

Benefits of Montessori

*Some of the many reasons why
Montessori is right for your child.*

EVERYBODY KNOWS that Montessori is a great way to educate children, but not everyone understands the benefits in detail. Here are some of the many reasons why Montessori is right for your child:

Your child learns at his own rate. He is neither held back nor pushed forward according to the learning rates of other students. In a traditional classroom, all the children are learning the same thing and moving through the curriculum at the same rate. We know that each child has different abilities and interests. Some are good at math, while others excel in language and so on. They all have different interests as well. Since children are so different, it is unrealistic to expect that they will learn at the same rate. Because of the repetition that Maria Montessori built into her system, a child is allowed to work on something until she masters it. Since they don't move on to the next skill until they have mastered the present one, there are never any gaps in their education. That means there is never any need for remedial education.

Your child learns how to focus and concentrate. One of Maria Montessori's goals was to teach children how to concentrate. This is one of the foundation skills for learning, and one that is largely ignored in traditional school systems. A Montessori day is structured so that a child's focus is never interrupted by having to move on to the next lesson before finishing the current one.

Montessori accommodates all learning styles. This is important because some children are visual learners, some are auditory learners, some learn through body movement and feeling, and some use a combination of several learning avenues. Montessori teachers are trained to use all the senses; the use of the didactic materials reinforces this.

Your child will master the important life skill of being a self-directed learner. Montessori's aim is to nurture the inner motivation of the child while allowing the opportunity for the fullest possible exploration of his or her interests. This nurture of learning begins as soon as a child enters the scientifically designed classrooms. You will often hear the phrase "prepared environment," because the classrooms are so carefully designed to ensure the child has the freedom to learn. This freedom to explore and choose areas of interest will carry over into a willingness to explore areas that may not otherwise appeal to a child being "force-fed" information in a traditional school setting.

The prepared environment of a Montessori classroom helps children learn to think for themselves at a rate determined by the Director. A young child new to Montessori may be given more direction at first, but as children grow in confidence and experience they are allowed to make more decisions for themselves.

Your child will achieve independence by learning how to take care of herself – her body, her belongings and her environment. Montessori understands that at the heart of

every child is a healthy drive toward independence. Independence is important because it is directly related to high self esteem, competence and cooperation. Therefore, every aspect of the Montessori classroom has been designed with the goal of an independent child in mind. Every feature and piece of equipment in the classroom is fully accessible to the child, so they don't have to constantly ask for help getting things. Tools, like the broom, are of a size they can handle easily, and children are free to choose their own work. Finally, the Montessori Director is trained to encourage independence by allowing the children to do things for themselves as soon as they are capable. For example, if they are learning to tie their shoes, the Director will ensure that are not rushed or interfered with.

A Montessori classroom is a place where children learn order.

This provides the sense of security and comfort they need to become self-directed. Everyone, including children, prefers order to chaos because it is easier to function in an orderly workplace. Order helps children become independent because they can always find the work materials they are going to use next without help. By being taught to maintain this order, your child will be learning awareness for others and the fact that you have to take care of the things that are shared – which is the basis of cooperation. The order of a Montessori classroom is also present in the routines that exist. The children enter the classroom (which has been set up so that everything is meticulously in its place), hang up their coats and other belongings, greet the Director, and get straight to work. And every aspect of this routine has been patiently presented to them. There is also order within the materials themselves: every tray or piece of material on a shelf is always in its proper place and ready to be used. While at work, disruptions are kept to a minimum so children can

focus on the task at hand. All of this is why anyone observing a Montessori classroom sees a well-ordered, calm and functional environment that is perfectly set up for learning.

