

Montessori 101: Some Basic Information that Every Montessori Parent Should Know

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Renaissance Montessori in Cary
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by Tim Seldin
President
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It's the beginning of a new school year for thousands of Montessori students around the world. For some, it will be their first experience in a Montessori classroom; for others, it will be a return to the learning environment that they have known for years.

Dr. Maria Montessori opened her first school, Casa dei Bambini, in Rome, Italy more than a century ago.

After one hundred years, the Montessori approach has proven that it is still vibrant and adaptive to the challenges of the 21st century.

As parents and educators, who have spent years around Montessori children, we know that Montessori works! Despite the proof of more than one hundred years of positive results, questions remain:

What is Montessori?

How is it different than traditional education?

Will it work for my child?

Isn't Montessori a very structured environment?

Do Montessori classrooms have structure?

Normalize my child?

Are we crazy to enroll our child in a Montessori school?

Is Montessori just for young children?

Can our child adjust to a traditional education after years in Montessori?

How can we find/create an elementary or secondary Montessori program for our children?

For more than forty years, I've tried to help parents sort all this out, so they could reassure themselves that Montessori isn't going to leave their children academically handicapped and unable to make it in the 'real' world. It's still not easy to put Montessori into context, when the rest of the world seems so completely committed to a very different approach to raising children. Montessori 101 was written to help parents begin to discover and reconfirm what Montessori children know — Montessori works!

— Tim Seldin, President
The Montessori Foundation
co-author of *The Montessori Way*,
The World in the Palm of Her Hand,
and *Celebrations of Life*; author of *How to
Raise an Amazing Child*.

There are more than four thousand Montessori schools in the United States and Canada and thousands more around the world. Montessori schools are found throughout Western Europe, Central and South America, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, and much of Asia.

The movement is widespread in countries such as the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Ireland, India, Sri Lanka, Korea, and Japan, and it is beginning to expand into Eastern Europe, the republics of the former Soviet Union, and China.

There is tremendous diversity within the community of Montessori schools. Despite the impression that all Montessori schools are the same, perhaps a franchise, no two Montessori schools are alike.

Across the United States and Canada, we can find Montessori schools in almost every community. They are found in church basements, converted barns, shopping centers, former public schools, and on expansive campuses, with enrollments of hundreds of children and the air of stature and stability.

We can find them in suburban and inner-city public-school systems. Montessori schools are often found in charming homes — the outcome of the individual vision of the owner/director. Many are found in affluent communities, but just as many serve working-class neighborhoods and the poor. We can find Montessori in Head Start programs, child-care centers in our inner cities, migrant-worker camps, and on Native American reservations.

Some Montessori schools pride themselves on remaining faithful to what they see as Dr. Maria

Montessori's original vision, while others appreciate flexibility and pragmatic adaptation. Each school reflects its own unique blend of facilities, programs, personalities, and interpretation of Dr. Montessori's vision.

Most Montessori schools begin with three-year-olds and extend through the elementary grades. Every year, more schools open middle-school and infant-toddler programs, and Montessori high schools are beginning to appear more frequently.

Montessori schools offer a wide range of programs. Many are focused on meeting the needs of the working family. Others describe themselves as college-preparatory programs. Public Montessori programs pride themselves on serving all children, while many independent schools work hard to find the perfect match of student, school, and family values. The Montessori Foundation and The International Montessori Council (IMC) celebrate the diversity to be found among Montessori schools. Just as each child is unique, so are the schools.

The Many Faces of Montessori in North America



What Makes Montessori Different?

Montessori schools are not completely different from other schools. Over the last century, Dr. Maria Montessori's ideas have had a profound and growing influence on education around the world. However, while individual elements of her program are finding their way into more classrooms every year, there is a cumulative impact that we see when schools fully implement the entire Montessori model, which creates something quite distinct.

- Montessori schools begin with a deep respect for children as unique individuals. They work from a deep concern for their social and emotional development.
- Montessori schools are warm and supportive communities of students, teachers, and parents. Children don't get lost in the crowd!
- Montessori consciously teaches children to be kind and peaceful.
- Montessori classrooms are bright and exciting environments for learning.
- Montessori classes bring children together in multi-age groups, rather than classes comprised of just one grade level. Normally, they span three age levels. Children stay with their teachers for three years. This allows teachers to develop close, long-term relationships with their pupils, allows them to know each child's learning style very well, and encourages a strong sense of community among the children. Every year, more non-Montessori schools adopt this effective strategy.
- Montessori classrooms are not run by the teachers alone. Students are taught to manage their own community and develop leadership skills and independence.



- Montessori assumes that children are born intelligent; they simply learn in different ways and progress at their own pace. The Montessori approach to education is consciously designed to recognize and address different learning styles, helping students learn to study most effectively. Students progress as they master new skills, moving ahead as quickly as they are ready.
- Montessori students rarely rely on texts and workbooks. Why? Because many of the skills and concepts that children learn are abstract, and texts simply don't bring them to life. Also, in the case of reading, many reading series fail to collect first-rate and compelling stories and essays; instead, Montessori relies upon hands-on concrete learning materials and the library, where children are introduced to the best in literature and reference materials.
- Learning is not focused on rote drill and memorization. The goal is to develop students who really understand their school-work.
- Montessori students learn through hands-on experience, investigation, and research. They become actively engaged in their studies, rather than passively waiting to be taught.
- Montessori challenges and sets high expectations for all students, not only those considered 'gifted.'
- Students develop self-discipline and an internal sense of purpose and motivation. After graduation from Montessori, these values serve them well in high school, college, and in their lives as adults.
- Montessori schools normally reflect a highly diverse student body, and their curriculum promotes mutual respect and a global perspective.
- Students develop a love for the natural world. Natural science and outdoor education is an important element of our children's experience.
- The Montessori curriculum is carefully structured and integrated to demonstrate the connections among the different subject areas. Every class teaches critical thinking, composition, and research. History lessons link architecture, the arts, science, and technology.
- Students learn to care about others through community service.
- Montessori teachers facilitate learning, coach students along, and come to know them as friends and mentors.
- Students learn not to be afraid of making mistakes; they come to see their mistakes as natural steps in the learning process.
- Montessori students learn to collaborate and work together in learning and on major projects. They strive for their personal best, rather than compete against one another for the highest grade in their class.

"When the children had completed an absorbing bit of work, they appeared rested and deeply pleased. It almost seemed as if a road had opened up within their souls that led to all their latent powers, revealing the better part of themselves. They exhibited a great affability to everyone, put themselves out to help others and seemed full of good will."

- Maria Montessori



To aid life, leaving it free, however, to unfold itself, that is the basic task of the educator.

Ours was a house for children, rather than a real school. We had prepared a place for children, where a diffused culture could be assimilated, without any need for direct instruction...Yet these children learned to read and write before they were five, and no one had given them any lessons. At that time, it seemed miraculous that children of four and a half should be able to write and that they should have learned without the feeling of having been taught.

We puzzled over it for a long time. Only after repeated experiments did we conclude with certainty that all children are endowed with this capacity to 'absorb' culture. If this be true – we then argued – if culture can be acquired without effort, let us provide the children with other elements of culture. And then we saw them 'absorb' far more than reading and writing: botany, zoology, mathematics, geography, and all with the same ease, spontaneously and without getting tired.

And so we discovered that education is not something which the teacher does, but that it is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being. It is not acquired by listening to words, but in virtue of experiences in which the child acts on his environment. The teacher's task is not to talk, but to prepare and arrange a series of motives for cultural activity in a special environment made for the child.

My experiments, conducted in many different countries, have now been going on for forty years (Ed. note: now more than one hundred years), and as the children grew up, parents kept asking me to extend my methods to the later ages. We then found that individual activity is the one factor that stimulates and produces development, and that this is not more true for the little ones of preschool age than it is for the junior, middle, and upper-school children."

— Dr. Maria Montessori
The Absorbent Mind

*Maria Montessori
is as controversial
a figure in
education today
as she was more than
a century ago.*

Dr. Maria Montessori: A Historical Perspective



Maria Montessori is as controversial a figure in education today as she was a half century ago. Alternately heralded as the twentieth century's leading advocate for early childhood education, or dismissed as outdated and irrelevant,

her research and the studies that she inspired helped change the course of education.

