



The Purpose of Montessori Education

Dr. Maria Montessori believed that no human being is educated by another person. He must do it himself or it will never be done. A truly educated individual continues learning long after the hours and years he spends in the classroom because he is motivated from within by a natural curiosity and love for knowledge. Dr. Montessori felt, therefore, that the goal of early childhood should not be to fill the child with facts from a pre-selected course of studies, but rather to cultivate his own natural desire to learn.

In the Montessori classroom this objective is approached in two ways: first, by allowing each child to experience the excitement of learning by his own choice rather than by being forced and second, by helping him to improve all his natural tools for learning, so that his ability will be at a maximum in future learning situations. The Montessori materials will have this dual long-range purpose in addition to their immediate purpose of giving specific information to the child.

How the Children Learn

The use of the materials is based on the young child's unique aptitude for learning which Dr. Montessori identified as the "Absorbent Mind." In her writings she frequently compared the young mind to a sponge. It literally absorbs information from the environment. The process is particularly evident in the way in which a two year-old learns his native language, without formal instruction and without the conscious, tedious effort which an adult must make to master a foreign language. Acquiring information in this way is a natural and delightful activity for the young child who employs all his senses to investigate his interesting surroundings.

The Importance of the Early Years

In the Absorbent Mind, Dr. Montessori wrote, "The most important period of life is not the age of university studies, but the first one, the period from birth to the age of six. For that is the time when man's intelligence itself, his greatest implement is being formed. At no other age has the child greater need of an intelligent help, and any obstacle that impedes his creative work will lessen the chance he has of achieving perfection."

Recent psychological studies based on controlled research have confirmed these theories of Dr. Montessori. After analyzing thousands of such studies, Dr. Benjamin Bloom of the University of Chicago wrote, "From conception to age four, the individual develops 50% of his mature intelligence; from four-eight he develops another 30%... This would suggest this very rapid growth of intelligence in the early years and the possible great influence of the early environment on his development."

Like Dr. Montessori, Dr. Bloom believes “that the environment will have the maximum impact on a specific trait during that trait’s period of most rapid growth.” As an extreme example, a starvation diet would not affect the height of an eighteen year-old, but could severely retard the growth of a one year-old baby. Since eighty percent of the child’s mental development takes place before he is eight years old, the importance of favorable conditions during these early years can hardly be over emphasized.

At What Age should you Send Your Child

Although the entrance age varies in individual schools, a child can usually enter a Montessori classroom between the ages of 2 ½ and 4, depending on when he can be happy and comfortable in a classroom situation. We will begin with the simplest exercises based on activities that all children enjoy. The equipment that he uses at three and four will help him develop the concentration, coordination and working habits necessary for the more advanced exercises he will perform at five and six. The entire program of learning is purposefully structured. Therefore, optimum results cannot be expected for a child who misses the early years of the cycle or for a child who does not attend the program consistently.

Parents should understand that a Montessori School is neither a baby-sitting service nor a play school. Rather, it is unique cycle of learning designed to take advantage of the child’s sensitive years between three and six, when he can absorb information from an enriched environment. A child who acquires the basic skills of reading and arithmetic in this natural way has the advantage of beginning his education without drudgery, boredom or discouragement. By pursuing his individual interests in a Montessori classroom, he gains an early enthusiasm for learning, which is key to his becoming a truly educated person.