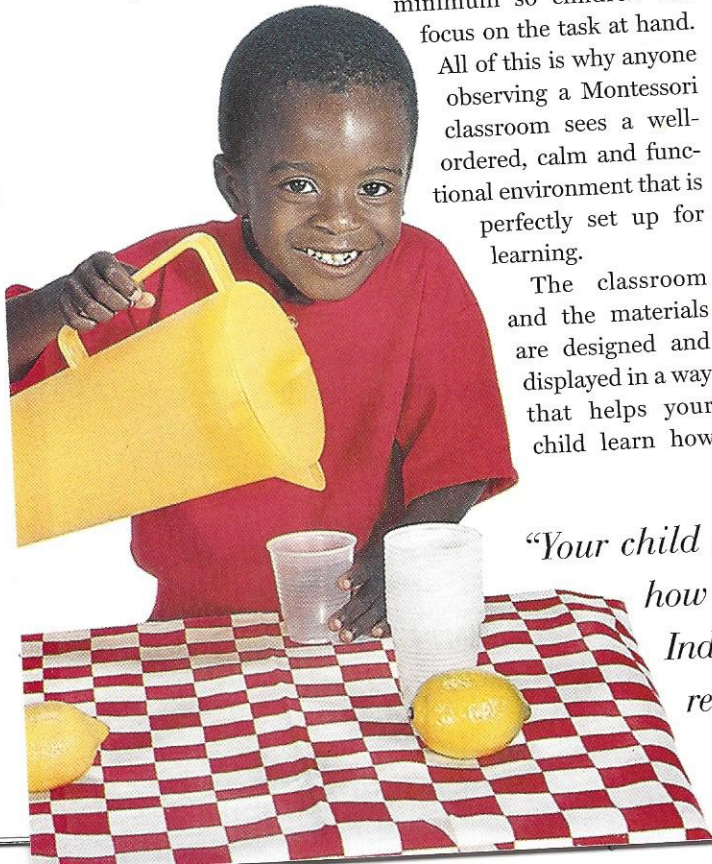
The classroom and the materials are designed and displayed in a way that helps your child learn how

to cooperate with others in their use and have respect for the needs of others as well as the use of the materials. The social goals of helping children learn how to get along with each other, respect each other and cooperate are an important component of the Montessori approach to learning. There is only one Pink Tower in the classroom, for example. Having to share materials helps promote cooperation and patience. Having to walk carefully around each child's mat (on which the work is done) teaches respect for others all day long. In addition, Montessori also includes structured lessons on grace and courtesy so that the child learns important social skills such as how to greet and introduce people; how to ask for something properly; and even mundane graces such as how to sneeze, cough and yawn politely (it's fun to watch all the children blowing their noses a lot the day they learn how to do it properly).

Your child will be treated with respect and dignity in a Montessori classroom. In Montessori the child is always working on the adult he is going to become. Montessori recognizes that children deserve and need to be treated with the same respect that we treat adults. Although they are relatively inexperienced, as a parent you must recognize that the way to help them learn is by not criticizing "failure," but rather by recognizing the incident as an opportunity to learn what went wrong, and helping the child find his or her path to a proper solution. This concentration on raising the child's self esteem, coupled with a focus on the rights of others, develops the child's entire being in a positive way, and helps the child to learn to respect the rights of others as well.

A multi-disciplinary approach is taken in regard to your child's interests. If your child were interested in dinosaurs, for example, this interest would be explored throughout the curriculum. She would be encouraged to read about dinosaurs to learn language skills; study the measurements of dinosaurs to understand math concepts; and depict dinosaurs when doing art lessons. Her interest in dinosaurs could even be used to facilitate lessons in history and geography. Montessori recognizes that when a child's interests are involved, any subject becomes fascinating.

Perhaps the biggest benefit of a Montessori education is that **it teaches children how to learn instead of just what to learn.** It instills in them a life-long love of learning, which prepares them to successfully go in any direction their skills and interests may take them.



"Your child will achieve independence by learning how to take care of himself, and his belongings. Independence is important because it is directly related to high self esteem and cooperation."

Answers to Some Frequently Asked Questions About Montessori

Is Montessori for every child?

The short answer is yes — there is no child who would not benefit from a Montessori education. First of all, every child wants to learn but each is unique in areas of interest and rate of learning. Montessori addresses this uniqueness because it is an individual program tailored to the strengths and challenges of each student. One child may spend two days learning multiplication while another may require two weeks or even two months. A trained scientist, Maria Montessori spent a lot of time observing exactly how and why children learn. She understood that all children, whether they have strengths or challenges in particular areas of learning, need their own time to master it. They don't need to be constantly worried about being "ahead" or "behind" anyone else. Every Montessori school is the living legacy of this educational breakthrough. Montessori works for every child no matter who they are or where they come from.

Why doesn't Montessori grade students?

