



Child

Parents' guide to Montessori

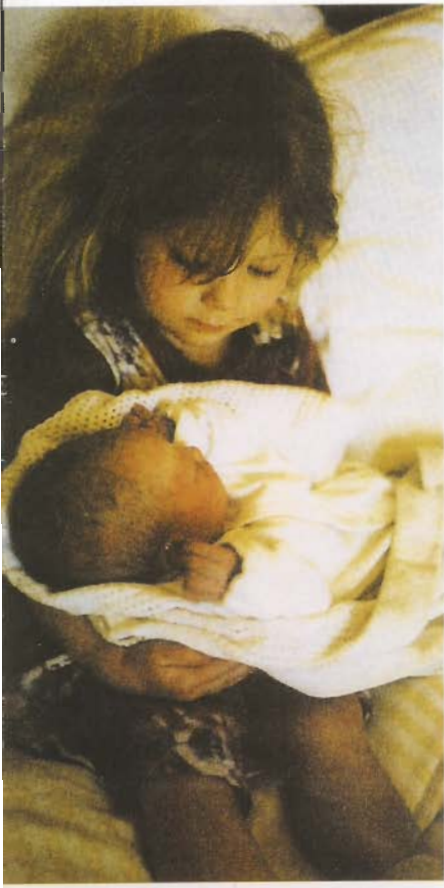
We hope to share with you a philosophy that remains at the forefront of calls for a new way of seeing educational systems. There are now experts world wide who support Montessori's own belief that such a change is not only necessary but vital if our children are to inherit a more peaceful world. All concur that children must be seen and treated as individuals, that they are dynamic natural learners and that anything which inhibits and destroys this love of learning cannot be right.

We have compiled *Your Montessori Child*, up-dating and adding new material where needed from some of the best articles for parents that have appeared in *Montessori International*, our quarterly magazine for teachers, lecturers, students and parents.

We hope you will enjoy finding out more about us!

Your Montessori Child

Children are the answer



“The child would appear among us as the teacher of peace. We must gather around him to learn the mystery of humanity, to discover in him the mystery of a fundamental goodness that our outer lives and acts belie. That is the source of the knowledge that interests us most of all. If we truly yearn for brotherhood and understanding among men, there must also be brotherhood and understanding between the adult and the child!”

Maria Montessori



Who was Maria Montessori?

(1870 - 1952)



A Short History

Maria Montessori was born in the town of Chiaravalle in Italy in 1870. She was the first Italian woman to qualify as a physician (much against the wishes of her father and despite endless prejudices and difficulties), and was first appointed assistant doctor at the Rome University Psychiatric Clinic. She began to be very interested in children's learning disabilities and studied everything that she could about the subject – finally evolving her own very innovative 'science of education'.

With her natural passion and charisma she rapidly became well known. She began to accept speaking engagements throughout Europe on behalf of the women's movement, peace efforts, and child labour law reform. In 1904 she became a professor, and occupied the chair of Anthropology and the Chair of Hygiene at the Magistero Femminile in Rome, one of the women's colleges in Italy.

As a young woman she saw the potential that the education of the young could have in changing the nature of society. When she started her first school in 1907 the results were so outstanding for both the children involved and their families, that it caused an enormous amount of interest, both in Italy and elsewhere. She was as astonished as everyone else by the children's progress, both socially and intellectually, and realised that she had uncovered something extraordinary about their learning abilities. This then became the focus of her life's work and the 'Montessori Movement' was formed. Her work became internationally renowned and she became famous, not only for her educational work, but for her interests in world peace through moral reform, being nominated three times for the Nobel Peace prize.

Montessori's views on education were truly radical for their day. At that time children were seen as naturally disorderly, reluctant to learn and in need of constant discipline and control. Montessori was the first person who recognised the importance of the early years and who stood up for the rights of the young child. Her training as a scientist meant that she did not enter the educational field with any conventional ideas about how to teach, but, instead, followed the actions of the children in order to better understand them. In this way she came to realise that children were capable of extraordinary independence and developmental growth if they were allowed to work freely and without constant adult interference.

