

How it began, why it works

By Helen Wheatley

Maria Montessori began her work with children by simply observing how they learned best and went on to base her teaching methods on her observations.

In this way she avoided a search for patterns of child development that would conform to adults' ideals of what they wished children to be, and paradoxically discovered that, given the right environment and stimulation, a child could develop behaviour and achievements beyond all expectations.

She found that children are better learners in the years up to the age of six than they will ever be again and that they can learn almost anything provided special techniques are used.

There must be a wide variety of activities available, with each piece of equipment serving a useful purpose. Each activity must be attractively presented, spotlessly clean and in perfect repair, and should be at the right size for small hands to use.

In a Montessori classroom children are encouraged to choose every activity they wish to work with, and to complete it in their own time. If children work without interruption they can develop great powers of concentration.

A child in a Montessori school will be given the opportunity to learn the simple practical tasks busy parents cannot always teach; at the age of two and a half or three it is important to provide familiar activities which give a link with home. Children who learn to care for themselves and their environment develop the greatest confidence as, perhaps for the first time in their lives, they find an adult who will show them how to do the things they really want to learn.

Many visitors to Montessori schools comment on the calm, relaxed way children go about their business. This inner harmony springs from self-respect gained from learning to take care of their own needs, and from the concentration they have acquired from being allowed to work without interruption at a chosen task.

These children are ready for the next stage in their education - the laying of the foundations for academic learning by developing and refining their senses with special materials, which enhance their perceptions and increase concentration. This sensorial equipment is also attractive and fun to use.

Reading and number work are also taught with specially designed materials which enable the child to grasp the basics without stress or strain at an early age. What makes this possible is the special combination of circumstances in the Montessori environment:

- The child's freedom to choose which develops in the child of three or four a capacity for self-discipline.
- The Montessori apparatus, most of which contains an inbuilt factor, which allows a child to discover and correct his or her own mistakes without asking a teacher.

One of her early observations was that children learn best when hand and mind work together and 'learning by doing' is now a recognised mainstream educational concept; like many of Montessori's ideas it has gradually found its way into accepted wisdom and is now taken for granted.

Maria Montessori was the first person to use child-sized furniture in classrooms. Her first school, the Casa dei Bambini or 'House for Children' was designed so that all the educational materials would be accessible to the children. In Montessori classrooms today, children take their own work from low shelves and cupboards; brooms, brushes, jugs and basins are of a size which children find easy to use and they become responsible for maintaining the environment spontaneously, noticing and picking up even tiny pieces of litter, caring for plants, doing their washing up and sometimes preparing their own food. Order is one of the most important features of such an environment; each person, child or teacher, is responsible for returning anything he or she has used to its correct place. This helps to develop a sense of personal responsibility as well as making sure that all children can find exactly what they need.

Montessori teachers are trained to be consistent but not to ask for behaviour, which is beyond the child capability. No child is allowed to behave dangerously, but the teacher exercises control by focusing on the problem, not the child. If a child is jumping on a chair seat, the teacher would probably remove the chair without comment and lead the child to a place where he or she could jump in safety - the problem is solved practically and simply with the minimum attention on the unacceptable behaviour, which might have reinforced it, or on the child personally.

Now, 100 years after the founding of the first Montessori school, the approach is spreading rapidly, as parents seek a middle way between old-fashioned rigid teaching methods and undue permissiveness. If its popularity continues to increase as it has done during the past decade, our children may be better placed to build the safe, peaceful world Maria Montessori envisaged.