Grades (letters or percentages) focus strictly on results and are only a measure of what a student knows at that particular moment in time. Grades become the end itself. What is worse, they can distract the child from the natural enjoyment of learning and developing true enthusiasm for a subject that can last a lifetime, not just until the end of the test. Instead of grades, Montessori



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provides informative and descriptive reports on what your child's focus of interest has been and how he or she is progressing. Montessori children repeat activities or correct mistakes until they gain competency. When students make the transition to other schools that do testing, they usually test well and perform a grade level or two above their peers.

Why does Montessori have mixed-age groups in each class (i.e., three-year age groups: 3-6, 6-9, 9-12, and so on)?

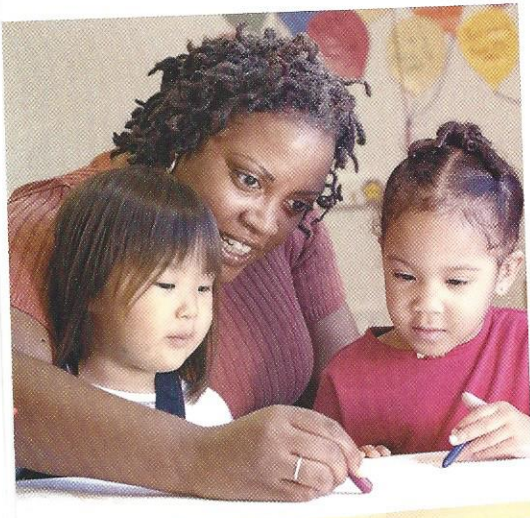
Maria Montessori discovered that putting older and younger children together helps them learn from and teach each other. This is good for the older children because they can be useful and helpful to the younger ones,

which not only reinforces what they have learned but enhances their self-esteem as well. The younger children in turn have role models to follow and are integrated into the classroom by these helpful older children. If you think about it, every normal community has a mixed grouping of ages.

What does polishing a mirror and washing a table have to do with education?

One unique aspect of a Montessori classroom is the Practical Life area. Through repetitive, hands-on and very purposeful activities, the child learns to do things for herself. At the same time, indirect learning beyond polishing a mirror, using tweezers, folding laundry or

opening and closing bottles is occurring. The children learn concentration, coordination, manual dexterity, order and independence. Far from being trivial, these skills form the necessary foundation for all future learning as they stir important areas of the brain. In addition, children are interested in learning real things in the real world, which accounts for the tremendous popularity of these exercises. As Maria Montessori once said: "Children don't play, they work."



What makes a Montessori teacher different?

In the simplest terms, a Montessori Director teaches individually. Picture a traditional classroom: the teacher stands at the front of a classroom in which the students are all sitting in rigid rows of desks, all receiving the same lesson at the same time. This is the factory approach that is convenient for school systems, but not conducive for learning. In the traditional school environment, the child is treated as an empty vessel, with information poured in at the same rate to all children until the bell rings.

In a Montessori classroom your child is taught individually or in small groups. This allows the teacher to get immediate feedback and to be sensitive to how well the child is absorbing the lesson and what questions or needs the child has. Simply put, there is nothing that works so well in educa-

tion as individual attention. This focus on your child's needs is heightened by the fact that each Montessori teacher has been trained in the science of observing children. They spend time every day observing the class: how it is functioning as a whole and how the children are progressing with their work. They have also been trained on how to teach using the Montessori materials, all of which have been scientifically designed to enhance the learning experience.

In fact, the word "teacher" is not always used in a Montessori classroom. A teacher is someone who knows something and gives it to you. A Montessori teacher is often called a Director or a Guide, because what they do is direct the child toward what he needs to teach himself. The child does this by using the specially designed materials. The Montessori Director has been trained to observe your child and to determine his or her level of development, and what guidance the child needs to progress to the next level.

If my child has a Montessori education, can he go into another kind of education program that is not Montessori based?

Because Montessori does such an excellent job at creating a love for learning, as well as the ability to focus, concentrate, cooperate with others and work independently, Montessori children thrive in any school, work or social situation.

Can my child stay in a Montessori school until post secondary, or should she transfer to a traditional school at some point?

