Sensitive Periods

Another observation of Dr. Montessori's, which has been reinforced by modern research, is the importance of the sensitive periods for early learning. These are periods of intense fascination for learning a particular skill, such as going up and down steps, putting things in order, counting, or reading. It is easier for a child to learn a particular skill during the corresponding sensitive period than at any other time in his life. The Montessori classroom takes advantage of this fact by allowing the child freedom to select individual activities that correspond to her own periods of interest.

At What Ages?

Although the entrance age varies in individual schools, a child can usually enter a Montessori classroom between the ages of two and one-half and four, depending on when she can be happy and comfortable in a classroom situation. She will begin with the simplest exercises based on activities that all children enjoy. The equipment that she uses at three and four will help her to develop the concentration, coordination and working habits necessary for the more advanced exercises she will perform at five and six. The entire program of learning is purposefully structured. Therefore, optimum results cannot be expected either for a child who misses the early years of the cycle, or for one who is withdrawn before she finishes the basic materials.

Parents should understand that a Montessori school is neither a babysitting service nor a play school that prepares a child for traditional kindergarten. Rather, it is a unique cycle of learning designed to take advantage of a child's sensitive years between three and six, when she can absorb information from an enriched environment. A child who acquires the basic skills of reading and arithmetic in this natural way has the advantage of beginning her education without drudgery, boredom, or discouragement. By pursuing her individual interests in a Montessori classroom, she gains an early enthusiasm for learning, which is the key to her becoming a truly educated person.

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This leaflet entitled *The Purpose of Montessori Education*
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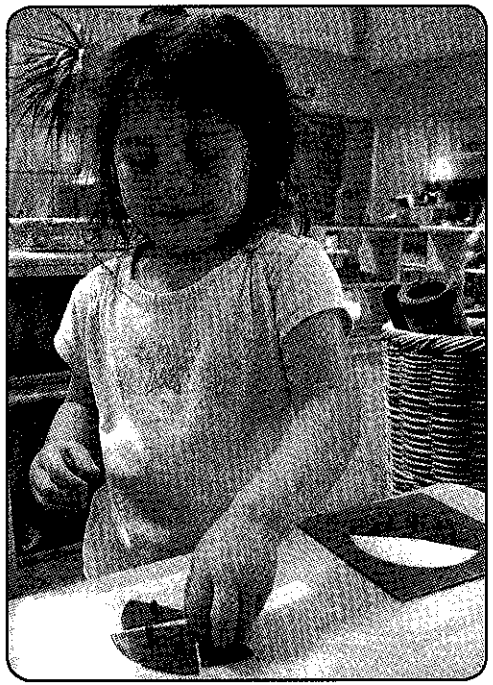
The Purpose of Montessori Education

Dr. Maria Montessori believed that no human being is educated by another person. She must do it herself or it will never be done. A truly educated individual continues learning long after the hours and years she spends in the classroom because she is motivated from within by a natural curiosity and love for knowledge. Dr. Montessori felt, therefore, that the goal of early childhood education should not be to fill the child with facts from a pre-selected course of studies, but rather to ***cultivate her own natural desire to learn.***

In the Montessori classroom this objective is approached in two ways: first, by allowing each child to experience the excitement of learning by her own choice rather than by being forced; and second, by helping her to perfect all her natural tools for learning, so that her ability will be at a maximum in future learning situations. The Montessori materials have this dual long-range purpose in addition to their immediate purpose of giving specific information to the child.

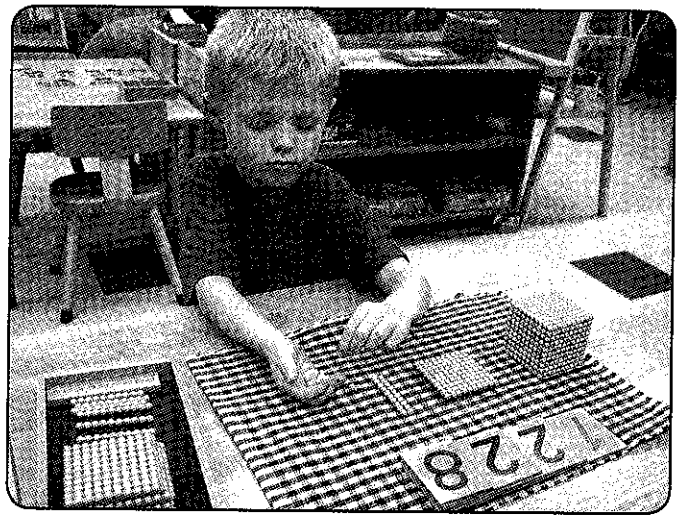


How Children Learn

The use of the materials is based on the young child's unique aptitude for learning that Dr. Montessori identified as the "absorbent mind." In her writings she frequently compared the young mind to a sponge. It literally absorbs information from the environment. The process is particularly evident in the way in which a two-year-old learns his native language, without formal instruction and without the conscious, tedious effort that an adult must make to master a foreign tongue. Acquiring information in this way is a natural and delightful activity for the young child who employs all his senses to investigate his interesting surroundings.

Since the child retains this ability to learn by absorbing until he is almost seven years old, Dr. Montessori reasoned that his experience could be enriched in a classroom where he could handle materials that introduce basic educational information. Over 100 years of experience have proven her theory that a young child can learn to read, write and calculate in the same natural way that he learns to walk and talk. In a Montessori classroom the equipment invites him to do this during his own periods of interest and readiness.

Dr. Montessori always emphasized that *the hand is the chief teacher of the child.* In order to learn there must be concentration, and the best way a child can concentrate is by fixing his attention on some task he is performing with his hands. (The adult habit of doodling is a remnant of this practice.) All the equipment in a Montessori classroom allows the child to reinforce his casual impressions by inviting him to use his hands for actual learning.



The Importance of the Early Years

In *The Absorbent Mind*, Dr. Montessori wrote, "The most important period of life is not the age of university studies, but the first one, the period from birth to the age of six. For that is the time when man's intelligence itself, his greatest implement, is being formed. But not only his intelligence; the full totality of his psychic powers... At no other age has the child greater need of intelligent help, and any obstacle that impedes his creative work will lessen the chance he has of achieving perfection."

Modern psychological studies based on controlled research have confirmed these theories of Dr. Montessori. After analyzing thousands of such studies, Dr. Benjamin S. Bloom of the University of Chicago wrote in *Stability and Change in Human Characteristics*, "From conception to age 4, the individual develops 50% of his mature intelligence; from ages 4 to 8 he develops another 30%... This would suggest the very rapid growth of intelligence in the early years and the possible great influence of the early environment on this development."

Like Dr. Montessori, Dr. Bloom believes "that the environment will have maximum impact on a specific trait during that trait's period of most rapid growth." As an extreme example, a starvation diet would not affect the height of an eighteen-year-old, but could severely retard the growth of a one-year-old baby. Since eighty percent of the child's mental development takes place before he is eight years old, the importance of favorable conditions during these years can hardly be over emphasized.