



Who Was Maria Montessori

Maria Montessori lived from 1870 to 1952. She was the first woman to attend medical school in Italy and the first female Doctor of Medicine there. Through her work with handicapped and socially deprived children, she developed her unique educational method known as the Montessori Method. As a result of her further study, observation and experimentation, she found the principles of her method to be applicable to all children. She has had an impact on the field of education in general and the way we understand and teach children today.

Montessori's influence can be seen not only in the number of schools that bear her name, but throughout the field of child care, education and child development. Many of her ideas are now part of our common knowledge, language and thinking about children. She was an innovator in the field of education and ideas that were once met with great resistance in her day now seem natural as accepted aspects of childhood.

What Makes Montessori Education Unique?

The Whole Child Approach

The primary goal of a Montessori programme is to help each child reach their full potential in all areas of life. Activities promote the development of social skills, emotional growth and physical coordination as well as cognitive preparation for future intellectual academic endeavours. The holistic curriculum, under the direction of a specifically prepared teacher, allows the child to experience the joy of learning, the time to enjoy the process and ensures the development of self esteem. It provides the experiences from which children create their knowledge.

The Prepared Environment

In order for self directed learning to take place, the whole learning environment - classroom, materials and social setting / atmosphere - must be supportive of the child. The teacher provides the necessary resources, including opportunities for

children to function in a safe and positive environment. Together, the teacher and child form a relationship based on trust and respect that fosters self-confidence and a willingness to try new things.

The Montessori Materials

Dr. Montessori's observations of the kinds of things which children enjoy and go back to repeatedly, led her to design a number of multi-sensory, sequential and self correcting materials to facilitate learning.

The Teacher

Originally called a "directress", the Montessori teacher functions as a designer of the environment, resource person, role model, demonstrator, record-keeper and meticulous observer of each child's behaviour and growth. At Happy Vale we are called 'Auntie'.

Extensive training is required for a full Montessori credential, including a minimum of a college degree and a year's student teaching under supervision. At Happy Vale all the aunties undergo in-house training and practical workshops given regularly by the principal who is a fully accredited Montessori Directress from St. Nicholas Montessori College, London.

What is the Montessori Method of Education

This system of education is both a philosophy of child development and a rationale for guiding such growth. It is based on two important developmental needs of children:

- 1.) the need for freedom within limits
- 2.) a need for a carefully prepared environment which guarantees exposure to materials and experiences.

Through these developmental needs, the child develops intelligence as well as physical and psychological abilities. The Montessori Method of education is designed to take full advantage of the children's desire to learn and their unique ability to develop their own capabilities. Children need adults to expose them to the possibilities of their lives, but the children must determine their response to all the possibilities.

The main premises of Montessori education are:

- Children are to be respected as different from adults and as individuals who differ from each other.
- Children possess an unusual sensitivity and intellectual ability to absorb and learn from their environment that is unlike that of the adult both in quality and capacity.
- The most important years of children's growth are the first six years of life when unconscious learning is gradually brought to the conscious level.

Children have a deep love and need for purposeful work. They work, however, not as an adult for the completion of a job, but the sake of an activity itself. It is this activity which enables them to accomplish their most important goal: the development of their individual selves - their mental, physical and psychological powers.

Benefits of the Montessori Method

Maria Montessori saw much need for reform in the educational system of her day, just as we see the same need for reform in our educational system today. Her goal was to develop the whole personality of the child and her system is based on a strong belief in the spontaneous working of the human intellect. Her three primary principles are observation, individual liberty and preparation of the environment. These principles and their various practical expressions with children are gradually becoming part of our educational system. Modern kindergarten classrooms use the child-sized furniture and didactic materials first introduced by Montessori. Such current concepts as individualized learning and readiness programs, manipulative learning, un-graded classes, combined age groups, team teaching and open classrooms reflect many of her early insights.

Parents of young children in the 21st century want to feel safe and secure in leaving their children in an environment that provides for all of their academic, social and emotional needs. A Montessori environment does meet all of these needs, but it also teaches children an "I can do it" attitude that will ensure their future success in all aspects of their life. Here are some characteristics and benefits of the Montessori Method:

- Age span of children within the classroom - Older children teaching younger children, sense of community and builds self esteem.
- Self correcting materials within the environment - Children learn through their own errors to make the correct decision versus having the teacher point it out to them.
- Individual learning takes place within the environment - Montessori recognizes that each child learns at a different pace and allows that growth to take place.
- Children are quiet by choice and out of respect for others within the environment - The Montessori classroom allows children to return to the "inner peace" that is a natural part of their personalities.
- There is an emphasis on concrete learning rather than on abstract learning - Children need to experience concepts in concrete "hands-on" ways
- It is a child-centred environment - All the materials are easily within the child's reach and placed on shelves at their levels. The tables and chairs are small enough for the children to sit comfortably while the pictures and decorations are placed at the children's eye level.
- The children work for the joy of working and the sense of discovery - Children are either natural leaders or followers both delighting in learning new tasks. Their interests lie in the process of the work itself rather than in the end result.