Those who studied (her ideas and methods) and went on to make their own contributions include Anna Freud, Jean Piaget, Alfred Adler, and Erik Erikson. Many elements of modern education have been adapted from Montessori's theories. She is credited with the development of the open classroom, individualized education, manipulative learning materials, teaching toys, and programmed instruction. In the last forty-five years, educators in Europe and North America have begun to recognize the consistency between the Montessori approach with what we have learned from research into child development.

Maria Montessori was an individual ahead of her time. She was born in 1870, in Ancona, Italy, to an educated but not affluent middle-class family. She grew up in a country considered most conservative in its attitude toward women, yet, even against the considerable opposition of her father and teachers, Montessori pursued a scientific education and was the first woman to become a physician in Italy.

As a practicing physician associated with the University of Rome, she was a scientist, not a teacher. It is ironic that she became famous for her contributions in a field that she had rejected as the traditional refuge for women, at a time when few professions were open to them other than homemaking or the convent. The Montessori Method evolved almost by accident, from a small experiment that Dr. Montessori carried out on the side. Her genius stems not from her teaching ability but from her recognition of the importance of what she stumbled upon.

As a physician, Dr. Montessori specialized in pediatrics and psychiatry. She taught at the medical school of the University of Rome, and, through its free clinics, she came into frequent contact with the children of the working class and poor. These experiences convinced her that intelligence is not rare and that most newborns come into the world with human potential that will be barely revealed.

Her work reinforced her humanistic ideals, and she made time in her busy schedule to support various social-reform movements. Early in her career, she began to accept speaking engagements throughout Europe on behalf of the women's movement, peace efforts, and child labor-law reform. Montessori became well known and highly

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regarded throughout Europe, which undoubtedly contributed to the publicity that surrounded her schools.

In 1901, Montessori was appointed Director of the new Orthophrenic School attached to the University of Rome, formerly used as the asylum for the 'deficient and insane' children of the city, most of whom were probably of diminished mental capacity. She initiated reform in a system that formerly had served merely to confine mentally handicapped youngsters in empty rooms. Recognizing her patients' need for stimulation, purposeful activity, and self-esteem, Montessori insisted that the staff speak to the inmates with the highest respect. She set up a program to teach her young charges how to care for themselves and their environment.

At the same time, she began a meticulous study of all research previously done on the education of the mentally handicapped. Her studies led Montessori to the work of two almost forgotten French physicians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Jean Itard and Edouard Seguin. Itard is most famous for his work with the *Wild Boy of Aveyron*, a youth who had been found wandering naked in the forest, having spent ten years living alone. The boy could not speak and lacked almost all of the skills of everyday life. Here apparently was a 'natural man,' a human being who had developed without the benefit of culture and socialization with his own kind. Itard hoped from this study to shed some light on the age-old debate about what proportion of human intelligence and personality is hereditary and what proportion stems from learned behavior.

Itard's experiment was a limited success, for he found the 'wild boy' uncooperative and unwilling or unable to learn most things. This led Itard to postulate the existence of developmental periods in normal human growth. During these 'sensitive periods,' a child must experience stimulation or grow up forever lacking the adult skills and intellectual concepts that he missed at the stage when they can be readily learned! Although Itard's efforts to teach the 'wild boy' were barely successful, he followed a methodical approach in designing the process, arguing that all education would benefit from the use of careful observation and experimentation. This idea had tremendous appeal to the scientifically trained Montessori and later became the cornerstone of her Method. From Edouard Seguin, Montessori drew further confirmation of Itard's work, along with a far more specific and organized system for applying it to the everyday education of the handicapped. Today, Seguin is recognized as the father of our modern techniques of special education.

From these two predecessors, Montessori developed the idea of a scientific approach to education, based on observation and experimentation. She belongs to the 'child study' school of thought, and she pursued her work with the careful training and objectivity of the biologist studying the natural behavior of an animal in the forest. She studied her mentally challenged youngsters, listening and carefully noting everything that they did and said. Slowly, she began to get a sense of who they really were and what methods worked best. Her success was given widespread notice when, two years after she began, many of Montessori's 'deficient' adolescents were able to pass the standard sixth-grade tests of the Italian public schools. Acclaimed for this 'miracle,' Montessori responded by suggesting that her results proved only that public schools should be able to get dramatically better results with 'normal' children.

Unfortunately, the Italian Ministry of Education did not welcome this idea, and she was denied access to school-aged children. Frustrated in her efforts to carry the experiment on with public-school students, in 1907, Montessori jumped at the chance to coordinate a day-care center for working-class children, who were too young to attend public school.

This first Casa dei Bambini, or Children's House, was located in the worst slum district of Rome, and the conditions Montessori faced were appalling. Her first class consisted of sixty children from two through five years of age, taught by one untrained caregiver. The children remained at the center from dawn to dusk, while their parents worked. They had to be fed two meals a day, bathed regularly, and given a program of medical care. The children themselves were typical of extreme inner-city poverty conditions. They entered the Children's House on the first day crying and pushing, exhibiting generally aggressive and impatient behavior. Montessori, not knowing whether her experiment would work under such conditions, began by teaching the older children how to help with the everyday tasks that needed to be done. She also introduced the manipulative perceptual puzzles that she had used with the mentally challenged children.

The results surprised her, for unlike the other children, who had to be prodded to use the materials, these little ones were drawn to the work she introduced. Children, who had wandered aimlessly the week before, began to settle down to long periods of constructive activity. They were fascinated with the puzzles and perceptual training devices. But, to Montessori's amazement, the young children took the greatest delight in learning practical everyday living skills, reinforcing their independence.

Each day, they begged her to show them more, even applauding with delight when Montessori taught them the correct use of a handkerchief. Soon the older children were taking care of the school, assisting their teacher with the preparation and serving of meals and the maintenance of a spotless environment. Their behavior as a group changed dramatically, from street urchins running wild to models of grace and courtesy. It was little wonder that the press found such a human-interest story appealing and promptly broadcast it to the world.

Montessori education is sometimes criticized for being too structured and academically demanding of young children. Montessori would have laughed at this suggestion. She often said, "I studied my children, and they taught me how to teach them." Montessori made a practice of paying close attention to their spontaneous behavior, arguing that only in this way could a teacher know how to teach. Traditionally,



Montessori child carrying soup in classroom, c. 1912

schools pay little attention to children as individuals, other than to demand that they adapt to our standards.

Montessori argued that the educator's job is to serve the child, determining what is needed to make the greatest progress. To her, a child who fails in school should not be blamed, any more than a doctor should blame a patient who does not get well fast enough. It is the job of the physician to help us find the way to cure ourselves and the educator's job to facilitate the natural process of learning.

Montessori's children exploded into academics. Too young to go to public school, they begged to be taught how to read and write. They learned to do so quickly and enthusiastically, using special manipulative materials Dr. Montessori designed for maximum appeal and effectiveness. The children were fascinated by numbers. To meet this interest, the mathematically inclined Montessori developed a series of concrete mathematical learning materials that has never been surpassed. Soon, her four- and five-year-olds were performing four-digit addition and subtraction operations and, in many cases, pushing on even further. Their interests blossomed in other areas as well, compelling an overworked physician to spend night after night designing new materials to keep pace with the children in geometry, geography, history, and natural science.

The final proof of the children's interest came shortly after her first school became famous, when a group of well-intentioned women gave them a marvelous collection of lovely and expensive toys. The new gifts held the children's attention for a few days, but they soon returned to the more interesting learning materials. To Montessori's surprise, children who had experienced both, preferred work over play most of the time. If she were here today, Montessori would probably add:

Children read and do advanced mathematics in Montessori schools not because we push them, but because this is what they do when given the correct setting and opportunity. To deny them the right to learn because we, as adults, think that they shouldn't is illogical and typical of the way schools have been run before.

Montessori evolved her Method through trial and error, making educated guesses about the underlying meaning of the children's actions. She was quick to pick up on their cues and con-

stantly experimented with the class.

