

WHAT IS MONTESSORI

By Louise Livingston

There are so many misconceptions about Montessori. Some people say 'that's where the children are allowed to do exactly as they like' others say 'it's too rigid – the children have to work all the time and have no time to socialise.' The reality is that Montessori is neither of these. However, one can be forgiven for being confused. Montessori is not a registered name and amazingly, it is possible to set up a school and call it Montessori even if you don't have any Montessori trained teachers and not one piece of Montessori material. So any parent looking for a Montessori school may well find it difficult to understand what Montessori is because there is such a wide range of so called 'Montessori' schools on the market.

In a true Montessori school you will find independent children who are encouraged not only to do things for themselves but also to think for themselves. You will find children who have learnt how to explore and solve problems for themselves. Most importantly you will see small children who are often perceived as only being aware of their own needs helping each other and who, without being asked to, will put things away and perform acts of kindness purely to benefit the group as a whole. So how does this all come about? What exactly is Montessori? What should you be looking for if you are looking for true Montessori and what kind of guarantees are there that what you are paying for is the real thing?

The Montessori approach is based upon the natural laws of human development. Maria Montessori observed that children under six absorb limitlessly and effortlessly from the world around them and in so doing lay down all the foundations for later life – they become adults with all the characteristics and language of the culture into which they have been born simply by living. In this huge task, however, they have some help. They have a special kind of mind that she called an absorbent mind - a strong desire to explore everything around them using their senses and a drive to become independent. She identified certain windows of opportunity for the child that she called 'sensitive periods' during which the child is irresistibly drawn to the things he needs to help him develop his full human potential.

Everything in the classroom is designed to support these windows of opportunity. The Montessori 'pre-school' is called the Children's House because everything in it is designed to allow the child to become independent – the materials are child sized and the equipment is laid out in an orderly fashion on low shelves that are easily accessible for the children. The equipment is aesthetically pleasing and is meticulously cared for which encourages the children to take care of it too. Children between the ages of two and a half and six are grouped together in their own mini society. The younger children learn from watching the older children and the older ones benefit by helping the younger children. The mixed age group allows the children to develop socially, intellectually and emotionally – it is an essential part of any Montessori school. When you are looking at schools you need to see children of different ages grouped together in this way otherwise the class is missing an important part of the Montessori approach.

The curriculum is divided into four main areas. Practical life not only gives the children the opportunity to practise the skills of everyday life but also helps them to develop concentration and develop co-ordination of mind and body. The sensorial materials capitalise on the fact that children use their senses to learn. Through these materials they are encouraged to order and classify the physical properties of the world they live in. The materials for mathematics help the children to learn and really understand mathematical concepts because they are presented using concrete materials. Children are prepared to write and read from the minute they come into the class through a series of activities that gradually build all the individual skills required so that when they

are ready it is just a natural progression. Geography, history, biology, botany, zoology, art and music are covered with a hands-on approach that is based on the fact that children learn most effectively from their own experiences.

In a Montessori school you will see children choosing their activities independently and moving from one activity to the next – always returning things to the shelf after they have used them. You will experience an atmosphere of calm and see young children concentrating for surprising periods of time. Children work individually, in a group or with a friend. The morning should last for a minimum of three hours – three hours in which there is no fixed 'timetable'. Groups arise spontaneously rather than at a fixed time every day. Maria Montessori observed that this unfettered period of time was essential for the children to develop the kind of concentration that you see when a child becomes involved with something that is essential for his development. There are no time limits for the child – he may work with whatever he chooses for as long as he likes. What is known as the 'three- hour work cycle' is another essential feature of the Montessori approach and if you don't observe this you are not looking at true Montessori.

In a Montessori school the child is guided by a trained adult who will show him how to do the things that he is ready for after which he can work with them independently. The adult observes the child and will not interfere so long as the child is working with the material productively. When a difficulty arises she is able to step in and give help but is always careful never to give more help than is needed. Children work at their own individual pace and naturally develop their own rhythm and work pattern. Each child's individual needs are assessed through observation so that he is shown new things when he is developmentally ready and new knowledge is always built on what he already knows. Since everything he does in the classroom also prepares for a later activity the child is able to move gradually through activities developing his skills effortlessly. The 'directress' is not teaching the child she is putting him in charge of his own learning through his own exploration. This may seem a subtle distinction but it is a key part of the Montessori approach.

So what other indicators are there that you are looking at a true Montessori school? Maria Montessori set up the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) in 1929 to make sure that her work would be faithfully reproduced after her death. If you see that a school is being run by an AMI trained teacher you can be sure that it is practising what is known as 'Maria Montessori's Montessori'.

But finally let's look to the child to find the essence of true Montessori. Ask any child who has been educated in a genuine Montessori school who taught him to read and he will probably say 'I taught myself'.

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