What is Montessori?

The Montessori movement takes its name from its founder, Dr Maria Montessori who began the first ‘casa dei bambini’ or children’s home in Rome in 1907.

Today Montessori is the single largest educational philosophy in the world with 22,000 Montessori schools in more than 100 countries on six continents.

Reaching 104 years of Montessori reveals that this approach to children is relevant for today’s future generations.

Dr Maria Montessori

Dr Maria Montessori (1870-1952) has been described as an educator, scientist, physician, philosopher, feminist and humanitarian, and was the first early childhood educator to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Dr Montessori felt strongly that a radical reform of education was essential if there was to be any hope for peace in our time.

She intended that children be placed at the centre of society to enable all children to become caring, self motivated and fulfilled individuals, able to create a harmonious and peaceful future for humanity.

By any measure Maria Montessori was a remarkable woman. She was the first woman to be granted a medical degree from an Italian university. Following graduation, she became director of a school for intellectually disabled children. Her work with these children saw remarkable results. When they competed successfully in public examinations, Dr. Montessori began to wonder what was possible using similar methods with “normal” children.

The First Montessori Children's House

Towards the end of 1906, Dr Montessori’s life and career took an unexpected turn when she was asked to help with unsupervised children in the San Lorenzo quarter of Rome. It was there that she founded the first Casa dei Bambini, or ‘Children’s House’ on January 6, 1907.

As a scientist she needed a chance to test her ideas, so she began work with 50 poor and illiterate two to six year olds.

With these children she was able to combine a child-centred approach to education with the materials and methods she has tried with the intellectually impaired children. The results that soon followed were so surprising that working for children soon became her life’s work.

Later she wrote: ‘In order to follow them, I changed my whole life. I was nearly 40. I
had in front of me a doctor’s career and a professorship at the university. But I left all, because I felt compelled to follow them, and to find others who could follow them, for I saw that in them lay the secret of the soul.

Her work in San Lorenzo clarified for Dr Montessori that education was not so much about handing on knowledge, but that children constructed their own knowledge from experiences in the world.

**Montessori Philosophy**

The Montessori approach is concerned foremost with the development of human potential. This approach is based on “following the child”, on recognising the developmental needs and characteristics of children of each age group and constructing the corresponding environment that best meets these needs.

Maria Montessori observed that the child moves to adulthood through a series of developmental periods which she called the Planes of Development. Each period is different but is built on the foundation of the preceding one with the Montessori environment and approach tailored to meet the child’s needs at each stage.

There are four planes of development. In the first plane from birth to age six, the child is characterised by his or her ‘absorbent mind’, absorbing all aspects of his or her environment, language and culture. In the second plane from age six to twelve, the child uses a ‘reasoning mind’ to explore the world with abstract thought and imagination. In the third plane from twelve to eighteen, the adolescent has a ‘humanistic mind’ eager to understand humanity and the contribution he or she can make to society. In the last plane of development from age eighteen to twenty four, the adult explores the world with a ‘specialist mind’ taking his or her place in the world. Maria Montessori believed that if education followed the natural development of the child, then society would gradually move to a higher level of co-operation, peace and harmony.

**The Prepared Environment**

Walk into a Montessori classroom, anywhere in the world, in any suburb of any city and you will invariably see happy and busy children working purposefully. The classroom itself will typically be beautiful and enticing. Great care has been taken to create a learning environment that will reinforce the child’s independence and natural urge toward self-development. This is achieved in three ways: beauty, order and accessibility.

The Montessori classroom is not merely a place for individual learning. It is a vibrant community of children, where the child learns to interact socially in a variety of ways. The three-year age range enables older children to teach the younger and learn much themselves from the experience while the younger children are inspired to more advanced work through observing the older ones. With such a variety of levels in the classroom, each child can work at his or her own pace, unhindered by competition and encouraged by co-operation. Children attend daily and for a three-year cycle.

The teacher provides a link between the child and the prepared environment, introducing the child to each piece of equipment when he or she is ready in a precise, clear and enticing way. On a broader level
the teacher provides a link between the classroom and the parent, meeting with each child’s parents to discuss progress. She needs to be an example; calm, consistent, courteous and caring. The most important attribute of a teacher is the love and respect she holds for each child’s total being.

