

What is Montessori?

The Montessori approach of education is built on the premise that children develop best if they can follow their own path of development rather than having to master skills at set times or according to a set curriculum. The aim of the approach is to help children become responsible, tolerant and compassionate members of their communities, able to solve problems, make good decisions and look after themselves, others and the environment. To facilitate this, Montessorians try to create an environment where children are free to follow their own path of development, but understand that this freedom will only work if they respect the boundaries and stick to the rules. In practice this is achieved in the following way:

A typical Montessori classroom is bright and uncluttered and laid out so that children can take responsibility for it by themselves. Children are helped to keep the room clean and tidy and shown how to return activities back to the shelves before taking out new ones. To help them in this endeavour, furniture and tools are child-sized and activities are easily accessible on open shelves. Children learn through play, so every activity is carefully chosen to be interesting and fun as well as teaching new skills or concepts. Activities are graded and logically follow on from one another. They are hands-on, encourage self-motivated learning and make use of all the child's senses, recognizing that all children learn through different physical and mental challenges.

Montessorians try to make every choice in their classrooms a good one. Because of this, children are allowed to freely move around the classroom, choose the activities they are most interested in and work at their own individual pace.

The role of the adult in a Montessori environment is that of guide and helper. Teachers show children how to complete activities and then retreat to let them work by themselves or within their self-chosen group. If needed, help is offered, but always with the emphasis on helping the child to help themselves rather than by way of the teacher taking over. Teachers make careful observations of children to determine what stage of learning they

are at so as to be able to offer appropriate, interesting and fun learning activities. They also make sure that the classroom remains orderly and that all learning activities are complete and in good repair. Lessons of Grace and Courtesy (saying please and thank you, sharing, turn taking and table manners) as well as compassion and tolerance are taught through modelling of appropriate behaviour and role-play. Children are encouraged to solve their own squabbles but given help if arguments become too hot-headed. Rules are straight-forward and gently but consistently enforced. Discipline focuses on helping children understand the consequences of their actions and tries to engage a child's natural desire to behave well.

Montessorians believe that children have the best chance of developing to their full potential if they are left to follow their own individual paths of development. Everything in the environment is geared to give the child as much freedom as possible to pursue this path. Overly permissive teaching or parenting, however, is known to be as bad for a child's development as overly strict supervision. Therefore children need to understand that with freedom comes responsibility – for themselves, for others and for their environment. Some children invariably need more help than others, but given sensitive guidance all children can usually learn to stick to the rules and exercise the self-discipline needed to co-exist peacefully and productively in their community.

The Montessori method of Education was originally developed in the early 1900s to teach under-privileged and wayward children. It quickly proved so effective that it grew in popularity, spread around the world and today is more popular and pertinent than ever. For her work and in particular her idea that lasting peace could only be brought about through education, the founder of the method, Maria Montessori (child-psychologist, educator, philosopher and Italy's first ever female doctor) was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.