



THE MONTESSORI APPROACH

When I drop off my three-year-old daughter at The Washington Market School in the morning, she looks up and says, "Mom, could you wait for a few minutes until I get to work?" At The Washington Market School and at other Montessori-affiliated schools, children work rather than play--a distinction that Maria Montessori considered critical in according dignity to the task of children. Because the task of children is to develop toward their full human potential, she refused to trivialize a child's endeavors as play. A child, she wrote, is "an amorphous, splendid being in search of his own proper form."

Maia walks across the colorful carpet to an area brimming with rolled-up cloth work mats. The room is cozy and inviting. To me, it seems magical. There are a shelf full of tanks and cages housing gerbils, fish, snails, and birds; furniture the right size for young children; a huge tub filled with water and various measuring instruments; and another filled with rice and beans and more measuring instruments.

Maia picks up a mat and, from a shelf nearby, a Montessori-style block containing knobbed cylinders of different depths and diameters. These are designed to be pulled out, mixed up, and inserted again into their appropriate sockets. Then she chooses a spot on the rug and begins to work. I wait a few minutes as requested, aware that her separation anxiety decreases when she is absorbed in a meaningful activity by the time I say goodbye. Often, she responds in kind: "Have a good day, Mom."

The Magic behind the Method

Montessori-affiliated schools are accredited by the American Montessori Society and adhere to the basic principles of Montessori education. These include consideration of the individual as a whole (physical, emotional, social, aesthetic, spiritual, and cognitive needs and interests are inseparable and equally important); respect for oneself, others, the environment, and life itself; the belief that learning occurs in an inquisitive, cooperative, and nurturing atmosphere; and the belief that learning takes place through the senses, by manipulating materials, and through interaction with others.

Maria Montessori placed great emphasis on the child's relationship to the real world. Why, then, did Maia's school seem magical to me? Perhaps because Montessori herself was enchanted by the real world. She knew that children were likewise amazed, and she worked to preserve and enhance this natural

enthusiasm by creating schools that respected the child, comfortable and attractive work environments, and specially designed materials to facilitate the mastery of life skills.

At Washington Market, the director, assistant director, and teachers exude a similar sense of wonder—one that illuminates their smiles and lends a resonant timbre to their voices. Their fascination with the world seems childlike in comparison with the sentiments of many other adults. It is as though we adults have grown somber with age, as though we are in mourning for parts of ourselves that were suppressed through misdirected education.

Captivated by the sense of awe at Washington Market, I was surprised to find that a number of people associate the Montessori approach with rigid methodology and a heavy emphasis on academic achievement. What was behind this apparent contradiction, I wondered, and I set out on a search for clues.

My first tip-off came when I read Maria Montessori's book *The Secret of Childhood*. In the preface, her son Mario explains: "Here [in the United States] a number of schools use Montessori only as a teaching method. Here also, many people maintain that this is what Dr. Montessori meant. They disregard what she most valued: the contribution the child can give humanity."^[2]

Other people, perhaps unaware that Montessori laid the foundation for their thinking, highly regard what she most valued. In fact, the principles that Maria Montessori emphasized at the turn of the century form the cornerstone for enlightened parenting in today's world—namely, respect for the individual child, freedom in which to grow, and a stimulating learning environment that allows for the flourishing of children's interests. These guiding notions, far more than any educational theorizing, fueled Montessori's reforms of the spirit-inhibiting traditional classrooms in which many students fidgeted, waiting for the school day to end.

Beriah Wall, whose daughter Emma is in Maia's class, appreciates the Montessori affiliation. He equates "Montessori" with "sensitivity to the particular nature of each individual child."



Still seeking to deepen my understanding of the value of a Montessori education, I asked several directors why they chose to associate their schools with Montessori. Gretchen Courage, of The Children's House in Park Slope, Brooklyn, said that she discovered Montessori as a daycare worker. Curious about a child who spent afternoons with her after attending a Montessori school in the morning, Courage went to visit. She was impressed by the respect displayed toward quiet children as well as more assertive ones. In addition, she was inspired by the teacher's unique role as observer and facilitator, as one who knows to stay in the background as much

as is feasible. Courage then decided to go for Montessori training and open her own school. Now, 15 years later, she still says, "I think that respect for the child is the strongest thing."

What calls forth such respect is, in the words of Montessori, "the absorbent mind"--the natural way in which children acquire information about their environment through the involvement of their senses. The absorbent mind remains highly active from birth to age six. And it is during these years that "man's intelligence itself, his greatest implement, is being formed," notes Montessori. Also formed at this time, she adds, is "the full totality of his psychic powers."^[3]

Concomitant with the notion of the absorbent mind is Montessori's observation of "sensitive periods" spans of time during which children, through their own persistent fascination with a particular activity, will demonstrate a readiness to learn the skills associated with it. Children who, undaunted by stumbling and falling, pick themselves up again and again and put one foot ahead of the other are in the sensitive period for learning to walk. Similarly, children who are in the sensitive period for learning to pour are welcome to spend their Montessori classroom work period filling and emptying containers to their hearts' content.