There is hardly a classroom in existence these days that has not been influenced in some way by Montessori's ideas – indeed much is now part and parcel of standard practice. Montessori schools continue to enjoy great popularity and remain at the forefront of systems that promote the development of happy fulfilled children with a lifelong love of learning.

Montessori died in 1952 and the inscription on her headstone reads:

"Io prego i cari bambini, che possono tutto di unirsi a me per la costruzione della pace negli uomini e nel mondo."

"I pray that the dear children will do all they can to unite with me in creating peace amongst mankind and in the world."

IN THE BEGINNING

BY THE TIME that Maria Montessori was 36 she was recognised as a talented scientist and academic. She had been steadily developing her own ideas about children's development and had established herself as a charismatic lecturer. When a group of property developers were looking for someone to help them with an urban regeneration project, she was the one they turned to.

San Lorenzo was renowned as a slum area. The bankers had undertaken to renovate some of the buildings and had chosen employed married couples to be tenants, but they ran into a problem – there were about 50 ragged children who were too young for normal school and who ran wild through the buildings. They decided that it would be cheaper to pay someone to oversee them in one area than to continually have to repair the damage they caused. They asked Montessori if she would be interested in running the project and she was given one room in a large tenement building, with no money for food or equipment, but enough for one supervising adult. On January 6th, 1907 the first 'Casa dei Bambini' (Children's House) was established.

A Science of Learning

With her scientific background Montessori decided to treat the classroom as a laboratory and she therefore asked the teacher not to control the children as would normally be the case, but to leave them to play as freely as possible. She brought in a number of sensorial materials that she had designed herself and began to see certain patterns appearing in the children's behaviour: they were more interested in the challenge of the new materials than in their normal toys, they wanted increasingly to do things for themselves rather than with the help of an adult, if they were allowed to work freely they would repeat the same thing again and again until they had mastered it, and they didn't seem to seek any rewards other than to be allowed to carry on working with interesting things. The only punishment for misbehaviour therefore became inactivity – not being given anything to do!

Natural Learning

Over the next few months Montessori continued to watch the children and develop her ideas. The more she saw, the more inspired she became. She began to understand that even young children were dynamic natural learners and that what had been holding them back was too much adult interference. The changes that occurred in the behaviour and abilities of these young slum children astounded everybody, even Montessori herself. At that time it was absolutely unheard of for four and five-year-olds to be so well-behaved and self-sufficient and to master such complex learning skills. That they should do so in such a happy, unpressurised environment seemed an impossibility. Visitors to the school left stunned at what they had seen and rapidly spread the word.

The demand for Montessori teacher training then rapidly increased and in 1909 Dr Montessori conducted the first training course for teachers. The course was offered annually and was attended mainly by Italian teachers. In 1912, with the translation into English of Dr. Montessori's book, *The Montessori Method* international interest in her approach grew substantially. In 1913 the first international course was held in Rome and was attended by eighty students from all over the world.

In 1919 Montessori offered her first course in England. Over two thousand people applied for the 250 places offered. She then travelled every second year to London to hold similar courses. From that time onwards Montessori schools have played a significant part in promoting the sensitivity and understanding necessary to support children's dynamic natural development.

NATURAL SPIRITUALITY

Montessori saw that children held within them something wonderful – something so special that it could be the key to changing the world. She saw that they were inherently good and that, if allowed to develop freely, they felt connected to everything and were naturally caring to each other and the world around them. The more that she worked with the children, the more convinced she was that they had precise inner 'guides' and that the work of adults was to help them to be all that they could be. She felt that it was the spiritual nature of children that had been forgotten and denied and that children could therefore show adults the way to return to a more meaningful, holistic way of living.



CHILDREN MOVE THROUGH SENSITIVE PERIODS

Montessori noticed that there were certain periods of particular sensitivity that kept occurring in the children. During these periods the child could learn the activity that it was focused on at a particularly intense rate and that such learning appeared to come very easily. They included a sensitive period for order, refinement of the senses, language acquisition, walking and movement, small objects and involvement in social life. What became clear is that at such times it was as though there was a light shining on that particular activity that completely held the child's attention. If left to follow this natural interest the child could achieve much more than would normally be expected. Montessori teachers therefore watch out for these very creative periods and make sure that the children have the freedom to follow their interests.