- The environment provides a natural sense of discipline - The "ground rules" or expectations of the child are clearly stated and are enforced by the children and the teachers.
- The environment is "prepared" for the children - Everything used in the room has a specific place on a shelf. Children are orderly by nature and having the room set this way allows them to grow in a very positive way.
- The teacher plays a very unobtrusive role in the classroom - The children are not motivated by the teacher, but by the need for self development.

The items found on the shelves in the classroom are "materials" rather than "toys." The children "work with the materials" rather than "play with the toys." This allows the children to gain the most benefit from the environment by giving them a sense of worth - the same sense of worth adults experience as they go to their jobs and do their "work."

Goals of a Montessori School

The main purpose of a Montessori school is to provide a carefully planned, stimulating environment which will help the child develop an excellent foundation for creative learning. The specific goals for the children who attend a Montessori school are presented below.

Developing a positive attitude toward school

Most of the learning activities are individualized: i.e. each child engages in a learning task that particularly appeals to him...because he finds the activities geared to his needs and level of readiness. Consequently, he works at his own rate, repeating the task as often as he likes, thus experiencing a series of successful achievement. In this manner, he builds a positive attitude toward learning itself.

Helping each child develop self confidence

In the Montessori school, tasks are designed so that each new step is built upon what the child has already mastered, thus removing the negative experience of frequent failure. A carefully planned series of successes builds upon inner confidence in the child assuring him that he can learn by himself. These confidence building activities likewise contribute to the child's healthy emotional development.

Assisting each child in building a habit of concentration

Effective learning presupposes the ability to listen carefully and to attend to what is said or demonstrated. Through a series of absorbing experiences, the child forms habits of extended attention, thus increasing his ability to concentrate.

Fostering an abiding curiosity

In a rapidly changing society, we will all be students at some time in our lives. A deep, persistent and abiding curiosity is a prerequisite for creative learning. By providing the child with opportunities to discover qualities, dimensions and

relationships amidst a rich variety of stimulating learning situations, curiosity is developed and an essential element in creative learning has been established.

Developing habits of initiative and persistence

By surrounding the child with appealing materials and learning activities geared to his inner needs, he becomes accustomed to engaging in activities on his own. Gradually, this results in a habit of initiative - an essential quality in leadership. "Ground rules" call for completing a task once begun and gradually results in a habit of persistence and perseverance for replacing materials after the task is accomplished.

Fostering inner security and sense of order in the child

Through a well ordered, enriched but simplified environment, the child's need for order and security is intensely satisfied. This is noticed in the calming effect the environment has on the child. Since every item in the Montessori classroom has a place and the ground rules call for everything in its place, the child's inner need for order is directly satisfied.

Reception Classroom (24 to 36 months)

The Ducklings' classroom offers very young children a unique year of self development in a tender atmosphere of special understanding, respect and support. They are unique in that they provide a very specific structure which fulfils the social, physical, emotional and psychological needs of each child.

In this environment, there is space for movement, space for individual work and space for group activities. Everything in the environment is proportionate to the child's size and is designed to be safe and aesthetically pleasing for children. The Ducklings classroom is simpler and slower paced than the early childhood (three to six year old) classrooms.

Ducklings are given opportunities to work in the development of language skills, art and music, sensorial and practical life. The practical life area is particularly emphasized as the activities in this area give children the chance to develop skills to care for themselves and their environment in the following areas: control of movement, grace and courtesy. Practical life activities are simple and can be accomplished by each child. They offer repetitive cycles of activity, helping the child establish patterns of order and sequencing. Due to the fact that these are very real activities, each child becomes grounded in reality, building the child's self esteem is the ultimate goal and this is accomplished through repeated successes with these activities.

Through song and dance and freedom of choice, the children have access to a variety of large muscle activities that offer them opportunities to jump, climb, balance, crawl or skip. These exercises, as well as creative art activities are offered for each child to choose. This freedom in a safe space is crucial to the toddler programme. However, it is always tempered by two important limits that will be beneficial for a lifetime, respect for others and respect for the environment.