For example, Montessori tells of the morning when the teacher arrived late to find that the children had crawled through a window and gone right to work. At the beginning, the learning materials, having cost so much to make, were locked away in a tall cabinet. Only the teacher had a key and would open it and hand the materials to the children upon request. In this instance, the teacher had neglected to lock the cabinet the night before. Finding it open, the children had selected one material apiece and were working quietly. As Montessori arrived, the teacher was scolding the children for taking them out without permission. She recognized that the children's behavior showed that they were capable of selecting their own work and removed the cabinet and replaced it with low, open shelves on which the activities were always available to the children. Today, this may sound like a minor change, but it contradicted all educational practice and theory of that period.

One discovery followed another, giving Montessori an increasingly clear view of the inner mind of the child. She found that little children were capable of long periods of quiet concentration, even though they rarely showed signs of it in everyday settings. Although they were often careless and sloppy, they responded positively to an atmosphere of calm and order. Montessori noticed that the logical extension of the young child's love for a consistent and often-repeated routine is an environment in which everything has a place.

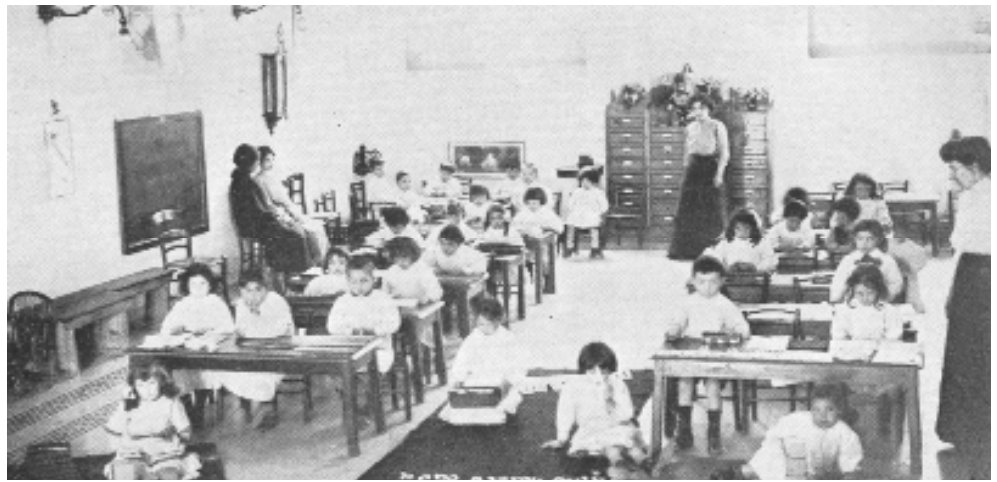
Her children took tremendous delight in carefully carrying their work to and from the shelves, taking great pains not to bump into anything or spill the smallest piece. They walked carefully through the rooms, instead of running wildly, as they did on the streets. Montessori discovered that the environment itself was all important in obtain-

ing the results that she had observed. Not wanting to use school desks, she had carpenters build child-sized tables and chairs. She was the first to do so, recognizing the frustration that a little child experiences in an adult-sized world.

Eventually she learned to design entire schools around the size of the children. She had miniature pitchers and bowls prepared and found knives that fit a child's tiny hand. The tables were lightweight, allowing two children to move them alone. The children learned to control their movements, disliking the way the calm was disturbed when they knocked into things. Montessori studied the traffic pattern of the rooms as well, arranging the furnishings and the activity area to minimize congestion and tripping. The children loved to sit on the floor, so she bought little rugs to define their work areas, and the children quickly learned to walk around them.

Through the years, Montessori schools carried this environmental engineering throughout the entire building and outside environment, designing child-sized toilets and low sinks, windows low to the ground, low shelves, and miniature hand and garden tools of all sorts. Some of these ideas were eventually adapted by the larger educational community, particularly at the nursery and kindergarten levels. Many of the puzzles and educational devices now in use at the preschool and elementary levels are direct copies of Montessori's original ideas. However, there is far more of her work that never entered the mainstream, and educators, who are searching for new, more effective answers, are finding the accumulated experience of the Montessori community to be of great interest.

Maria Montessori's first Children's House received overnight attention, and thousands of visitors came away amazed and enthusiastic. Worldwide interest surged, as she duplicated her first school in other settings, with the same results.



A Montessori classroom in a Franciscan Convent c. 1912

Montessori captured the interest and imagination of national leaders and scientists, mothers and teachers, labor leaders and factory owners. As an internationally respected scientist, Montessori had a rare credibility in a field, where many others had promoted opinions, philosophies, and models that have not been readily duplicated. The Montessori Method offered a systematic approach that translated very well to new settings. In the first thirty-five years of the twentieth century, the Montessori Method seemed to offer something for everyone. Conservatives appreciated the calm, responsible behavior of the little children, along with their love for work. Liberals applauded the freedom and spontaneity. Many political leaders saw it as a practical way to reform the outmoded school systems of Europe and North America, as well as an approach that they hoped would lead to a more productive and law-abiding populace. Scientists of all disciplines heralded its imperial foundation, along with the accelerated achievement of the little children. Montessori rode a wave of enthusiastic support that should have changed the face of education far more dramatically than it has.

Montessori's prime productive period lasted from the opening of the first Children's House in 1907 until the 1930s. During this time, she continued her study of children and developed a vastly expanded curriculum and methodology for the elementary level as well.

Montessori schools were set up throughout Europe and North America, and Dr. Montessori gave up her medical practice to devote all of her energies to advocating the rights and intellectual potential of all children. During her lifetime, Dr. Montessori was acknowledged as one of the world's leading educators. Modern education moved beyond Montessori, adapting only those elements of her work that fit into existing theories and methods. Ironically, the Montessori approach cannot be implemented as a series of piecemeal reforms. It requires a complete restructuring of the school and the teacher's role. Only recently, as our understanding of child development has grown, have we rediscovered how clear and sensible was her insight.

Today, there is a growing consensus among psychologists and developmental educators that many of her ideas were decades ahead of their time. As the movement gains support and continues to spread into the American public school sector, one can readily say that Montessori, begun more than one hundred years ago, is a remarkably modern approach.



Montessori Myths

by
**Maren Schmidt &
Dana Schmidt**

Each year, during the start of school, teachers and administrators try to explain to new parents the essence of the term *Montessori*. In this article, we'll try to explain what Montessori is and is not, dispelling, we hope, a few misperceptions about Montessori education in the process.

What Montessori Is

In its simplest form, Montessori is the philosophy of child and human development as presented by Dr. Maria Montessori, an Italian physician who lived from 1870 to 1952.

In the early 1900s, Dr. Montessori built her work with mentally challenged children on the research and studies of Jean Itard (1774-1838), best known for his work with the "Wild Boy of Aveyron" and Edward Seguin (1821-1882), who expanded Itard's work with deaf children. In 1907, Dr. Montessori began using her teaching materials with normal children in a Rome tenement and discovered what she called "the Secret of Childhood."

The Secret? Children love to be involved in self-directed purposeful activities. When given a prepared environment of meaningful projects, along with the time to do those tasks at his or her own pace, a child will choose to engage in activities that will create learning in personal and powerful ways.

Over the past one hundred years Montessori classrooms all over the world have proven that, when correctly implemented, Dr. Montessori's philosophy works for children of all socio-economic circumstances and all levels of ability. In a properly prepared Montessori classroom, research shows that children learn faster and more easily than in traditional schools.

However, the implementation of

Montessori philosophy is a school's biggest challenge. There are many factors to consider when putting theory into practice, for example: the individual children in the classroom, their ages and emotional well-being; parent support and understanding of Montessori philosophy; and the training and experience of teachers, assistants, and administrators. These are only a few of the elements that create a Montessori school.

Because of this, Montessori schools come in all shapes and sizes including the small in-home class for a few children to schools with hundreds of students, from newborns through high school.

While schools come in many shapes and sizes, all successful Montessori classrooms require three key elements:

1. Well-trained adults;
2. Specially prepared environments; and
3. Children's free choice of activity within a three-hour work cycle.

Finding the right school for your family – whether it's Montessori, public, parochial, alternative, traditional or home school – requires a bit of investigative work and an understanding of the needs and concerns you have for your family. Being clear about what Montessori education is and what it is not can help you make an informed decision.

