

What is Montessori?

The Montessori Approach is based upon the lifelong work of Dr. Maria Montessori who dedicated her life to improving the education of children. Maria Montessori made the observation that every child spontaneously wants to learn. She identified what came to be known as “the universal characteristics of childhood,” regardless of where children were born or how they were brought up. These characteristics of childhood are qualitatively different from adulthood. As such, childhood deserves our respect and attention.

The core beliefs upon which the Montessori Method is based are as follows:

1. All children have absorbent minds in that they learn in a manner different from how adults learn. Children are like sponges the first six years of their lives as they soak up information both consciously and unconsciously from the environment around them. The amount of information they learn is phenomenal and has a lasting impression on whom and what they eventually become.
2. All children pass through “sensitive periods.” This refers to phases of development in which a child is focused on developing a particular knowledge or skill set. Learning occurs through the senses. During a sensitive period a child will repeat an activity time and time again – for no apparent reason. They are absorbed by what they are doing and for a period of time it is the only interest they have.
3. All children want to learn. Children have a fundamental drive to learn about themselves as well as their relationship and impact on their immediate surroundings. As children grow they are driven to learn about their environment. Montessori described this as an “inborn motivation” to learn which means that you cannot stop it from happening. From birth, children are active participants in their environment and by being able to manipulate their environment through their hands they acquire knowledge. Practical, purposeful and “hands on” activities foster this learning.
4. All children learn through play/work. The activities that children occupy themselves with in a Montessori program are often labeled as “work.” To outside observers it may look like “play” behavior; however, play is the child’s work simply because it is the means through which the child learns. The child is working hard at learning when engaged in enjoyable, voluntary, purposeful, and spontaneously chosen activities. The child is busy learning new ideas and acquiring new skills while constantly working to create him or herself.

5. All the children pass through several stages of development. There are three distinct planes of development that children pass through from birth to adulthood.

Stage 1: From birth to three is the “absorbent” mind in which a child learns by absorbing impressions from the environment without awareness of the process. From three to six the child develops the “conscious” mind during which memory and language will develop.

Stage 2: From age six to twelve is the period of childhood.

Stage 3: From twelve to eighteen is the period of adolescence.

6. All children want to be independent. From the beginning a child struggles to be independent and separate from those around him or her. Parents have the important task of providing a child with the opportunities to experience this move towards independence. Unfortunately, and for the best of intentions, parents try too hard, help too much, and in the wrong way. Waiting patiently while a child dresses himself or buttons a jacket can be difficult for most parents. However, performance of simple everyday activities meets the child’s needs for independence and because of this, he becomes totally absorbed and concentrated on them. The successful completion of tasks that are useful/practical helps to build up the child’s self-esteem and sense of self-worth. The ultimate goal of this is a true sense of interdependence in which one realizes that he or she is an important part of society with significant contributions to make to the world around them.