**Montessori 3-6 Program**

Children between the age of birth and six possess an "absorbent mind". This almost genius capacity for mental absorption enables them to learn their native tongue, to perfect movement and internalise order. Maria Montessori observed that children also experience Sensitive Periods in their development. These are periods of special sensitivity when the child is attracted to certain stimuli in his or her environment allowing them to acquire certain knowledge and skills. These periods occur universally for all children at approximately the same age and provide the time for optimal development of that particular skill or knowledge.

The 3 to 6 year old child is undergoing a process of self-construction. The application of the Montessori philosophy and the specifically designed Montessori equipment aids the child’s ability to absorb knowledge and continue this path of self-construction. There are four main areas in the preschool program: Practical Life, Sensorial, Language and Mathematics. Considerable emphasis is also placed on Creative Arts, Music, Science, Geography and Cultural Studies. Acquisition of one’s own first culture is the child’s central developmental drive in the first plane of development.

The pre-primary environment serves this drive abundantly, bringing the world to the child. Globes, maps, songs, land forms, collections of pictures of life in different cultures, and much more, is offered, with the aim of helping the child to grow as an individual appreciating the larger context of his or her world.

**Practical Life**

The Practical Life component of the Montessori approach is the link between the child’s home environment and the classroom. The child’s desire to seek order and independence finds expression through the use of a variety of materials and activities which support the development of fine motor as well as other learning skills needed to advance to the more complex Montessori equipment. The practical life materials involve the children in precise movements which challenge them to concentrate, to work at their own pace uninterrupted, and to complete a cycle of work which typically results in the feelings of satisfaction and confidence. Practical life encompasses four main areas: Control of Movement, Care of Person, Care of Environment, and Grace and Courtesy.

**Sensorial**

From an early age children are developing a sense of order and they actively seek to sort, arrange and classify their many experiences. The sensorial component provides a key to the world, a means for a growth in perception, and understanding that forms the basis for abstraction in thought. The sensorial materials give the child experience initially in perceiving distinctions between similar and different things. Later the child learns to grade a set of similar objects that differ in a regular and measurable way from most to least. Each piece of equipment is generally a set of objects which isolate a fundamental quality perceived through the senses such as color, form, dimension, texture,
temperature, volume, pitch, weight and taste. Precise language such as loud/soft, long/short, rough/smooth, circle, square, cube and so on is then attached to these sensorial experiences to make the world even more meaningful to the child.

**Language**

Maria Montessori did not believe that reading, writing, spelling and language should be taught as separate entities. Pre-primary children are immersed in the dynamics of their own language development and the Montessori approach provides a carefully thought-out program to facilitate this process. Oral language acquired since birth is further elaborated and refined through a variety of activities such as songs, games, poems, stories and classified language cards.

Indirect preparation for writing begins with the practical life exercises and sensorial training. Muscular movement and fine motor skills are developed along with the ability of the child to distinguish the sounds which make up language. With this spoken language background the directress begins to present the alphabet symbols to the child. Not only can children hear and see sounds but they can feel them by tracing the sandpaper letters. When a number of letters have been learned the movable alphabet is introduced. These cardboard or wooden letters enable the child to reproduce his or her own words, then phrases, sentences and finally stories. Creativity is encouraged and the child grows in appreciation of the mystery and power of language. Other materials follow which present the intricacies of non-phonetic spelling and grammar. Because children know what they have written, they soon discover they can read back their stories. Reading books both to themselves and others soon follows.

**Mathematics**

Mathematics is a way of looking at the world, a language for understanding and expressing measurable relationships inherent in our experience. A child is led to abstract ideas and relationships by dealing with the concrete. The child’s mind has already been awakened to mathematical ideas through the sensorial experiences. The child has seen the distinctions of distance, dimension, graduation, identity, similarity and sequence and will now be introduced to the functions and operations of numbers. Geometry, algebra and arithmetic are connected in the Montessori method as they are in life. For instance the golden bead material highlights the numerical, geometrical and dimensional relationships within the decimal system. Through concrete material the child learns to add, subtract, multiply and divide and gradually comes to understand many abstract mathematical concepts with ease and joy.