What Montessori Is Not

In my twenty-five years in Montessori education – as a parent, school employee, volunteer, trainee, teacher, school founder, and school director – time after time, I've come to fresh and deeper understandings of Montessori philosophy and the process of human development and education.

My first encounter with Montessori was less than positive. As a college student, I frequently visited my family after my four younger siblings' school day had ended. Our family tradition was to have a snack together after school. Friends and neighbors were always welcomed.

The neighbor girls, ages four, five and six, frequently joined the group. They would barge into my parents' home and head straight for the refrigerator. No knock on the door, no *hello*. They inhaled huge amounts of food with neither manners nor thanks. Their lack of decorum appalled me.

The neighbor girls' grandmother chatted with me about how wonderful the girls' Montessori school was and how much the girls learned there. I attributed the girls' little savage conduct to their Montessori school. If a school would put up with that kind of behavior, I figured it couldn't be any good.

A few years passed, and I had children of my own. Our friends and co-workers recommended the local Montessori school to my husband and me. Because of my experiences with the neighbor's children, I responded negatively to my friends' suggestions. I began to notice, though, that our friends' children were well mannered, articulate, and a joy to be around. Hum? So what was up with Montessori?

My mother helped clear up my misperceptions. The neighbor's girls, even though they lived in an expensive home, were suffering the effects of a newly divorced and stressed mother attending law school. The girls were starved for food, attention, and adult guidance. Their behavior was a reflection, not of their Montessori schooling, but of the turmoil in their home.

This experience showed me that what we may think are the effects, negative or positive, of a Montessori school, may be something quite different.

Let me use my twenty-five years of Montessori experience to help dispel a few misconceptions about Montessori schools, some of which I've held myself.





Montessori is just for rich kids.

Many Montessori schools in the United States are private schools, begun in the early to mid-1960s, a time when most public education didn't offer kindergarten and only 5 percent of children went to preschool, compared with the 67 percent reported in the 2000 census. When many Montessori schools were established, private preschools might have been an option only for those in urban well-to-do areas, thus giving the impression that only wealthy families could afford Montessori schools. The first schools that Montessori established were in the slums of Rome, for children left at home while parents were out working, and certainly not for rich kids.

Today, in the United States, there are over 300 public Montessori schools and 100 charter schools that offer taxpayer-financed schooling, along with thousands of private, not-for-profit Montessori programs that use charitable donations to offer

low-cost tuition.

Montessori education, through these low-cost options, is available to families interested in quality education. Many private, high-dollar schools offer scholarships, and some states offer child-care credits and assistance to low-income families.



Montessori is for learning- disabled children.



Myth #2

Montessori is just for gifted kids.

Montessori is for all children. Since Montessori preschools begin working with three-year-olds in a prepared learning environment, Montessori students learn to read, write, and understand the world around them in ways that they can easily express. To the casual observer, Montessori students may appear advanced for their age, leading to the assumption that the schools cater to gifted children.

In reality, a Montessori school offers children of differing abilities ways to express their unique personalities, through activities using hands-on materials, language, numbers, art, music, movement and more. Montessori schooling helps each child develop individuality in a way that accentuates his or her innate intelligence. Montessori schools can help make all kids 'gifted' kids.

It is true that Dr. Montessori began her work with children who were institutionalized, due to physical or mental impairments. When using her methods and materials with normal children, Montessori discovered that children learned more quickly using her teaching methods.

There are some Montessori schools and programs that cater specifically to children who have learning challenges. In many Montessori schools, however, children with special needs are included, when those requirements can be met with existing school resources.



Myth #4

Montessori is affiliated with the Catholic Church.

Like many preschools, some Montessori programs may be sponsored by a church or synagogue, but most Montessori schools are established as

independent entities. Conversely, a school might be housed in a church building and not have any religious affiliation. Since Montessori refers to a philosophy, and not an organization, schools are free to have relationships with other organizations, including churches.

Some of the first Montessori programs were sponsored by Catholic or other religious organizations. Dr. Montessori was Catholic and worked on developing religious, educational, hands-on learning experiences for young children. The Montessori movement, however, has no religious affiliations.

Montessori schools all over the world reflect the specific values and beliefs of the staff members and families that form each school community. Around the world, there are Montessori schools that are part of Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and other religious communities.



Myth #5

In Montessori classrooms, children run around and do whatever they want.



When looking at a Montessori classroom you may see 25 or more children involved in individual or small group activities. It is possible that each child will be doing something different. At first glance, a classroom can look like a hive of bumblebees.

If you take the time to follow the activities of two children, over the course of a three-hour work period, you should observe a series of self-directed activities. The children aren't running wild. They are each involved in self-selected *work*, designed to build concentration and support independent learning.

Choosing what you do is not the same as doing whatever you want. A well-known anecdote, about Montessori students doing what they like, comes from E.M. Standing's book, *Maria Montessori – Her Life and Work*:

"A rather captious and skeptical visitor to a Montessori class once buttonholed one of the children – a little girl of seven – and asked: 'Is it true that in this school you are allowed to do anything you like?' 'I don't know about that,' replied the little maiden cautiously, 'but I do know that we like what we do!'"

Myth #6



Montessorians are a selective clique.

One definition of a clique is: *an exclusive circle of people with a common purpose*. Many Montessori teachers could be accused of this because of their intense desire to be of service in the life of a child, coupled with the teacher's knowledge of child development. And while many schools have tight-knit communities, they are not exclusive. You should look for a school where you and your family feel welcomed.

For many years, Montessori training programs were only available in a few larger cities. Becoming certified required prospective teachers to be determined and dedicated, as relocating for a year of study was often required. Now Montessori teacher's training is mainstream and more accessible, with colleges and universities offering graduate programs in Montessori education, in conjunction with Montessori training





centers. Loyola College in Maryland, New York University, and Xavier University are only a few of the many institutions of higher learning that include Montessori teacher's training.

Dr. Montessori's books, full of Italian scientific and psychological terminology, translated into the British English of the early 1990s, can be difficult for the modern reader to follow. To parents the use of

Montessori-specific terms and quotes may at times take on esoteric tones of an elusive inner circle. The enthusiasm and dedication evident in the work of many Montessorians might be misinterpreted as excluding to uninitiated newcomers.

My experience with Montessori teachers and administrators has been that they are eager to share their knowledge with others. Just ask.



A Montessori classroom is too unstructured for my child.

The Montessori classroom is very structured, but that structure is quite different from a traditional preschool. Montessori observed that children naturally tend to use self-selected, purposeful activities to develop themselves. The Montessori classroom, with its prepared activities and trained adults, is structured to promote this natural process of human development.

Students new to the Montessori classroom, who may or may not have been in a traditionally structured school, learn to select their own work and complete it with order, concentration, and attention to detail. Montessorians refer to children, who work in this independent, self-disciplined way as 'normalized,' or using the natural and normal tendencies of human development.

Many traditional preschools work on a schedule where the entire classroom is involved in an activity for fifteen minutes, then moves on to the next activity. This structure is based on the belief that young children have a short attention span of less than twenty minutes per activity.



Myth #7

Montessori classrooms are too structured.

Parents sometimes see the Montessori concept of *work as play* as overly structured. The activities in the classroom are referred to as *work*, and the children are directed to choose their work. However, the children's work is very satisfying to them, and they make no distinction between work and play. Children almost always find Montessori activities both interesting and fun.

Each Montessori classroom is lined with low shelves filled with materials. The teacher, or guide, shows the chil-

dren how to use the materials by giving individual lessons. The child is shown a specific way to use the materials but is allowed to explore them by using them in a variety of ways, with the only limitations being that materials may not be abused or used to harm others.

For example, the Red Rods, which are a set of ten painted wooden rods up to a meter long and about an inch thick, are designed to help the child learn to perceive length in ten centimeter increments. The Red Rods aren't to be used

as Jedi light sabers. Obviously, sword fights with the Red Rods are a danger to other children, as well as damaging to the rods, which cost over \$200.00 a set.

In cases where materials are being abused or used in a way that may hurt others, the child is stopped and gently and kindly redirected to other work.

