponding educational environment should support this natural drive, enabling the child to become competent and confident. In a Montessori classroom, the child is guided toward making his own choices, so that he is able to work on what interests him, within appropriate limits. The child thus begins to develop an authentic sense of self.

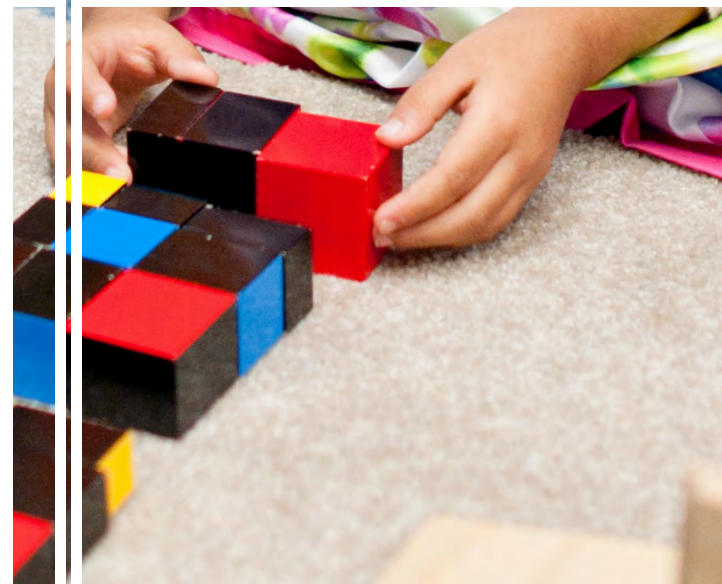
The Montessori approach treats learning as a holistic process, embracing the development of the whole individual by addressing the physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual needs of the child.

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Montessori: The Early Childhood Years

Ages 2 ½ – 6



PHOTOS: Front, Jimmy Cheng Photography. Middle and back, Frida Azari.



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Montessori: The Early Childhood Years Ages 2 1/2 – 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 in order to guide the children toward self-discipline. As children are treated with respect by the adults, they learn to treat themselves and others in kind.

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, as well as learning to be courteous. Through these tasks and experiences, children learn to concentrate, coordinate their movements, develop fine- and large-motor skills, and to be graceful in social encounters. Practical Life activities are the foundation of all future academic work because they promote concentration, order, and the completion of a work cycle.

The Sensorial materials are designed to enable young children to identify and refine information obtained through their senses, and to order and classify sensorial impressions. 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. Dr. 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 and 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 math concepts through the manipulation of sequential

hands-on materials. This builds a secure foundation of math principles, skills, and problem-solving abilities.

Science, geography, history, art, and music are all integrated into the Early Childhood environments and are presented in sensorial ways with specially designed materials and the opportunity for real-life experiences. In geography materials and lessons, children learn not only about 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—for example, for food, clothing, and shelter. Young children are natural scientists. 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 as well as experiences with works of great musicians and artists.

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.

Impact of a Montessori Education on the Child

Children who are educated using the Montessori Method become competent students, who not only know how to learn, they love learning. The solid foundation constructed early in life creates self-confident adults who are driven to contribute. In *Education for a New World*, Dr. Montessori writes:

They will be witnesses of the unfolding of the human soul and to the raising of a New Man who will not be the victim of events, but will have the clarity of vision to direct and shape the future of human society.