

## **Montessori 101: An Introduction to the Method**

### **What is Montessori?**

The Montessori Method, at its core, is the theory of child and human development pioneered by Maria Montessori in the early 20th century. Montessori purported that children crave independence and meaningful work in order to realize their highest potential in life. Human development is a pathway that we travel, and Montessori education helps children along on their own individual journey.

### **Who was Maria Montessori?**

Maria Montessori was an Italian physician, psychologist, and scientist who (among many other achievements) developed an educational method to address the needs of young children. After developing her methods and some materials while working as the director of an educational facility for training teachers to work with children with mental challenges. These children were labeled as “deficients”, and it was assumed that they were incapable of learning.

Montessori, through trial and error, soon developed a program that proved successful with these children, and the news of Montessori’s success spread like wildfire among the Italian government and the educational community. Many considered it a “miracle”, and were astonished when a group of her older students were able to pass the Italian school’s standard sixth-grade test.

Eager to expand upon her observations and research, Montessori accepted a position teaching 50 to 60 young children living in the slums of Rome. She used the materials she developed with the mentally challenged children, and taught her young charges how to care for themselves and for their environment, which Montessori dubbed Casa dei Bambini (Children’s House). The Casa children thrived, and soon were reading and writing, and experiencing the greatest joy in doing so. Montessori became a proponent of child-led education, with a focus on careful observation of each individual child. She soon began training other teachers in her method, and the Montessori movement was born!

During her lifetime, Montessori was labeled as one of the leading educators in the world, and even today her ideas are being recognized as ahead of her time.

### **So how are Montessori schools different?**

Montessori schools are different from traditional schools in a number of ways:

- Rather than assuming that all children learn in the same way, Montessori schools start from a place of respect for the child as an individual. Guides meet children where they are and Montessori education is compatible with many different learning styles.

- Montessori schools are concerned with not just academic learning, but educating the whole child- spiritually, emotionally, physically and mentally.
- Montessori schools consist of multi-age classrooms, typically a three-year span. Older children have the chance to be leaders, and younger children have someone to look up to. This gives students a global view of their education; rather than simply seeing each activity in a vacuum, they can see where they've been, and how far they've come. Children who are new to the classroom can look at the older students and say, "Someday I'll be able to do that." And the experienced children can look back at the younger students and say, "I used to do that, and now I can do *this*."
- Mistakes are not something to be feared, but an opportunity to learn. Work is not complete, and the student is not ready to move on until they have mastered it. This prevents children from falling behind because of not fully understanding a concept. The goal is that learning is not rote or memorized, but that children truly understand the concepts being taught.
- Children learn to work toward their personal best, rather than a grade. They also learn to collaborate rather than compete with their peers.
- Differences are embraced, not shunned, and because of this children become compassionate, caring, and peaceful. The classroom is a community whose members care about and look after one another. Even the youngest children notice when a child in their class is absent.
- Because of the multi-age groupings, classrooms are run on a three-year cycle, which means children stay in the same classroom with the same teacher for three years. Children develop strong bonds with their teacher, who comes to know them and their learning style very well. And since they spend three years together, the children also develop strong bonds with each other.

## **Outcomes**

So what are the outcomes of a Montessori education? Children become lifelong, joyful learners who think outside the box. Some of the most innovative entrepreneurs of our time are Montessori alums, including but not limited to:

- Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon.com
- Larry Page and Sergey Brin, founders of Google
- Julia Child, renowned chef and author
- Katherine Graham, Pulitzer Prize winning author and former owner and editor of The Washington Post
- Yo Yo Ma, Grammy Award winning cellist

## **Recommended Reading**

Interested in learning more? Here are some books to get you started.

- The Secret of Childhood by Maria Montessori
- Montessori: A Modern Approach by Paula Polk Lillard
- Montessori Today: A Comprehensive Approach to Education from Birth to Adulthood by Paula Polk Lillard