Unfortunately, some parents see this limitation on the use of the material as 'too structured,' since it may not allow for fantasy play.



**Work consists
of whatever a
body is
obliged to do.**

**Play consists
of whatever a
body is *not*
obliged to do.**

~ Mark Twain

A typical morning might look something like this:

Traditional Preschool Schedule

8:30 to 8:45	Morning circle and singing
8:45 to 9:00	Work with Play Dough™
9:00 to 9:15	Letter of the day work
9:15 to 9:30	Crayon work
9:30 to 9:45	Snack
9:45 to 10:15	Outside time
10:15 to 10:30	Story time
10:30 to 10:45	Work with puzzles
10:45 to 11:00	Practice counting to 20
11:00 to 11:15	Craft project: cut out a paper flower
11:15 to 11:30	Circle time to dismissal

The above schedule reflects structure created by and dependent upon the teacher.

Montessori Preschool Schedule

8:30	Arrive, hang up coat, and greet teacher
8:35 to 9:00	Choose puzzle. Work and rework three times.
9:00 to 9:15	Return puzzle to shelf. Choose sandpaper numbers.
9:15 to 10:00	Trace sandpaper numbers.
10:00 to 10:15	Return numbers to shelf. Prepare individual snack. Eat snack with friend.
10:15 to 10:30	Choose and work with scissor cutting lesson.
10:30 to 11:15	Choose and work with knobbed cylinders.
11:15 to 11:30	Clean up time and group time with singing.

In the Montessori classroom each child creates his or her own cycle of work based on individual interests. This cycle of self-directed activity lengthens the child's attention span. The teacher, instead of directing a group of children in one activity, quietly moves from child to child, giving individual lessons with materials. The teacher or assistant may lead a few small-group activities, such as reading a book out loud, cooking, or gardening with two to six children.

The Montessori classroom is a vibrant and dynamic learning environment, where structure is created by each

child selecting his or her activity, doing it, and returning the activity to the shelf. After the successful completion of a task, there is a period of self-satisfaction and reflection, then the child chooses the next activity.

Montessorians call this rhythm of activity a *work cycle*. Stephen Covey, in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, refers to the habit of a work cycle as creating an upward spiral of growth and change. Covey describes a spiraling process of *learn – commit – do* that empowers us to move toward continuous improvement, both as children and adults.



Myth #9

Montessori schools don't allow for play.

Montessorians refer to the child's activities in the classroom as *work*. The children also refer to what they do in the classroom as *their* work. When your three-year-old comes home from school talking about the work he did today, he can sound way too serious for a kid you just picked up at preschool.

What adults often forget is that children have a deep desire to contribute meaningfully, which we deny when we

regard everything they do as 'just' play. With our adult eyes, we can observe the child's 'joyful work' and expressions of deep satisfaction as the child experiences "work as play."

Consider this. You start a new job. You arrive the first day, full of enthusiasm, and ready to contribute to the success of your work group. You're met at the door by your new boss and told, "Go outside and play. We'll let you know when it's time for lunch and time to go home."

Ouch!

But that's exactly what we do to our children when we dismiss their desires to contribute to their own well-being and to the common good of home or school. Montessori schools create environments, where children enjoy working on activities with grace and dignity. Montessori children often describe feelings of satisfaction and exhilaration upon completing tasks that we might have considered as only 'play.'



Myth #10

Montessori doesn't allow for creativity.



Creativity means "to bring something into existence." First we have an idea. Then we use our imagination, thoughts, and skills to bring these ideas into being. The Montessori classroom nourishes the creative skills of writing, drawing, painting, using scissors, modeling clay, gluing, etc. to enable children to express their thoughts and ideas in genuine and unique ways.

When I was in kindergarten, we were all given a coloring sheet of a caboose. I colored my caboose green. My teacher told me that cabooses were red. As I looked around, all the other children's cabooses were red. My classmates laughed at my green caboose. I felt the tears in my chest.

Twenty-four years later, I saw another green caboose, attached to the end of a Burlington-Northern train. "Yes!" I wanted to shout back to my kindergarten class. "There *are* green cabooses."

What does a green caboose have to do with creativity?

I wasn't trying to be creative with my green caboose. I was trying to express myself, because I had *seen* a green caboose.

Montessori classrooms allow for safe self-expression through art, music, movement, and manipulation of materials and can be one of the most creative and satisfying environments for a child to learn to experiment and express his or her inner-self.



Myth #11

Kids can't be kids at Montessori.

Somehow, our expectations as parents, having witnessed temper tantrums in restaurants and stores, create a view of children as naturally loud, prone to violent behavior, disrespectful of others, clumsy, and worse.

In a well-run Montessori classroom, though, one might be prone to think that kids aren't being kids.

When you see twenty-five to thirty children acting purposefully, walking

calmly, talking in low voices to each other, carrying glass objects, reading and working with numbers in the thousands, you might think the only way this behavior can occur is by children being regimented into it. I remember observing Dana, then fifteen-months-old, moving serenely around her infant Montessori classroom. She sure didn't act that way at home.

As I observed Dana's infant-toddler class in action, I saw the power of this child-friendly environment. As the children moved from activity to activity, day by day their skills and confidence grew. Lessons in grace and courtesy helped the children with social skills, as *please*, *thank you*, and *would you please* became some of these toddlers' first words.

When Dana was three, one of her favorite activities was the green bean cutting lesson. After carefully washing her hands, she would take several green beans out of the refrigerator, wash them, cut them into bite-sized pieces with a small knife, and arrange them on a child-sized tray. She carried the tray around the classroom, asking her classmates, "Would you like a green bean?" As they looked up from their work, the other children would reply, *Yes, please*, or *No, thank you*.

Dana, now in her mid-twenties, still remembers that work with deep satisfaction. Children show us, when given a prepared environment, a knowledgeable adult, and a three-hour work cycle, the natural state of the child is to be a happy, considerate, and contented person. A kid is most like a kid when he or she is engaged in the work of the Montessori classroom.



Myth #12

If Montessori is so great, why aren't former students better known?

Most of us associate our career success with our colleges. Not too many people come out and say, "When I was three years old I went to Hometown Montessori School, and that made all the difference."

Here are a few well-known people who remember their Montessori school connections and consider their experiences there vital.

Julia Child, the cook and writer, who taught Americans to love, prepare and pronounce French dishes, attended Montessori school.

Peter Drucker, the business guru, who has been said to be one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century, was a Montessori student.

Alice Waters, the chef of Chez Panisse fame and creator of The Edible Schoolyard project, was a Montessori teacher.

Anne Frank's famous diary was a natural extension of Anne's Montessori elementary school experience.

Annie Sullivan, Helen Keller's teacher, corresponded with Maria Montessori about teaching methods.

Larry Page and **Sergei Brin**, founders of Google, **Jeff Bezos** founder of Amazon, and **Steve Case** of America Online all credit Montessori schooling to their creative success.

Montessori schools are focused on helping children become self-directed individuals, who can, and do, make a difference in their families, in their communities and in their world – famous or not.

And that's *not* a myth.

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Montessori Vocabulary Made Clear

by
**Maren S. Schmidt &
Dana C. Schmidt**

Every discipline has its specific jargon. Lawyers, doctors, car mechanics, computer technicians, nurses, gardeners, and gymnasts, each have vocabulary that is unique to their area of expertise.

So it is with Montessori education. Here is a handy reference for the language that is used in Montessori writings and discussions, which, we hope, will help you understand what goes on in your child's Montessori classroom.

Adolescence	Mneme
Apparatus	Montessori Materials
Auto-Education	Nido
Casa	Normalization
Casa Dei Bambini	Normalizing Events
Children's House	
Cosmic Education	Parent Education
	Pedagogical Principles
Didactic Materials	Practical Life
Directress	Prepared Environment
Elementary Community	Primary Community
Elementary Environment	Primary Environment
Environment	Psychological Characteristics
Erdkinder	
Four Planes of Development	Respect for the Child
Freedom within Limits	Responsibility
Freedom and Responsibility	Self-Construction
	Sensitive periods
Going Out	Sensorial Materials
Guide	Structure
Guido	
Human Tendencies	Three-Hour Work Cycle
Horme	Toddler
Infant/Toddler	Upper Elementary
Inner Teacher	Whole Child
Lower Elementary	Work Cycle

Adolescence

Adolescence refers to the ages of twelve to eighteen years. There are two sub-stages of development during this period (ages twelve to fifteen and fifteen to eighteen), with each sub-stage having different learning requirements and environments, distinct from elementary and each other.

