

## What You Need to Know About Montessori Preschools



by Traci Geiser

Montessori Preschools began in 1907 by Dr. Maria Montessori in Italy. Montessori education has become popular in the United States and there are more than 4,000 Montessori schools in the US and thousands more across the world.

Montessori schools can focus on infants through high school and may be found in public schools, private schools as well as large daycare chains. How does Montessori education differ from other early childhood programs? Is a Montessori Preschool a good choice for your child? Recognizing some of the distinguishing features of the classrooms, materials, methods and teachers may help you determine if Montessori would be a good fit for your child.

### Montessori Classrooms

Montessori classrooms are known for their beauty, organization and child sized furnishings. “Upon entering an authentic Montessori classroom the observer will first be struck by the quiet hum,” says Sally Wallace, former Montessori Preschool Director. “It will appear to be a busy workshop where each child is working independently.”

- Maria Montessori is known for creating the first child sized furnishings in early childhood classrooms.
- Montessori classrooms are equipped with low sinks, chairs and tables, and perhaps even a child sized couch.

- Materials in a Montessori classroom are kept on open shelves that are easily accessible to children.
- Natural light and beautiful furnishings are important. You may see “homey” items such as rugs, lamps, framed artwork and plants throughout the room which adds to its beauty.
- There are large open spaces where children can spread out to do their work as well as places for large groups and independent work.
- Montessori classrooms also have quiet places where children can read or think.
- A Montessori environment allows the children to make independent choices and work at their own pace.
- Classrooms are decorated with artwork created by the children.

### **Montessori Materials**

Montessori education is known for being hands-on. Learning materials are designed specifically for manipulation.

- Learning materials are arranged on the shelf from left to right and easiest to hardest.
- Activities are designed to be completed in a specific sequence.
- Materials are self-correcting to allow children to work independently.
- Colorful and inviting, the materials lend themselves to exploration.
- Many activities are designed to help children with fine motor control.
- As children master a task, they return the materials and move on to the next (more difficult) activity.

### **Montessori Methods**

“Montessori method provides a unique educational approach to meet the individual needs of each child,” says Wallace. “The Montessori method allows for unrestricted growth of every child.”

- A child is allowed to work independently at her own pace and to choose which activities she would like to pursue from many choices.
- There is an emphasis on learning through all five senses rather than the traditional listening, watching and reading.
- There is a focus on learning that leads to concentration, self-discipline and a love of learning in Montessori programs.

### **Montessori Teachers**

- Teachers work with children on the floor or at tables rather than at the front of the classroom.
- The teacher’s role is to observe and guide children’s learning rather than instruct. “The teacher is a quiet observer only interfering if she/he sees that a child may need assistance,” states Wallace. “The teacher’s responsibility is to create the environment that entices and enhances the development of each child. The child then acts on this prepared environment at their particular stage of development.”

- Teachers keep notes and records on each child's progress and introduce lessons according to the needs of the children in the class.

### **Other Distinguishing Features**

- Montessori classrooms are typically multi-aged. The age span will usually be 3 years.
- Older children help the younger children master skills.
- Often the teacher and children stay together as a group from year to year, especially in programs that continue into elementary or even secondary grades.
- Children in a Montessori classroom are part of a caring community. They are trained to be kind to one another and help each other.

Montessori preschool programs may have only some components, or be very authentic Montessori programs that include all aspects of Montessori education. Many preschool programs do not call themselves a Montessori preschool, but may incorporate some Montessori methods into their program.

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