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Nurturing the Love of Learning: Montessori for the Early Childhood Years

The program opens with a series of shots of children doing various activities, enjoying themselves, deep in thought, working together. We see children of different cultures and children with disabilities, children of different ages, all involved in learning. The soundtrack is the voices of parents talking about their feelings about Montessori.



Deidra: As a parent, I chose Montessori because I saw something happening in that classroom that was just magic. The children were working as if it were play and yet they knew it was work, and I wanted that for my children.

Solomon's mom: One particular thing is that he is doing cursive writing and I see him working and working and working on it at home. He is happy about learning and that is what I really want for him is to be happy about learning.

Pria's father: It is just a quiet self confidence where she knows she can do this, she can put her coat on when she is three years old or draw some shapes or water the plants. When she was quite young she was doing all these different things.

Linda Treasure: I think they are respected for who they are, each individual little person, and I like that about it and I think that has benefited each and every one of my four and I see them kind of blossoming in this environment. It's delightful.



Sharon: I would say go to a school and observe a Montessori school. You'll probably walk away like I did saying this is wonderful. This is what I want for my child.

It doesn't take long to realize a Montessori classroom is different from most other classrooms. The children are actively engaged, working independently.

A closer look reveals each child is involved in working with hands-on materials that stimulate all of his or her senses - materials that communicate complex concepts in a concrete way.

Angela: (Former student) Like the materials get you interested because you are doing something and it doesn't make it seem like you are doing work and you can still have fun while you are learning.



Shayna Patel: When I learned to tie my shoes, I liked it. I was excited and I think it worked.

All the materials in a Montessori classroom are organized into one of five curriculum areas:

Practical Life

Sensorial

Language

Math

Cultural

Montessori materials are carefully sequenced so that each activity has an orderly and logical process to follow. This allows children to organize their thinking and problem solving skills in a clear way, and to absorb this knowledge through their senses.

Practical Life Materials

Small children have many life skills that they need to learn to achieve independence. Respecting a child's desire to be independent is a cornerstone of Montessori philosophy.

Children develop a sense of pride when they are able to do things for themselves.

Sensorial Activities

Maria Montessori was one of the first educators to recognize that children learn best when they are engaged in hands-on activities. She believed that children need to move freely in their environment and to investigate whatever interests them. For these reasons, Montessori insisted that the classroom be beautiful. Through years of observation she was able to develop a curriculum that appealed to all of a child's senses.

Language Activities

Young children have a natural ability to learn language skills that diminishes as they grow older. Emphasis is placed on learning the sounds each letter makes rather than the alphabet. Throughout the curriculum, children are developing the small motor skills they will need to be a successful writer and the auditory and visual tracking skills necessary for learning to read.

Objects and images are used to begin the association between beginning sounds and names. The child learns that snake begins with a ssssss sound, that horse begins with a hhhh sound, or that dog begins with a ddd sound and so on.

Math Activities

Most adults who were taught in traditional educational settings, are fascinated by the power of the Montessori math curriculum. As the child becomes more comfortable with each material, the concept of numbers becomes more and more abstract. Like the language curriculum, when the abstract symbols of numbers are introduced, the child has a deep understanding of what each symbol represents.

Any child who has learned math in a Montessori classroom knows the difference between 1000 and 100 because they have seen the difference and felt it in their hands many times.



Sam Scott: (Former student) They kind of cut it down to the basics here.

Cultural Activities (History and Geography)

As you become more familiar with Montessori materials, you begin to see the elegant philosophy behind how each activity works to build the child's understanding of the world around her. Matching and tracing activities continue to build the child's ability to identify and name individual states, countries within continents and continents within a world map.

Angela: (Former student) I like how you could move at your own pace instead of having to work in the same classroom with everyone at the same time.

Each material provides the child with the potential to correct his or her own work, making the process of learning an independent venture. Children often take advantage of their freedom to self-correct by experimenting with all the different ways to do a single activity - satisfying their curiosity about what works and doesn't work and why.