Early Childhood Classroom (3 to 6 years)

The Montessori classroom is a "living room" for children. Children choose their activities from open shelves with self-correcting materials and work in distinct work areas - on tables or on rugs on the floor. Over a period of time, the children develop into a "normalized community" working with high concentration and few interruptions. The Hummingbirds' and Sandpipers' classrooms include the following components:

The Practical Life Exercises enhance the development of task organization and cognitive order through care of self, care of the environment, exercises of grace and courtesy, and refinement of physical movement and coordination.

The Sensorial Materials enable the child to order, classify, sequence and describe sensory impressions in relation to length, width, weight, temperature, mass, colour, sound and shape.

The Montessori Math Materials are concrete manipulative materials, allowing the child to internalize the concepts of number, symbol, sequence, operations and memorization of basic facts.

The Language Materials introduce the child to each written letter by its sound and encourage muscular memory through the touching of Sand Paper Letters. Various presentations allow children to effortlessly link sounds and their written symbols and ultimately to write; Dr. Montessori recognised that writing as a coding skill comes before reading, a decoding skill. Basic skills in writing are developed through the use of the sandpaper letters together with pencils or crayons and paper.

While letter sounds are being learned the child is introduced to objects and words as a matching exercise. These objects will then be used together with a Moveable Alphabet allowing the child to 'build' words in a phonetic way. Reading follows as the information is absorbed. Pictures and word cards follow in preparation for tackling printed text in the form of simple phrases and then sentences. All materials encourage oral language development.

The child is also presented with Geography, History, Life Sciences, Music, Art and Drama education.

Virtually every environment will also have an elliptical line on the floor. This is generally used for "walking on the line" activities that help children develop grace, balance, follow simple instructions and for the "silence game" where an individual child can practice sitting without making a sound. The line is also frequently used for a large group meeting area. It is here, or in some other designated area, where the class meets as a whole. Often a class will have one or two large group meetings each day. One will usually serve as an opening meeting and precede a more individualized work period and another will serve as a closing or transitional group

time preceding the next activity (i.e., time out doors, lunch, dismissal, etc.) The group meetings may be used for large group presentations of materials, movement, music activities, group celebrations, snacks, games and discussions.

Introduction of the Materials

The first way children are introduced to any material in the classroom is through careful one-on-one presentation by the teacher. A presentation is a time when the teacher slowly and precisely uses the material in its intended way while an individual or small group of children observe. During such a presentation unnecessary words and movements are avoided and actions are broken into discernible steps in order to increase understanding and the chance for success when the child uses the materials independently later. A particular point of interest may also be shown to attract the child to the materials.

At times it is appropriate and desirable for the teacher to offer some additional instruction to the child. This usually occurs at a separate occasion after times of repeated concentrated work with the materials has been observed. The teacher may then re-present the exercise in order to show variations or extensions or to help the child learn the terminology involved.

Discipline

Ground rules protect the rights and liberty of each individual child and the group as a whole. They promote the internalization of pro-social behaviours and values including: self-control of impulses, consideration of others and a sense of responsibility for oneself and the welfare of the group. Ground rules can help to make life at school easier, make the days run more smoothly, enable children to be more independent and help to develop responsibility. The number of ground rules is generally kept to a minimum, stated and presented in a positive manner with an emphasis on safety, respect for others / environment and the result benefits all members of the group.

Here is a list of some typical, often automatic, ground rules used in most Montessori classrooms:

- The child selects a material to use from the shelf and takes it to a suitable table, floor and/or other designated work space.
- The child is free to use the material as long as they like as long as it is treated with respect.
- After using the material, the child returns it to its place on the shelf, in the same condition in which it was found, for the next person to use.
- The children restore the environment, clean up spills and messes, put rugs away in proper order, push chairs in etc., after each activity

- The child is free to work alone - no child is forced to share with another, materials they have first chosen for activity.
- The child has the right not to choose any materials or activity.

Other common ground rules may need to be established to insure safety if special equipment is used, when travelling as a group, or when staying within supervised areas

The Community of Children

An essential part of the learning environment is the other children in it. The Montessori classroom provides ample opportunities for making friends, interacting with others, and developing consideration for others, learning how to cooperate and fostering a sense of interdependence.

In the prepared environment, cooperation and a sense of community are stressed. Individual differences are easily accepted and appreciated while each child is treated and taught as an individual. Children of different ages are together in the same group. This provides abundant opportunities for learning and helps to create a sense of family while everyone contributes and takes responsibility for the functioning and maintenance of the environment.

The social life of the children is a vital aspect of the Montessori classroom and curriculum. Assisting the social skills, development and abilities of children is vital to the implementation of an effective Montessori program. It is important that the complexities and ups and downs of relationships are supported and enhanced by adults sensitive to the needs and social development of children.