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PHOTOS: Front: James Nubile, Inside: Jennifer Hirsch Day.



## Montessori: Infant and Toddler Programs

Birth – Age 3



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“The child’s development follows a path of successive stages of independence, and our knowledge of this must guide us in our behavior towards him. We have to help the child to act, will and think for himself. This is the art of serving the spirit...”

— Maria Montessori,  
in *The Absorbent Mind*



# Montessori: Infant and Toddler Programs Birth – Age 3

Many parents today recognize that experiences in the first years of life influence their child's long-term brain development. Advice abounds, and infant and toddler learning fads come and go.

The very youngest children have been part of the Montessori learning community from the beginning, when visionary Italian physician Maria Montessori first made her observations about children's development, more than a century ago. Today, neurological research on early learning confirms the accuracy and relevance of Dr. Montessori's teaching methods.

## What is the Montessori approach to guiding very young children?

In her book *The Absorbent Mind*, Dr. Montessori described the ability of even the youngest children to soak up the new, revel in sensory experiences, experiment with movement, practice language, and find their places within their learning communities.

Montessori infant and toddler programs welcome children early in their lives. Though individual programs vary, infant programs generally nurture children who are just a few weeks old through 18 months of age; toddler programs welcome children 18 months to 3 years old.

At heart, the Montessori approach to educating the youngest learner is based on respect for the child. Even with the smallest children, adult guides seek to assist, not teach. During these early months of life, when the foundations of the personality are laid down, Montessori teachers educate by showing and modeling, not by correcting.

## How are Montessori classrooms organized for infants and for toddlers?

At first glance, a Montessori infant or toddler classroom may not look all that unlike a traditional preschool—although there is probably less noise, and the environment is likely more muted, with natural lighting and uncluttered spaces that set the stage for focused and calm activity. The environment is safe, healthy, and

stimulating. The focus is on fostering basic trust in the child. Foremost in the environment is the adult, whose caring, respectful response to the infant's needs—physical, psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual—conveys a message of unconditional love and acceptance.

Montessori infant communities follow the natural rhythms of young children through a predictable day. Your infant's sleeping and eating patterns will be observed and honored. Your child will kick and creep on a large floor mat, look at and reach for mobiles, and enjoy supervised "tummy time" to strengthen muscles. She will experience different textures and objects to touch, feel, and watch.

This approach supports neurological development by providing freedom of movement and choice. In a Montessori environment, children are not restricted to infant equipment or high chairs. They are allowed freedom, within limits, always in the presence of an adult. Safety is paramount.

## How do children spend their time in a Montessori infant or toddler classroom?

Once your child can crawl, he will learn through direct experience, choosing his own activities within a carefully prepared classroom environment. Infants and toddlers intuitively discover concepts, learn language, solve simple problems, develop muscle control, and learn self-care skills as they explore specially designed materials. And appreciation for the larger world is fostered through safe outdoor activities and exploring objects from nature.

The Montessori approach recognizes that small children learn best through movement and exploration, following intrinsic motivation, and that they experience "sensitive periods"—times when they are particularly attuned to discovering and mastering skills.

A toddler's growing abilities, as well as her innate drive to develop independence, require an environment that enables the transition from infancy. To foster this, activities are positioned around the room so that toddlers may choose among them. They are free to explore and are given the time they need to complete whatever they start. The activities allow toddlers to experience sequence, form, shape, and

movement, and sound—and the offerings evolve as the children grow physically, emotionally, and intellectually.

A carefully prepared Montessori environment, planned down to the smallest detail, guides children to tools for learning new things just at the moment they are ready for them. Furniture and learning materials are child-size. Everything needed to complete tasks and achieve success is accessible.

## What do children learn in Montessori infant and toddler programs?

A central tenet of the Montessori approach is that children have the innate ability to explore and learn on their own. Toddlers walk into the classroom by themselves; they take off and hang up their own coats and put backpacks in their cubbies. They learn to use the toilet and to wash and dry their hands. They learn by interacting with classroom materials, by moving, and by observing other children—and by teaching other children themselves. These children grow confident and independent.

Many Montessori activities are practical: setting the table for lunch, washing dishes, arranging flowers. The children practice and perfect these skills, increasing fine muscle coordination and concentration and gaining a sense of order. Toddlers delight in learning to do these real-world tasks for themselves—and parents enjoy seeing these skills put to use at home.

Visitors are often struck by the orderliness and peacefulness of a Montessori environment. Adults move slowly and calmly, speak softly, and seek to embody two Montessori watchwords: grace and courtesy. The approach is based on the premise that a child's earliest experiences help him or her become a peaceful, caring, sensitive, and healthy person.

In Montessori infant and toddler programs, children learn to trust themselves and the world and to recognize their own competence. They learn to make decisions and to understand that their behavior affects others, who have needs and wants, too. They learn to appreciate nature, to care for their bodily needs, and to persist. They develop a love of learning and experience the satisfaction of success.