

What is Montessori?

The approach

The Montessori approach was formulated by Dr Maria Montessori (1870–1952), an Italian doctor then educationalist who worked with children over many years. She revolutionised the idea of education, giving back to children the opportunity for self-expression, for decision-making, for exploration and discovery, for following their interests, and for developing their own abilities and self-confidence. “We cannot create a genius,” she wrote. “We can only give each individual the chance to fulfil his potential possibilities to become an independent, secure and balanced human being.”

Maria Montessori’s ideas are as valid and relevant today as they were in her lifetime and have proved successful in providing children with the “education for life” that was her objective.

The Montessori approach emphasises the development of each child, respecting their individual needs, interest and abilities. It is based on children’s natural desire to learn, and allows each child to experience the excitement of learning by his or her own choice and at his or her own speed.

Children learn willingly under these circumstances, and the Montessori teacher – or “directress” in Montessori terms – spends time with each child individually. She (or he) is a gentle and sympathetic presence in the classroom, there to observe, to guide, to help and to be full of encouragement, but never to dictate or impose herself.

She is trained to help children of all abilities – fast learners can move quickly on, while others can take their time until they are ready to progress to the next stage; the teacher always shares each child’s pride in his or her achievements. There is no competitiveness between the children – they are all busy with their own activities. Each child’s individual activities and learning are carefully recorded, and regularly shared with parents.

The Montessori classroom and materials

The Montessori classroom is bright and cheerful, carefully ordered with a place for everything. The furniture and fittings are child-sized with corners set up for different activities, and all the materials are accessible to the children. This is their space, and it must be attractive to them if they are to feel responsible for it.

The children are free to move around to choose their activities, to work on their own or alongside their friends, at a table or on a mat on the floor, to watch or converse, but they may not disturb or disrupt others. They put things away when they have finished before moving on to their next activity. There will be a happy buzz of conversation, movement and activity in the room, yet an overall atmosphere of calmness and concentration.

Social skills are important and the boundaries of acceptable social behaviour within the classroom are clearly defined. The children are all treated with respect and affection – and are expected to learn to respect the materials they are working with and act with respect and consideration towards others. Children who need extra help with behaviour are treated clearly, calmly and consistently - and are given lots of opportunities to make good choices; school and parents work together in this area.

Young children have an aptitude for learning, which Maria Montessori identified as “the absorbent mind” (she frequently compared the young mind to a sponge), and can absorb information from their environment. It makes sense, therefore, to make that environment as rich and meaningful as possible.

The equipment and materials found in a Montessori classroom from which the children can choose are wide-ranging, encompassing creative activities, practical life skills, exercises involving colour, shape, dimension, weight, sound and texture, as well as academic areas including mathematical activities, language and literacy. The cultural materials cover nature studies, geography and early science. The materials move from simple tasks and skills to more complex activities in a logical progression in each

areas, are very “hands-on” and inviting to work with, and make it easy for the children to understand what they are doing.

Through working with the equipment and in topic and project work, the children cover many areas of knowledge. There is also time for art, music, drama, cooking, outside play and story-telling.

Maria Montessori left behind her a wonderful legacy: a philosophy of life, a unique method of education, materials for children to use, a new and meaningful role for teachers – overall, a chance to give children the best possible foundation for their later learning – and for life.