Adults who impose a too-structured curriculum on children in the guise of educating them are, in effect, failing to respect their absorbent minds and sensitive periods. Such behavior, in Montessori's view, can only hinder their growth.

The Flexibility within the Structure

Asked whether her school departs from Montessori thinking in any way, Courage says, "I don't think that we have departed at all. There are ways that every school has to keep up with its children and the needs of that group at that time That's what Montessori really is: to observe children and keep up with what needs to change. It's inherently a very dynamic, changing sort of philosophy."

Indeed; many contemporary Montessori schools offer programs that Montessori herself did not implement. "She had no creative arts program for children," notes Courage. "She didn't talk about fantasy play; she didn't talk about creative art But fantasy play does have an important part in children's development."

Maria Gravel, director of the Seton Day Care Center and Pre-School in upper Manhattan, was drawn to Montessori while working with blind children. She was especially attracted to the idea of encouraging students to learn by manipulating materials. Gravel describes herself as eclectic, and believes that the best approach is to incorporate into the Montessori system the latest discoveries in early childhood development. For her, and others, this means the inclusion of opportunities for fantasy work and creative art.

Ronnie Moskowitz, director of The Washington Market School, adapts Montessori philosophy to the needs of three and four year olds who live in downtown Manhattan. She says that the noise level in Washington Market must surely be higher than that in any one of the case dei bambini that Montessori started. And while Moskowitz appreciates the flexibility inherent in Montessori philosophy, she is most attracted to the structure it offers teachers and children.

Moskowitz attended college in the late sixties, amid a flurry of student rebellion against the constraints of external forms of discipline. Sensing the underlying value of discipline, she studied Montessori, who "really looked at the child and at the child's needs." Says Moskowitz, "As wonderful as all the other

educational theories I'd learned were, I didn't feel they were connected with children at different stages of readiness."

The discipline addressed by Montessori is of another sort entirely, for it originates within the child. On the subject of concentration, she wrote: "This fixation of the mind and activity upon a single object is a phenomenon of inner origin The will of another produces disciplined actions only with difficulty since such an external influence does not create the organization necessary for such activity." [4]

Montessori linked this inner discipline to four main areas of development: sensorial activity (methods of observation), practical life activity (methods of working), language (methods of communication), and mathematical reasoning (methods of thinking in quantitative relationships and symbols). To nurture children's growth in each of these areas, she developed educational materials that would help them discover certain operative principles on their own.

As Maia works, with the Montessori cylinder blocks early in the morning, I am reminded of a puzzle, each piece of which can only go in one "right" place. Here, each cylinder fits correctly into only one particular



hole. When Maia attempts to place a cylinder in the wrong socket, she realizes it does not fit and corrects herself accordingly. This built-in control of error allows her to correct her mistakes with little if any interference from the teacher. In Montessori's words, "We admit that every lesson infringes [on] the child's liberty and for this reason we allow it to last only a few seconds."

So it seems that the emphasis on "teaching," which some people associate with Montessori, is a misguided interpretation. The materials she devised are not the "point" of her work. The point of her work is that learning is natural. Children do it with great eagerness, for they are possessed with what she calls "the intelligence of love."

"Because he is in love with his environment and not indifferent to it, a child's intelligence can see what is invisible to adults," Montessori said. What, then, is the role of the adult in that environment? "The special object of the child's affection is the adult," she adds. "What an adult tells a child remains engraved on his mind as if it had been cut in marble." [6]

If we are to assist our children, we must above all be sensitive to the immense power of their love. Montessori respected that power. She called upon the world to treat children with dignity, and to teach them by learning from them. Why? Because their love is of such magnitude that only the utmost sensitivity is a fitting response. This is the Montessori approach.

Notes

1. Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), p. 99.

- 2. Ibid., p. x.
- 3. Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind* (New York: Dell, 1984), p. 33.
- 4. See Note 1, p. 95.
- 5. Maria Montessori, *Spontaneous Activity in Education* (Cambridge, MA: Robert Bentley, 1964), p. 43.
- 6. See Note 1, pp. 103-104.

For more information on the Montessori method, see the following articles in past issues of *Mothering*: "Montessori Education," no. 23; "Montessori: Children Teaching Themselves," no. 26; and "In Their Own Words: Ashton-Warner, Montessori, Steiner," no. 28.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Dr. Maria Montessori, circa 1950.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): A baby girl

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Photographs by Jill Fineberg

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