



Frequently Asked Questions about Montessori Education

Q. What is a Montessori school?

A. Montessori schools grew out of the scientific theories of Dr. Maria Montessori. She was a medical doctor, an anthropologist, and an educational researcher. She opened the first Montessori school in 1907. After extensive observations of students in her schools, she concluded that children who are placed in a carefully prepared environment are highly motivated to learn and will teach themselves. In Montessori schools, children can freely choose from many age-appropriate activities designed to teach specific skills. One hundred years after the first casa dei bambini (“children’s house”) opened in Rome, Montessori schools for children of all ages are found around the world. There are at least 4,000 certified Montessori schools in the United States and about 7,000 worldwide. Over 200 public school systems in the U.S. have Montessori programs.

Q. What is the difference between a Montessori class and a traditional class?

A. Children in Montessori classes move freely around the room, choose their own work and learn at their own, individual pace. They learn the same kinds of things as children in traditional classes, but learning occurs through self-paced, hands-on activities rather than teacher-directed lessons and follow up seat work. The primary goal of Montessori classes is to help children learn concentration, motivation, self-discipline, and a love of learning. Rather than providing direct instruction, Montessori teachers guide children to exciting moments of discovery, and works to create a non-competitive learning community in which children spontaneously share their knowledge with each other.

Another difference is that Montessori classes place children in three-year age groups. The combined preschool and kindergarten class has children age 3 to 6 years (PK-K); the lower elementary class has children ages 6 to 9 years (1st-3rd grade); and in Arlington Public Schools the upper elementary class has 4th and 5th grade children. The children stay with the same teacher for 3 years.

Q: Why does Montessori have mixed aged groups?

A: Mixed age groups free children to enjoy their own accomplishments rather than comparing themselves to others. Older children provide leadership and guidance, and benefit from the satisfaction of helping others. Younger children are encouraged by attention and help from older children. They learn through observation of older children. At the same time, older children reinforce and clarify their knowledge by sharing it with younger ones. Children easily learn to respect others, and at the same time develop respect for their own individuality. This interaction of different age children offers many occasions for building community, as well as nurturing the development of self-esteem. This encourages positive social interaction and cooperative learning.

Q: With mixed age groups and individualized teaching how do Montessori teachers keep track of all the children?

A: The Montessori method is based on scientific observation. A key aspect of a Montessori teacher’s training is learning how to systematically observe when a child reveals an especially strong interest towards a piece of knowledge or skill. Teachers observe for children’s independence, self-reliance, self-discipline, love of work, concentration and focus. They also observe for the mood of the class – an overview of the mood of the whole class as well as the mood of individual children.

In addition to keeping observation notes, teachers keep records of lessons presented to individual children and record children’s progress in working toward mastery of skills.

Q: What specialized training do Montessori teachers have?

A: Montessori teacher education is extensive, offering a comprehensive course of study which provides integrated academic and practicum experiences. The traditional Montessori teacher education program is a full year of graduate work for each developmental level (preschool, early elementary or upper elementary). The Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) and the American Montessori Society (AMS) are the main providers of Montessori teacher preparation in the United States.

Montessori teachers learn principles of child development and Montessori philosophy as well as specific uses of the



Montessori classroom materials. They become knowledgeable about the sensitivities of each age group of children, and develop classroom leadership skills that foster a caring learning environment, such as class meetings and peace education. They also learn to observe and respond to individual learning styles of their students. Because respect for children and the willingness to encourage children to grow in a noncompetitive environment are essential, Montessori teachers are taught to be positive, gentle and encouraging in their interactions with children.

Q. Can I use Montessori at home?

A. Using Montessori principles at home can help create a happy and relaxed home life. As the adult, you can try looking at your home through the eyes of your child. Can you find ways for your young child to help in meal preparation, share responsibility for taking care of her things, garden with you, choose her own clothes, get her own snacks? Self-esteem will grow as your child learns to be independent, and a sense of secure belonging arises from the fullest possible participation in the routines of everyday home life. With older children, many home-schooling families find their children's education is enriched by following the Montessori philosophy of protecting the child's concentration and encouraging children to pursue their own interests.

Q. Is Montessori for all children? What kind of student will do well in Montessori?

A. Montessori education has been used successfully for nearly 100 years with children of all socio-economic levels, of all academic abilities, and from all ethnic backgrounds. No single educational approach can work for all children, and there may be some children who do better with more teacher-directed instruction, fewer choices and more consistent external structure. In general, any child who can become engaged with a toy, game, or topic (dinosaurs, space, animals) and spend time exploring it and concentrating on it if left uninterrupted, should do well in Montessori.

Q. Is Montessori good for gifted children? What about children with special learning needs?

A. Montessori schools support all children in working at their own unique and appropriate pace to reach their fullest potential. Because work is individualized, there is no limit to how far children can go in their studies. For children with special learning needs, the attractive hands-on Montessori learning activities are helpful learning tools because they present one isolated concept at a time and allow students to experience one success after another. And in a classroom that has children of mixed ages and varying abilities, a non-competitive community develops, in which everyone both learns from others and also contributes to the good of the whole. Multi-age, mixed ability groups help children celebrate their own successes without comparing themselves to others.

Q. How well do Montessori children do later in life?

A. Montessori children are well prepared for later life not only academically, but also socially, and emotionally. They score well on standardized tests, and are ranked above average on following directions, turning in work on time, listening attentively, using basic skills, showing responsibility, asking provocative questions, showing enthusiasm for learning, and adapting to new situations.

Q. Do children have opportunities for pretend play in Montessori classrooms?

A. Montessori offered many kinds of play things along side the materials of instruction in her first Children's House, but she found the children had no interest in pretending when they were allowed to do real things. In Montessori classrooms, for instance, children have opportunities to actually help cook instead of pretending to cook. She developed her method by emphasizing those activities children were attracted to do and removing any activities they ignored. We do see pretend play in Montessori classrooms, but more often children are attracted to the Montessori materials of instruction as they become accustomed to concentrating for long periods of time on their work.

Q. Do Montessori teachers allow children to be creative?

A. Montessori classrooms encourage creativity by helping children develop the skills they need to express themselves. For example, as they develop hand-eye coordination through the guided use of metal inset materials, children also begin to express themselves by creating beautiful drawings and paintings.

Q. Is there too much individual work in Montessori? Do children learn how to get along with



others?

A. Montessori children are free to work alone or in a group. Although younger children do often choose to work alone as they master challenges, there are many aspects of Montessori schools that help children learn to get along well with others. They learn to share. They learn to respect each other's work space. They learn to take care of materials so other children can learn from them. They learn to work quietly so others can concentrate. And they learn to work together with others to take care of the classroom. As they get older, most children choose to work in small groups.

Q. Who accredits Montessori schools?

A. Unfortunately, anyone can use the name Montessori. Parents should ask whether the teachers are certified Montessori teachers, and observe a classroom to see if it is well equipped, orderly, and allows children to work alone and in small groups on their own self-chosen activities.

The two major organizations that provide teacher preparation programs in the United States are the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) and the American Montessori Society (AMS). Parents considering placing a child in a Montessori school can ask where teachers received their training, and whether or not the school is affiliated with AMI or AMS. The majority of Arlington County Montessori teachers have AMI or AMS training.