Apparatus

The word *apparatus* is used interchangeably with the terms *Montessori materials*, or *didactic materials*.

Auto-Education

Sorry, gentlemen, this has nothing to do with cars. The idea of auto-education is linked with the concept of self-construction in Montessori philosophy, and some people view it as the same idea. There is a nuance though that with auto-education a person consciously takes responsibility for his or her learning. Self-construction has a connotation of activities, or work, being unconsciously performed by children to build foundational skills before the age of six years.

Casa or Casa Dei Bambini

Casa Dei Bambini is *not* the name of a popular Mexican Restaurant. *Casa*, or *house* in Italian, refers to the environment for children ages three to six years. Dr. Montessori referred to the first schools as Casa Dei Bambini, or Children's Houses. Many schools use the term *Casa*, or *Children's House*, to refer to the classroom for children ages three to six years. Some schools may also refer to this age group as the preschool or primary group.

Children's House

See above.

Cosmic Education

Dr. Montessori saw the use of the imagination as the key to learning for children ages six to twelve. Montessori urged us to give the child a "vision of the universe," because within this view, there would be something that would fire each individual child's imagination, and, therefore, set the child on a path of true learning. As children pursue areas of interest, all subjects of learning are touched upon, due to the interconnectedness of everything in the cosmos.

Dr. Montessori may have preferred to use the term *universal education*, but that phrase was already in use in the United States at the time, relating to educator John Dewey's idea of free public education for everyone.

Instead, the term *cosmic education*, or connecting the child to the idea of the cosmos, was used. Back in the 1970s and 80s, the term seemed a bit 'out there' for mainstream use. Now there is more of a cultural awareness that everything is, indeed, connected to everything else, and the term *cosmic education* seems to better communicate the idea of giving the child a vision of the cosmos.

Didactic Materials

See *Montessori Materials*.

Directress

See *Montessori Teacher*.

Elementary Community

The elementary community is comprised of all the children, teachers, parents, and adults in a school's elementary classrooms or environments. As community relationships are established, other people involved in strategic relationships with the school, such as museum docents, librarians, storekeepers, and master gardeners are considered part of the community.

Elementary Environment

The elementary environment is designed for children ages six to twelve years. There may be a lower elementary, made up of six- to nine-year-olds, and an upper elementary, comprised of nine- to twelve-year-olds. Elementary classrooms for six- to twelve-year-olds are also found. The elementary environment includes an outdoor component but also expands to encompass the children *going out* to explore their local community's museums, libraries, and other facilities outside the school campus.

Environment

The term *environment* in Montessori terms is used to describe a prepared environment that meets the learning needs of the age group it serves.

You will hear the words *environment* and *classroom* used interchangeably. A Montessori classroom, or environment, does not look anything like a traditional classroom, though. A primary environment for three- to six-year-olds is different than an elementary environment, which differs from an adolescent environment.

Erdkinder

Dr. Montessori envisioned an *Erdkinder* (German for *child of the earth*) environment for the young adolescent, ages twelve to fifteen years, to fulfill a developmental need to con-

nect and form a society of his or her time and place. This vision of *Erdkinder* encompasses the idea of a working farm and much more. For the past ten years, the farm-school concept, or *Erdkinder*, is being successfully implemented in the United States.

Four Planes of Development

Dr. Montessori saw human beings going through four planes, or stages, of development, with each plane having unique characteristics and opportunities for learning.

First Plane:	From birth to 6 years
Second Plane:	From 6 to 12 years
Third Plane:	From 12 to 18 years
Fourth Plane:	From 18 to 24 years

Freedom and Responsibility

The idea that freedom follows responsibility is an important concept in Montessori philosophy. We give opportunities to "respond with ability," and corresponding freedoms are given. For example, if you remember to bring your coat, then you will be given the freedom to go outside when it is cold. If you act responsibly in the elementary classroom, then you can be granted the freedom to go outside of the classroom into the larger community. See *going out*.

Freedom within Limits

The concept of allowing freedom within limits is a crucial idea in Montessori philosophy. To the casual observer, or new teacher, freedom may appear to allow a child to do anything he or she would like.

Freedom is limited by the level of ability and responsibility a child has. We give the child the freedom to move freely about the classroom. This freedom may be taken away, if the child uses the freedom to go around hitting other children, disrupting other's work, damaging materials, or otherwise not choosing a purposeful activity that will lead to a normalizing event. The child is free to act within the limits of purposeful activity.

Going Out

The idea of *going out* is very different than the typical field trip that traditional elementary students take. Students in a Montessori elementary classroom will go out in small groups of two to perhaps six students into the community to gather information or experiences in areas of interest. For example, some schools are able to let students walk a few blocks to the city library. Other schools allow students to take public transportation

to go to museums, or college campuses to visit with experts in their field of study. Others have a system of parent volunteers that drive and chaperone going-out students.

A going-out program is possible due to the child developing freedom and responsibility over a period of many years. Students must earn the right to go out.

Guide

See *Montessori Teacher*

Guido

See *Montessori Teacher*

Horme

Not ham in a can. Dr. Montessori used this psychological term from Sir Percy Nunn. Horme means life force. (From the Greek, *horme*, meaning impetus or impulse.) If the life force is allowed to develop smoothly, without obstacles impairing its force, normalization occurs. When the hormone is blocked, we see deviations in the life force, and the process of normalization does not occur. If the hormic force is strong and deviated, we may see a child with powerful emotional and physical outbursts. If the hormone is weak in a child, we may observe boredom, laziness, and the need to be constantly entertained.

Human Tendencies

Dr. Montessori saw that there were certain characteristics that make us human. Depending on our individual natures, sensitive periods of learning, or different psychological characteristics, the following activities define us as human:

- Activity
- Becoming
- Belonging
- Exploration
- Orientation
- Order
- Communication
- Imagination
- Exactness
- Repetition
- Perfection

Human beings need to be involved in meaningful activities. They need to feel a sense of becoming. Humans need to belong. They need to explore the world around them and create an orientation for that exploration. People have a need to create order and make sense out of the chaos around them. We need to communicate with others. We

use our imaginations. We work at exactness. We learn using repetition. We yearn for perfection.

Montessori pedagogical principles use and are based on the knowledge of the human tendencies.

Infant/Toddler

Infant/toddler refers to the age span from birth to around age three. The infant/toddler communities are divided into two areas – the Nido, for ages two to fourteen months and the Young Children's Communities for children ages fourteen to thirty-six months.

Not every Montessori school offers an infant/toddler program. Many infant/toddler programs are self-contained and feed into schools that have students ages three to six years.

Inner Teacher

The child's self-construction is aided by what Montessorians call the *inner teacher*, or the child's unconscious urge to connect to certain activities. The outward manifestations of the child's inner teacher are the child's interest and attention. We encourage interest through the prepared environment and an enlightened awareness of our role in the work of the child.

For example, we observe a child's interest in music by observing his or her choice of playing the bells in the Montessori classroom. The child's inner teacher is urging the child to learn to play songs.

A trained Montessori teacher in a prepared environment helps guide the child to activities, thus aiding the child's self-construction.

Lower Elementary

The elementary age group in many schools is divided into two classes: the lower and upper elementary. The lower elementary is for those children who show psychological characteristics of being in the second of the four planes of development.

Ages given for each plane of development are approximate and are used as guidelines to aid observation of the child's choices for work, in order to know when the child is ready to enter a new learning environment. Montessori teachers are trained to offer key lessons to direct and encourage growth in the child's observable areas of interest.

A child who is past his or her sixth birthday may, or may not, exhibit the psychological characteristics of the child in the second plane of development. Until these characteristics are observed, the child is best served

by remaining in the primary environment of the Casa.