One of the most enduring misconceptions about Montessori is that it is only for young children. In fact, research has shown that Montessori students consistently outperform those from traditional schools in social, moral, cognitive and emotional levels throughout their entire school life. A recent study, *A Comparison of Montessori and Traditional Middle Schools: Motivation, Quality of Experience, and Social Context*, by Kevin Rathunde, had this to say about older Montessori students:

"Results [of the study] showed that Montessori students reported a singularly better quality of experience in academic work than the traditional students. There were strong differences suggesting that Montessori students were feeling more active, strong, excited, happy, relaxed, sociable and proud while engaged in academic work. They were also enjoying themselves more, were more interested in what they were doing, and wanted to be doing academic work more than the traditional students."

The study concluded that the primary experience of the traditional students was what famed educator John Dewey called "drudgery" while the Montessori students were more intrinsically motivated. In other words, they want to do academic work, so they don't have to be driven to it by threats or rewards (extrinsic motivation).

Many successful people who were educated in the Montessori system will tell you that Montessori is based on the concept that an individual must tap into the inner motivation of a child in order to be truly successful. Montessori utilizes and nurtures the natural desire in all children to learn and reach their full potential, providing the foundation for future growth. Montessori graduates range from the founders of Google, Amazon.com, the youngest Rhodes scholar, to the youngest artist to ever exhibit at the United Nations. There are hundreds of thousands of Montessori graduates whom you may have never heard or read about, who are successfully well-adjusted and meeting the goals they have set for themselves.

Montessori's understanding of how and why children learn allows the classroom to create an excellent foundation for a young child that opens educational doors instead of closing them. For the very same reasons that Montessori benefits younger children, older students continue to benefit from a Montessori education. Montessori, like life itself recognizes the need for change at every level of life and adapts to the student's changing needs and challenges. *m:*

A Glossary of Montessori Terms

The Absorbent Mind: This is the way Montessori describes the minds of young children. Their minds are like sponges soaking up information from their environment. Just think about how much a child learns in the early years: how to talk, walk, understand social cues and relationships, objects, laws of nature (like gravity), and even the rudiments of reading. Much of this learning is unconscious because the brains of young children have been hard-wired to absorb information automatically and effortlessly.

Control of Error: Children make mistakes as they learn. Maria Montessori recognized that it was vitally important that children not lose motivation or become discouraged when mistakes occur. So into each didactic material she built in a way for the child to recognize if his work was done correctly or not, along with the ability to make it right – a control of error. As a result, no one criticizes his error or circles his mistakes with a big red pencil for the entire world to see. If a child is putting the lids on bottles and one top does not fit, he knows he's using the wrong sized lid without having to be told.

Cycles of Activity: Allowing a child to become deeply engaged in an activity is crucial for learning. In a Montessori classroom, a child is never interrupted during the work period (the time the child is focused on working with a material). For a normalized child, the cycle of activity is usually about one

and half hours in length or even longer. The basic concept behind the cycle of activity is that it allows the child to become absorbed in and complete the task to satisfaction. Children who complete the cycle of activity emerge feeling happy and refreshed because, as Maria Montessori said: "A child who concentrates is a happy child."

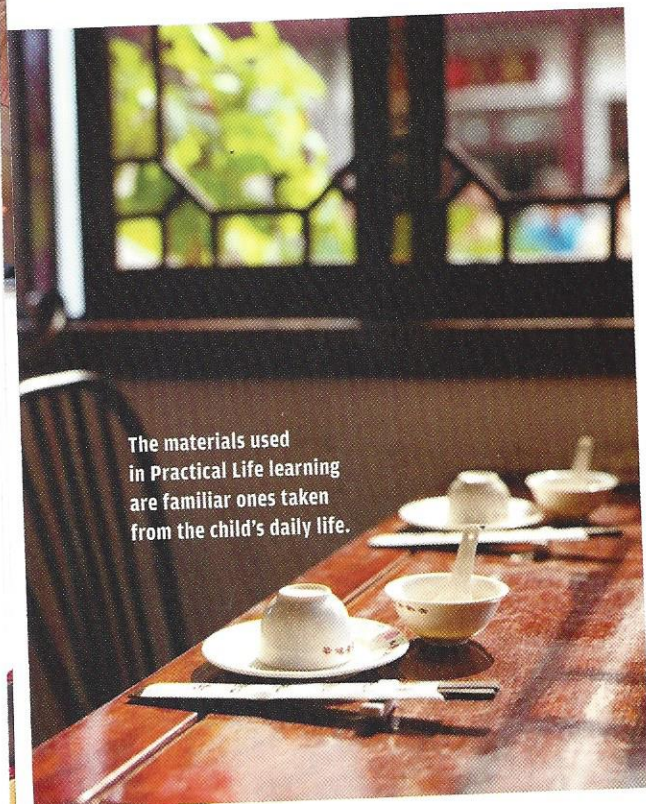
Didactic Materials: Montessori didactic materials are designed to be aesthetically pleasing and to teach through the senses. (For example, The Pink Tower depicted to the right.) The child progresses through the curriculum by repeatedly handling and manipulating these materials. Each one is scientifically designed to teach one concept only. There is also a specific order in which the materials are presented to the child: for instance, in the geography area the sandpaper globe showing the difference between land and water is presented first. The globe of the world showing the continents is shown second. Then a round blue ball of clay is cut in half and pressed flat to explain how we arrive at a map. Finally, these unique didactic materials (you won't find them anywhere except a Montessori classroom) have a control of error built right into them.

