

Why Choose Montessori?

Why Choose Montessori? - By Linda Steeves

Mary, who was a toddler climbed everything in sight, fearlessly encounters any obstacle. Michael likes to sit quietly colouring or contentedly looking at a book. Tommy races his cars around the room. Kathy mothers any cat or dog she can find, including her countless stuffed animals. Our children each have their own unique personalities, including particular likes, dislikes and energy levels. And each grows within a certain natural structure at her own rate and in his own way.

When the time comes for parents to look to an educational system to supplement the learning, development and growth already proceeding at a rapid pace at home, why choose a Montessori school? One very common response is: "I heard Montessori is a quality programme and I want the best for my child." But why this quality programme as opposed to many other quality programmes out there?

In this article I'll explore some basic ideas behind Montessori's educational philosophy and how they translate into common practice in classrooms. As you read, you may ask yourself: "Is this what I support and believe most important for my child's education?"

Maria Montessori, the scientist, observed children and made conclusions about their growth and development that were enlightened and ahead of her time. She believed that children want to know the "how-tos, whys and wherefores" because the natural process of growth and development drives them to assimilate and fit into their society. So she developed an educational system with the primary focus on providing an environment that enhances the child's natural growth and developmental intuitiveness on all levels – physical, mental, social and spiritual.

This contrasts with some other educational systems whose primary focus concerns imparting knowledge so that by adulthood the child has acquired a certain body of information.

The love for the child and respect for the natural creative process implicit within Montessori's approach allows the child the freedom to form himself into a productive, contributing adult member of his culture. Because the child follows her instincts and drives in this process, the adult that the child forms will reflect her particular personality.

Maria Montessori talked about the adult's role in providing an enriched environment as one comparable to that of a supportive fellow traveller, rather than an all-knowing dictator of knowledge. Consequently, she developed a process-oriented educational philosophy.

In the classroom this means that depending on which "plane of development" a child might be in, more or less emphasis might be placed on his work product. However the directress continually focuses on providing children access to tools they'll need to unlock the mysteries of the world. These tools include independence, ability to make responsible choices, self-direction, self-knowledge, and acceptance, co-operative attitudes and problem solving abilities.

The vehicle used to foster the process and provide access to these tools is the classroom environment. The environment allows interaction between the children in a multi-age classroom where co-operation and working together flourish. Materials designed to encourage exploration and discovery fills the room. The curriculum or programme of studies within this environment, especially at the primary level, addresses universal questions of how the world came to be, how do we name and classify things, how does our world operate and how do we operate within it?

Children learn the process of seeking out information. They learn the questions to ask rather than the answers. They learn what works to reach a goal. And sometimes they learn this by not reaching a goal in an environment which allows this to happen. They learn about natural consequences and how to take responsibility for their selves and their own actions.

If, as a parent, you have already decided how your child should be when he grows up; if you know she has to go to college or there's no way he's going to college; or that she has to be a veterinarian, or a business person or a doctor or hairdresser or whatever; if you are committed to his being a certain way and you're determined that your child fits your particular mould that defines success; then you might want to think about a different quality programme for your child.

If, on the other hand, you are willing to place your faith in your child's ability to follow the natural creative process occurring within, and foster it as he learns to determine his own path and follow it, then a Montessori philosophy of education makes a good fit for your child and you.

*Reprinted with permission. Linda Steeves is editor of The Sandpaper Letter, a quarterly newsletter published by the Milwaukee Montessori School, WI, USA