

Principles of the Montessori Method

The Montessori method has been and is very popular around the world with early childhood professionals and parents. The Montessori approach is designed to support the natural development of children in a well-prepared environment.

Five basic principles fairly and accurately represent how Montessori educators implement the Montessori method in many kinds of programs across the United States. These principles include: 1. respect for the child, 2. the absorbent mind, 3. sensitive periods, 4. the prepared environment, and 5. autoeducation.

Respect for the Child

Respect for the child is the cornerstone on which all other Montessori principles rest. As Montessori said,

As a rule, however, we do not respect children. We try to force them to follow us without regard to their special needs. We are overbearing with them, and above all, rude; and then we expect them to be submissive and well-behaved, knowing all the time how strong is their instinct of imitation and how touching their faith in and admiration of us. They will imitate us in any case. Let us treat them, therefore, with all the kindness which we would wish to help to develop in them (Montessori, 1965).

Teachers show respect for children when they help them do things and learn for themselves. When children have choices, they are able to develop the skills and abilities necessary for effective learning autonomy, and positive self-esteem.

The Absorbent Mind

Montessori believed that children educate themselves: "It may be said that we acquire knowledge by using our minds; but the child absorbs knowledge directly into his psychic life. Simply by continuing to live, the child learns to speak his native tongue" (Montessori, 1966). This is the concept of the absorbent mind.

Montessori wanted us to understand that children can't help learning. Simply by living, children learn from their environment. Children are born to learn, and they are remarkable learning systems. Children learn because they are thinking beings. But what they learn depends greatly on their teachers, experiences, and environments.

Early childhood teachers are reemphasizing the idea that children are born learning and with constant readiness and ability to learn. We discuss these concepts further in Chapter .

Sensitive Periods

Montessori believed there are sensitive periods when children are more susceptible to certain behaviors and can learn specific skills more easily:

A sensitive period refers to a special sensibility which a creature acquires in its infantile state, while it is still in a process of evolution. It is a transient disposition and limited to the acquisition of a particular trait. Once this trait or characteristic has been acquired, the special sensibility disappears....(Montessori, 1966).

Although all children experience the same sensitive periods (e.g., a sensitive period for writing), the sequence and timing vary for each child. One role of the teacher is to use observation to detect times of sensitivity and provide the setting for optimum fulfillment.

The Prepared Environment

Montessori believed that children learn best in a prepared environment, a place in which children can do things for themselves. The prepared environment makes learning materials and experiences available to children in an orderly format. Classrooms Montessori described are really what educators advocate when they talk about child-centered education and active learning. Freedom is the essential characteristic of the prepared environment. Since children within the environment are free to explore materials of their own choosing, they absorb what they find there. Maria Montessori was a master at creating environments for young children that enabled them to be independent, active, and learn.

Autoeducation

Montessori named the concept that children are capable of educating themselves autoeducation (also known as self-education). Children who are actively involved in a prepared environment and who exercise freedom of choice literally educate themselves. Montessori teachers prepare classrooms so that children educate themselves.

The Teacher's Role

Montessori believed that "it is necessary for the teacher to guide the child without letting him feel her presence too much, so that she may be always ready to supply the desired help, but may never be the obstacle between the child and his experience" (Montessori, 1967).

The Montessori teacher demonstrates key behaviors to implement this child-centered approach:

- **Make children the center of learning** because, as Montessori said, “The teacher’s task is not to talk, but to prepare and arrange a series of motives for cultural activity in a special environment made for the child” (*Dr. Montessori’s Own Handbook*).
- **Encourage children to learn** by providing freedom for them in the prepared environment.
- **Observe children** so as to prepare the best possible environment, recognizing sensitive periods and diverting inappropriate behavior to meaningful tasks.
- **Prepare the learning environment** by ensuring that learning materials are provided in an orderly format and the materials provide for appropriate experiences for all the children.
- **Respect each child** and model ongoing respect for all children and their work.
- **Introduce learning materials**, demonstrate learning materials, and support children’s learning. The teacher introduces learning materials after observing each child.

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