Director: The adult who is guiding the children in a Montessori classroom is called a Director, not a teacher. The reason is that a teacher is someone who gives information to someone else. In other words, they "teach." But Montessori believes that



the child learns experientially – by doing, not by listening passively. One of the Director's most important jobs is to observe the child's interest, ability and level of understanding and then to introduce her or him to the appropriate didactic material when they have shown they are ready. This way, the child directs her own learning at her own speed, while relying on the Director to "direct" or facilitate this process of self-learning.

Normalized Child: This is a term used to describe a child who has adjusted to the order of a Montessori classroom, and can engage in her own learning. Within this environment, a child's true nature can be expressed. A normalized child is calm, confident, grounded, enthusiastic about learning, and positive toward others. This takes time to accomplish with most children (sometimes up to a few months).



The materials used in Practical Life learning are familiar ones taken from the child's daily life.

Practical Life: Another unique area of the Montessori classroom, Practical Life helps children take care of their environment as well as themselves. Montessori is always striving to help the child develop self-confidence, competence and independence. The materials used are familiar ones taken from their daily life. Some of the purposeful activities in the Practical Life area are: setting the dinner table and clearing the dishes after dinner; folding

clothes; polishing a mirror; manipulating tongs, and using screws and screwdrivers.

Prepared Environment: The Montessori classroom is carefully designed to allow the child freedom to move and choose the work that most interests her. A Montessori classroom is a stimulating, beautiful, and ordered environment, full of scientifically designed didactic materials. The order of the prepared environment is designed not to over-stimulate the child with too much decoration and haphazard arrangement of materials, but instead to calm the atmosphere so the child can focus on the work at hand. The proportions of the prepared environment – everything from the furniture to the materials – are uniquely suited to each child's size and capabilities.

Sensitive Periods: Children become ready to learn a new concept or skill at certain specific times in life. It is almost as if a switch is turned on in their brain, which floods their being with interest and readiness for the subject to the exclusion of all else. During these periods the child will get involved in doing a repetitive thing over and over again until suddenly they have developed a new skill. Montessori Directors are trained to be receptive to these sensitive periods of time, and to give the child every opportunity to take in what they are ready for at that moment. For example, Maria Montessori felt that reading was introduced to children in traditional schools much too late. She felt that children around three years of age were most ready, or sensitive, to learn to read because that's the time children are most attuned to the sounds of words. Similarly, it is before the age of three that children become very interested in small objects – a tiny ant crawling across the floor, or a handful of colored beads – so this is the time to introduce activities that include small objects.

Sensorial: This is another area of the classroom that is unique to Montessori. In this area, scientifically designed didactic materials help the child learn through the senses. Taking one sense at a time, the child is awakened to the sensory world. This fine tuning of the senses helps in other learning areas: the aural skills sharpened by using the Montessori Sounds Cylinders (that teach the child how to match sounds) help later in differentiating the sounds used in learning how to read. Using the Pink Tower (made of up of blocks that gradually reduce in size) helps children understand spatial relationships, which lays a foundation for learning math later on.

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This is #1
in a series of topics
for Montessori parents

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RECOMMENDED READING

Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius

by Angeline Stoll Lillard
(Oxford University Press)

The Secret of Childhood

by Maria Montessori
(Ballantine)

Understanding the Human Being

by Silvana Montanaro
(a special order book,
available only through
Neinhuis-USA)
tel. 800/942-8697