Mneme

Mneme was the Greek Muse for memory. Dr. Montessori used this psychological term to express the idea of memory being created and retained in the child by sensorial experiences. The idea of neuro-muscular memory follows this concept.

Montessori Materials

Montessori materials were designed or incorporated into the work with the children by Dr. Montessori, her son Mario and original Montessori adherents.

Dr. Montessori used materials made by Itard and Seguin, notably the Moveable Alphabet and the Command Cards from Itard and the Teens Board and Tens Board from Seguin. Other materials are designed to reveal certain concepts to the child through hands-on, uninterrupted exploration, after an introductory lesson from the Montessori teacher.

For example, the Pink Tower contains multiple concepts, including height, volume and sequence, squares of numbers and cubes of numbers, among other abstractions.

There are dozens of pieces of Montessori-designed materials that help the child in educating the senses of hearing, seeing, smelling, touching, and tasting. Other Montessori materials aid the child in acquiring skills in math, reading, writing, geography, social studies, science, music, and more.

Montessori Teacher

A Montessori teacher has Montessori training in the age level at which he or she is teaching. There is training for Assistants to Infancy for working with children from birth to age three; Primary training for working with children ages three to six; and Elementary training for working with ages six to twelve. Adolescent training for working with twelve to eighteen-year-olds is now being developed. Most adolescent teachers have elementary training, with additional adolescent training.

A Montessori teacher is trained to observe children in a specific age group and introduce them to developmentally challenging activities, based on those observations. A Montessori elementary teacher, for example, is trained to work with six- to twelve-year-olds and may only have fundamental, versus specific, knowledge of the work with the younger and older children. Primary teachers, likewise, have general knowledge of the work of the elementary-aged child but may

not be trained to observe and give lessons to the elementary-aged child.

Many Montessorians prefer to use the term *guide* or *director/directress* instead of *teacher* to describe their work with the child. Dr. Montessori used the term *guido* in her writings. The Montessori teacher's job is to help direct or guide the child to purposeful activity. The Montessori *guide* is focused on directing the successful learning and developmental progress of the child, instead of being focused on teaching. This fundamental view of how to interact with the child is one of the major principles of Montessori philosophy. The adult's job is to prepare an environment in order to guide and direct the child to purposeful activity.

When I first became a Montessori certified teacher, I proudly introduced myself as a Montessori *guide* at dinner parties, and people asked me to lead float trips down the Buffalo River. Even though the word *guide* communicates more effectively to me about what role the adult plays in a Montessori classroom, I realize that most folks might think *guide* means *river rat*.

The job of a Montessori guide is to help children learn. As a college professor of mine said, "I'm a Ph.D. in chemistry. My job is to present information. Your job is to learn it." Unfortunately, I've seen too many teachers over the years that see their job as presenting information, with no concern if a student actually learns that information. The word *guide* to me connotes that you are committed to helping someone reach a destination.

I would rather be *guided* than *taught*. With a guide, I'll end up where I want to be.

Most Montessori schools use the word *teacher*, in a desire to communicate effectively with parents, whose experience has primarily been with *teachers*.

Montessori teachers are guides, and that is very good for your child.

Nido

Nido is *nest* in Italian, and the Nido is a Montessori environment designed for the infant between the ages of two to fourteen months. When the child begins to walk, he or she enters a new environment of the Young Children's Community.

Normalization

The natural, or normal state, for a human being is characterized by four attributes:

1. A love of work or activity
2. Concentration on an activity
3. Self-discipline
4. Sociability or joyful work.



The understanding of normalization doesn't require a leap of faith; it occurs in those moments when you feel most alive and more *you* than any other time. When we do what we love, and love doing it because we have the skill and self-discipline to do the activity well, those are the blissful moments of being human. The activity we love might be anything – chopping wood, singing, dancing, writing, conversing with others, cooking.

In a Montessori school, we are trying to help the child attain a natural or normal developmental process, which is referred to as *normalization*. This process of human development, or normalization, is evident in an observable cycle of activities, call normalizing events.

Normalizing Events

In her book, *The Secret of Childhood*, Montessori told us of her discovery that in their natural state, children love to work, which means to be involved in meaningful and purposeful activity. When we are able to give the child (or an adult, if only our bosses understood!) a prepared environment and uninterrupted time to work, the child experiences a *normalizing event*.

Children love to be busy, so we prepare their environment with activities that foster a love of work, concentration, self-discipline, and a sense of joyful accomplishment.

There are three steps to a normalizing event:

1. Choose an activity.
2. Complete the activity and return the materials to original order.
3. Sense of satisfaction.

Normalizing activities in a prepared environment, with an uninterrupted three-hour work cycle, creates what Stephen Covey, in

his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, calls a success cycle. To Montessorians, this process is normalization. When was your last *normalizing event*? How did it make you feel?

Parent Education

Parent education in Montessori terms is a series of ongoing lectures, discussions, and demonstrations, designed for parents to help bridge the child's world of school and home. Montessorians want to work with the whole child – body, heart, mind and spirit – and know that what happens at school affects home life, and what happens at home affects school life.

Parent education strives to create important home/school and parent/teacher relationships in order to create an optimum environment for the whole child.

Pedagogical Principles

Pedagogy refers to more than just teaching. Montessori pedagogical principles apply to teaching, as well as learning. Montessori teachers teach in order to promote learning, to fire the child's imagination and to feed the child's heart and spirit.

Each piece of material, with its corresponding lessons, has been developed to include the following teaching and learning principles:

- Use knowledge of human tendencies
- Awareness of psychological characteristics
- Prepared environment
- Limitation of material
- Teacher as link between child and the environment



- Freedom of choice and development of responsibility
- Auto-education or self-construction
- Whole to the parts; concrete to abstract
- The working of the hand and the mind
- Isolation of difficulty
- Observation of the child at work
- Repetition through variety
- Indirect preparation
- Techniques that lead to mental and physical independence.

Practical Life

The prepared environment of the primary classroom contains activities that help the child learn dozens of practical self-care skills, such as hand washing, dusting, sweeping, clothes washing, and more. Children, around the age of three years, are extremely interested in these activities. Working with the practical life exercises, children learn to work independently in the classroom and develop the concentration necessary to be successful with later work that is more academic in nature. Practical life activities form

the foundation for later work, with reading and math materials for the four- and five-year-old.

Prepared Environment

We live in a world of prepared environments. Stores, theatres, and restaurants are examples of places that have been prepared to meet the specific needs of the user.

A restaurant is prepared to serve our need for food, our need to socialize, etc. Wait staff, chefs, wine stewards, are ready to serve us. Tables and chairs are for our comfort and aesthetic appeal. Pictures, flowers, plants, and candles provide decoration.

A good restaurant anticipates our needs. Wait staff offers us drinks and appetizers to get us comfortable. Menu selections are clearly given to us. The restaurant is designed to serve our dining needs, be it fast food or a five-star experience.

The prepared environments in a Montessori school

are created to meet the developmental needs of children, based on observable behaviors, in many ways, like a restaurant is prepared to serve its customers.

There are four basic Montessori environments:

The infant/toddler environment from birth to age three.

The primary environment for ages three to six years.

The elementary environment for ages six to twelve years.

The adolescent environments for ages twelve to fifteen and fifteen to eighteen years.

Each Montessori environment is prepared by Montessori-trained people who understand the developmental needs of that age group.

Primary Community

Children age three to six years and adults (including parents) in the primary environment comprise the primary community. If a school has multiple primary classrooms, the term may refer to all the people involved in that age group.

Primary classes in a traditional setting may refer to grades one to six, or grades one to three, in many parts of the country. Montessorians see the years from three to six being the time of a person's greatest learning and view this period as the primary, or foundation, years of schooling. To Montessorians, there is nothing 'pre-school' about this time of children's learning. It is the real thing.

Primary Environment

The primary environment is the prepared environment or classroom for children ages three to six years. The environment usually contains an outdoor component as part of the classroom experience.

Psychological Characteristics

For the child from the age of six to twelve years, we refer to the identifying features of that time as *psychological characteristics*. The child now prefers to do activities with friends, instead of working alone. To learn, the elementary-age child needs repetition of concepts through a variety of work. For the child in the second plane of development, learning must use the imagination, involve a sense of humor, involve going outside of the familiar school and home, use logic and reason, and exercise the developing sense of right and wrong.

