

What is Montessori Education?

Montessori education is based upon the work of lifelong educator and physician, Maria Montessori. Montessori education is not completely different from traditional-style education. The content is typically the same; the teaching methods are what make it different. There are over 6,000 Montessori schools in the United States and Canada, with many thousands more across the world. Montessori schools are implemented in private, public, charter and magnet schools.

Multi-Age Classrooms

Classes are grouped in two to three-year age spans. This model allows for individual students to observe a variety of learning styles. It is used in a Montessori classroom to encourage responsibility in older classmates and to foster self-confidence among all classmates. Students stay with their teachers for multiple years. This concept is sometimes called looping and has been adopted by many schools nationwide. Staying with one teacher for 2-3 years gives the teacher the gift of growing with the student. It also eases transitions into new academic years for students who return to a familiar, trusted environment and gives the student and teacher more time to focus on learning.

Individually-Paced Learning

Because classrooms are multi-age, they are able to support a broader spectrum of learning levels. Montessori lessons are carefully presented and thoughtfully supported with classroom materials. Students may then absorb the subject matter on a number of planes and are encouraged to apply their learning across multiple disciplines. Students go beyond memorization and repetition to true understanding and application of knowledge, skills, and concepts. Supporting students in this way allows the individual student to progress, without self-consciousness, at his or her own rate, either moving ahead without having to wait for the rest of the group, or taking the time he or she needs to internalize the material.

Teachers as Guides

One of the core principles of Montessori education is to instill a love of learning in students. Maria Montessori believed that we all possess innate curiosity and a strong internal drive to learn. To nurture these self-motivational instincts in a student, Montessori teachers act as guides, carefully observing students, and skillfully presenting material to support key concepts.

Integrated Curriculum

In a Montessori program, subject matter is interrelated through over-arching cultural themes. Reading, writing, science, history and other subjects are tied together. Modern brain research affirms that connecting knowledge in this way is the most effective method for humans to learn and retain information. This integrated approach is one of the Montessori curriculum's greatest strengths. Studies come alive through a host of hands-on projects and activities.

At the Elementary level, Montessori's Five Great Lessons provide the integrated curriculum framework. These lessons include: The Story of the Universe, The Timeline of Life, The History of Language, The History of Mathematics, and the Timeline of Civilization. These inspirational, inquiry-based stories, along with supporting lessons, materials and student-chosen research, promote a global understanding and strong critical thinking skills.

The Prepared Environment

Montessori classrooms are filled with extraordinarily well-organized materials. Much of the work of a Montessori teacher occurs in the preparation and organization of materials and the careful follow-through of a lesson or concept. This allows the student to unlock the door to learning through his or her own exploration of the supporting materials. The teacher spends considerable time gathering, creating and changing these supporting materials, and in general, keeping the classroom environment inviting for discovery. Classroom shelves contain objects from nature, follow-up exercises, Montessori materials and original source materials which all complement the themes being studied.

Classrooms are arranged in study centers, with clusters of student-sized tables and open areas for floor work. Each study center is surrounded by shelves of books and materials pertaining to a particular area such as language arts, mathematics, history, or geography. Students are allowed to move about the classroom and choose resources, working individually or in small groups.

Applied Learning and Projects

Montessori learning extends beyond the classroom. The elementary and middle-school programs teach history through hands-on experiences: students may build shelters, cook over a wood fire, churn butter, hike, work with a map and compass, canoe, and camp out. Montessori Science often takes place outdoors. Classes grow flowers and vegetables and study the effect of various conditions on their growth. Students take part in planning and organizing field trips which extend and enrich the curriculum.

Mastery of Core Skills: The Montessori Materials

At the elementary level, learning continues to be a hands-on experience, as students learn through inquiry. Montessori materials are widely acclaimed and copied in many progressive educational settings worldwide. They teach multiple concepts simultaneously. The Montessori materials allow students to explore concepts in a way that embraces individual learning styles. The math materials, for example, allow elementary-aged children to visualize and internalize complex concepts in pre-algebra and geometry in a simple and concrete way. By the time children are ready to practice these concepts on paper, they have a visual model which they can refer back to. Similar hands-on materials help students understand grammar, sentence analysis, geographical facts, and concepts in science. Materials are self-correcting and reinforce autonomy, confidence, and self-motivation.

Emphasis on Intrinsic Motivation

Montessori helps children learn how to learn. We operate from the understanding that intelligence, creativity and imagination can be found in every child. The true challenge of education is to keep the spark of human intelligence and curiosity alive. The teachers create captivating lessons and fascinating materials so that learning does not need to be forced. We help children to choose work wisely, to focus their attention, and to come into a setting ready to learn. Montessori students are given the time to reflect and play with ideas until they figure out how things fit together. They practice new skills until they are mastered. They are encouraged to do their own research, analyze what they have found, and come to their own conclusions. Montessori teaches students to think, not simply to memorize, feedback, and forget. This emphasis on inspiration and intrinsic motivation instills much greater self-discipline and a love of learning.

Long Work-Periods and Self-Directed Learning

Essential to inquiry-based learning is the Montessori principle of long uninterrupted blocks of time. The long work block approach to organizing the day enables students to explore a topic or material thoroughly until they achieve mastery. Parents are often amazed at the deep concentration and focus of Montessori students who are granted this freedom with

responsibility. Whole-class instruction is minimal with lessons being given to individuals or in small groups. Independent learning and responsibility for one's work are easily mastered in a classroom environment that is inspirational and skillfully organized.

Students use daily and/or weekly work plans to keep track of assignments and work accomplished. They work closely with their teachers to set goals. The student's involvement in determining their learning objectives leads to ownership and self-motivation. Teachers use their knowledge of each child's interest and abilities to guide them into new areas and areas of increasing challenge as they master skills and show signs of readiness to move on.

Friendships, Life Skills, and Community

The Montessori classroom is not only a community of close friends; it is a source of countless "life lessons" in social skills, everyday courtesy, and ethics. Montessori teachers are trained in child development theory and understand the sensitive periods at each stage. It is with this understanding that they are effective guides in the social and emotional issues which children face.

Montessori noted that elementary and middle school-aged children not only enjoy each other's company, they naturally learn from each other. Classrooms take advantage of this tendency by operating as a small social community in which children work together, resolve conflicts peacefully, encourage and acknowledge each other, and work as committees to complete tasks. The classrooms are run almost entirely by the students. They keep the room in order, care for classroom pets, tend to the plants, organize special events, and experience a multitude of practical life skills like writing thank-you letters, facilitating a group discussion, creating a budget, and preparing for a long hike.

Children at this stage are developing a strong sense of justice and moral reasoning. It is common for Montessori students to explore difficult moral questions, to adopt "causes", and to engage in community service projects.

Source: *The Montessori Way: An Education for Life*, The Montessori Foundation