Montessori philosophy

There were certain things that Montessori saw were very important for children's natural development. She outlined them in her courses and they form the basic understanding behind all Montessori schools.

CHILDREN THRIVE ON ORDER AND STRUCTURE

Order plays a very important part in the lives of young children. Order consists in recognising the place for each object in relation to its environment and in remembering where each thing should be.

Such an awareness is essential for a child to feel secure within its environment

and to build on existing experiences. Order in the environment makes children feel safe and that they know how things should be. Great emphasis is therefore put on order within the Montessori classroom. By ensuring that everything has its place, and that the environment is designed to be as accessible as possible for children to work in, they can then be given the maximum freedom to move and develop.



CHILDREN LEARN THROUGH THEIR SENSES

Montessori saw that children built on their physical experiences of the world through their senses and that by carefully designing interesting materials which the children were drawn to experiment with, she could help them extend this understanding. She did so by taking each of the senses in turn and developing materials that isolated certain aspects that could then be increasingly explored by the children. She believed that children loved working with beautiful objects so all the materials were prepared with the greatest care. Rather than proving to be outdated in the modern world, these beautifully designed items have gone on to show how accurate Montessori's initial observations were. Many are now reproduced in schools of all types throughout the world.



CHILDREN NEED FREEDOM

Montessori saw freedom as the single most important factor in allowing children to develop as spontaneous, creative individuals. She saw the role of education as providing environments in which the children could be set free to follow their natural impulses – to become the wonderfully dynamic, natural learners they were designed to be.

CHILDREN ABSORB THEIR CULTURE

Montessori's emphasis on children being allowed the freedom to work alone and to develop concentration, did not mean that she underestimated the importance of social development. Instead what she saw was that it was precisely because the children were allowed to work in such freedom that they could display such love and care towards others. She saw that children literally absorbed the world around them and that true discipline and harmony was something that came from within and was not something that could be enforced.

BIG TEACHERS

Montessori called her teachers Directresses because she felt that they sensitively guided, rather than controlled, the children's activities. She asked that they be "more psychologists than teachers" and considered that success lay in the ongoing nature of the teacher's own personal development as well as on the sensitivity of the observations of individual children. Ultimately she saw their role as not so much to teach the children as to 'direct' the natural energies that they saw emerging.

LITTLE TEACHERS

As she watched the children busily going about their work Montessori realised that it was natural and very easy for the younger children to learn by watching and listening to the older children. In fact she saw that children learn best this way and that something wonderful happened when a community of children could actively support and help each other. Montessori schools therefore encourage children of all ages to work together as a social group and do not normally split children by sex or age.



CHILDREN ARE NATURAL LEARNERS

Montessori saw that children underwent extraordinary transformations in overall happiness, self-confidence and self-discipline when they were allowed to follow their innate needs. She saw that the work of a child, therefore, was fundamentally different to that of the adult: that the child worked for the joy of the process rather than for the end result, that the child had a need to repeat activities over and over until an inner need was fulfilled, and that the child was excited and energised through work, rather than burdened and fatigued by it. She felt that children only stopped loving learning when they were forced to go against their natural impulses.

PROCESSES NOT RESULTS

Montessori schools believe that children are at their happiest when they are busily involved in processes. Children are natural learners who, if left to follow their instincts, will want to constantly explore the world. All too often what stops children enjoying this natural curiosity are external demands that don't fit with their needs. The only results young children are interested in are the ones that end up making them feel good about themselves and their abilities. When they learn, instead, that there are unacceptable results that make them feel bad about themselves they start to fear the processes. And that fear can cut them off from the joy of learning forever.

Montessori schools therefore believe that each child is an individual and should be encouraged to work at the pace that is right for him or her. There are no grades or tests. Children are never in competition with each other.

And Montessorians continue to fight to preserve the rights of each child to be protected from undue pressure.

Learning should be
FUN!

Montessori saw that children learn best by doing and that happy self-motivated learners form positive images of themselves as confident, successful people.

“ Education must no longer be regarded only as a matter of teaching children, but as a social question of the highest importance, because it is the one question that concerns all mankind. The many other social questions have to do with one group or another of adults, with relatively small numbers of human beings; the social question of the child, however, has to do with all men everywhere. ”

Maria Montessori