Montessori teachers look for these psychological characteristics in a six-year-old child to see if the child is ready to move into an elementary environment.

Respect for the Child

Montessorians focus on the child's needs and the child's work of creating a unique person. We recognize that the child has a formidable task. We work to be a help to the life of the child, respecting both the person that is not yet there and the one in front of us.

Responsibility

The concept of freedom and responsibility is a key concept in working with children using Montessori's philosophy. Freedom follows responsibility.

Self-Construction

The Montessori idea is that the child constructs the adult he or she will become by the self-selected activities that the child engages in with concentration, self-discipline, and joyfulness.

This concept of self-construction is perhaps more readily seen with a child's learning to walk and talk. In normal circumstances, we don't have to teach a child how to walk or talk. The child self-constructs as long as the environment is conducive to that building of the person. For example, if a child is confined and not allowed movement, walking will not develop. If a child doesn't hear spoken language, speech will not appear.

In a Montessori classroom, we strive to create a place where children have the freedom to enhance their abilities through self-selected activities. It occurs in much the same way that they learned to walk and talk but at a different level, involving reading and writing, mathematics, music, science, geography, and practical living activities.

Sensitive Periods

Before the age of six, human beings are in a unique period of learning and development. At this time in our lives, certain information is absorbed by our personalities without conscious effort. Young children learn to walk, talk and do hundreds of things without formal instruction or being aware of learning. Montessori described these stages as *sensitive periods* of development, using a term from biologists.

Sensitive periods are characterized by the following five observable behaviors.

Children seem to be drawn to certain work and we see the following:

A well-defined activity with a beginning, middle, and end.

The activity is irresistible for the child, once he or she starts it.

The same activity is returned to again and again.

A passionate interest develops.

A restful and tranquil state comes at the finish of the activity.

Once the sensitive period is over, children are not drawn to certain activities as before. Three-year olds love to wash their hands, because they are in a sensitive period for that activity; whereas, ten-year-olds are not.

There are five sensitive periods of development from birth to age six: Language, Order, Refinement of the Senses, Movement, and Social Relations.

In the older child, these unique learning periods are called *psychological characteristics*.

Sensorial Materials

Montessori sensorial materials are self-correcting, hands-on materials that aid your child

in his or her developing powers of vision, hearing, touch, taste, and smell.

The sensorial materials engage the hand and the mind to create powerful learning experiences for your child. These experiences become indirect preparation for later academic and artistic skills, and create 'touchstones' in the mind for skills such as perfect pitch, color memory, figure memory, and other nonverbal accomplishments.

Visual discrimination of length, width, height, and color are addressed through the work with the Pink Tower, Brown Stair, Red Rods, Color Tablets, Cylinder Blocks and Knobless Cylinders.

The Geometric Cabinet, Geometric Solids, Constructive Triangles, Binomial and Trinomial Cubes help the child learn different shapes.

Touch is fine tuned with Rough and Smooth Boards, Fabric Boxes, Mystery Bag, Thermic Bottles, Thermic Tablets, Baric Tablets, and Pressure Cylinders.

Hearing is refined in the work with the Sound Cylinders and the Bell Material, along with teacher-initiated sound games.

Tasting activities and the smelling bottles help your child distinguish a variety of tastes and aromas.

Each material is designed to help your child's mind focus on a quality, such as color, and distinguish objects by their attributes, which may include color, size, shape, weight, sound, smell, taste, temperature, or other qualities.

Structure

Some parents complain that Montessori classrooms are too structured. Others say there is not enough structure.

Traditional preschools are structured around the group changing activities every fifteen or twenty minutes. Snack and recess occur at predictable times each day. For many parents, children being told what to do and being constantly scheduled and entertained by teachers is construed as structure. These parents, therefore, may see a Montessori classroom as not having enough structure.

The structure of a Montessori classroom is built on allowing the children free-choice activities in a prepared environment, within an uninterrupted three-hour work cycle. Individual work is not interrupted by snack time, song time, or circle time. The child creates an inner structure by having 'normalizing events' based on personal interests.

The child entering a Montessori classroom from a traditionally structured preschool may feel anxious, if not told by the teacher what to do every fifteen minutes. It

usually takes six to eight weeks for most children to begin to build the inner structure that will give them confidence in the Montessori classroom. During this period, parents may, again, feel that a Montessori classroom is not structured enough.

Another parent of a newcomer may think there is too much structure in the classroom, when children are asked to use the materials in specific ways. As long as the materials are not being abused or used in a dangerous manner, the children are free to explore the materials after they have had an introductory lesson.

To the parent of a child, who is accustomed to playing with everything at home, without having to consider the effects on other people and surroundings, the Montessori classroom may appear too structured.

An 'invisible' structure provided by the process of normalization allows your child to create an internal organization. This self-construction will aid the development of self-discipline that will last a lifetime.

Three-Hour Work Cycle

When given a regular three-hour period, children (and adults) learn to tap into a success cycle. After accomplishing a series of short and familiar tasks in a 90-minute time frame, a child will often choose a task that is challenging and represents 'true learning.' At this 90-minute mark, there is a period of restlessness that lasts about 10 minutes, until the choice for the challenging activity is made. The new activity may last for sixty to ninety minutes.

At the end of a work cycle, it is not unusual to see a child in quiet satisfaction, smiling both outwardly and inwardly.

Toddler

Toddler refers to the children who have begun to walk and are in the Young Children's Communities for children ages fourteen to thirty-six months.

Upper Elementary

The upper elementary is for children about ages nine to twelve years of age. See *elementary environment*.

Whole Child

In the process of aiding development, Montessorians focus on the growth of the *whole child*, not just academics. The paradox of focusing on the development of the whole child, through the process of normalization, is that academic interest and skills

bloom, as the child develops a habit of *learn-commit-do*, or a success cycle.

As Montessorians and adults, our challenge is to lead the whole person – body, mind, heart, and spirit. Our challenge is that we must model the self-discipline, the vision, the passion and the conscience that is at the heart of true learning and self-discovery for our children.

As Montessorians and adults, we walk with our children on a path of trust, helping them to understand how to live their lives, how to develop their talents, how to share their love, and how to do what's right. Corrections on our path should strive to be of loving intention to serve the needs of the whole child.

Work Cycle

The development of a work cycle is an important component in the idea of normalization for the child. In our Montessori schools, every day we should try to protect a three-hour work period from interruption.

A basic work cycle involves choosing an activity, doing that activity, returning the activity to order, and then experiencing a sense of satisfaction. That defines one unit or cycle of work.

This sense of satisfaction, which may last a few seconds to a few minutes, helps motivate the child (and adult) to choose the next activity, thus creating another cycle of work.

As the child matures, his or her work cycle will grow until the child is able to maintain a three-hour level of activity. True learning occurs during the last 90 minutes of the three-hour work cycle, when a child, after experiencing satisfaction with previous work, will choose a new and challenging activity to master.

This all begins with the child choosing, doing, returning to order, feeling satisfaction, then choosing again. Each activity contributes to an upward spiral of successful learning within the child.

Five-year-olds in a Montessori classroom usually begin to establish a second three-hour work cycle in the afternoon.

Summary

We hope this vocabulary guide will help you feel comfortable with the Montessori lingo in your child's school. Also, if there is some idea or concept you don't understand, please contact your child's teacher or school administrator. They are in a sensitive period for helping parents.



A Guided Tour of the Early Childhood & Elementary Montessori Classrooms: Part One

Practical Life * Sensorial * Grace & Courtesy

by Tim Seldin,
President

The Montessori Foundation
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Tomorrow's Child

Before children enter a Montessori classroom on the first day of school each year, Montessori teachers have spent many hours preparing the environment. Materials that were carefully stored in boxes during vacation time are brought out and unwrapped. Wooden shelves that were stacked in the far corner of the room to allow for a thorough cleaning of the carpet are pulled into position. Plants and classroom pets that spent their vacation at the teacher's home are brought in from the car.

A similar scene is repeated in Montessori schools around the