Unlike most schools, children are allowed to continue with their work as long as they want to. Over a few days of observation, we may notice a child repeating the same activity many times. Children decide for themselves what activity interests them and naturally repeat that activity until they are ready to move on. The freedom to continue working on an activity without interruption allows the child to process information in his or her own way.



Former Student (female): I liked how we had the freedom to go at our own pace and I liked how we could work individually or in a group. It depended on how we felt about the work.

Children develop a readiness to grasp abstract concepts at different ages. Montessori teachers follow the child's own sense of what they are ready to learn. In their primary role as observers of the child's progress they present materials when the child is ready to take on new work.

Through this freedom, the child becomes more comfortable, taking the time to contemplate all aspects of an activity - the feel, the visual appearance, the sound of the materials, even the smell. This curiosity to explore the sensual world around them is part of what makes learning fun. The children enjoy the process over the product.

Former Student (male): You don't have to sit in one place, was one of the things. You could always move around and you could talk with people and the people were real nice. I liked that about it.



We see children dressing themselves, handwashing, cleaning up their environment.

Part of becoming independent learners is taking responsibility for themselves and the classroom environment. Each child learns to take responsibility for their own belongings and to master the skills of taking care of him or herself.

We see a child taking a material off a shelf and then returning it to its place and cleaning up the area.

Children also feel secure in the knowledge that they can find the materials they wish to work with neatly stored in a particular spot in the classroom. They are in turn responsible to put the materials back where they found them and to clean up after themselves.

Former student (female): We are taught at an early age (3-6) that sharing and being kind to one another is the right thing to do, not to be selfish, to care about other people.

We see two small 3-6 children filling the bird feeder outside with Jeremy, a 9-12 student.

Jeremy (9-12 student): "Just pour it in the top okay?"

Boy (3 years old): "I want to do it."

Jeremy: "Yeah, you'll go next."

If another child is using the materials a child is interested in, he or she learns to wait patiently, respecting the rights of others.



Boy: "Now, can I do it?"

The child pours the seeds and asks to be allowed to be able to hang it back up on the tree.

Boy: "I will hang it?"

Jeremy: "You want to hang it up? Can you reach?"

Boy: "Would you lift me up?"

Jenna: (Former student) I think that Montessori has really helped me understand the different levels of a person because of going through different groups as first year, second year and third year, you know you are not going to be up with third year but some people may be just because of their different level.



Multiage grouping is the norm in Montessori. Three year age spans in each classroom provide each child the opportunity to grow within a cooperative community, becoming both a learner and a teacher. Even complex concepts such as cube root and the classification of plants and animals by elementary age students. Unlike most educational environments, children are able to enjoy the learning process without competitive pressures. No grades or skill differentiations are made.

Each child begins at his or her own level and progresses at his or her own pace. Each member of the community is welcomed and shares in the responsibilities and pleasures of learning.

Deidra: And there is this love of learning. The children are turned on because they are successful. They understand it, they see it. It makes sense, it's beautiful and they want to do it and they're not doing it for anyone else other than themselves.

Deidra: When Maria Montessori first sat down, and its coming about hopefully full circle, especially now that it is in the public schools, that its good for everyone. It's holistic, it's environmental, everything that as human beings we want our world to be.

Karen: Sometimes I feel like my enthusiasm and respect for the Montessori method is a little unrealistic to some people, but it's really simple. The method works, it just works.

Maria Montessori, a medical doctor, decided in 1907 to devote her life to the education of small children. Through decades of observation, she developed a philosophy and method of education, based on how children actually learn. That method now exists on every continent of the world. Public and Private Montessori schools in the U.S. now offer programs from as early as birth through, as late as high school. The growth of public Montessori schools has been rapid with over 320 public and charter Montessori schools in 34 states.

The name Montessori is in the public domain and may be used for schools that do not use the methods described in this videotape. Check to see if the school you are considering is affiliated with the American Montessori Society.