

SAMA Parent Guide

*Mutual
respect
is practised*



*The
Montessori
method
develops
intrinsic
motivation*



*A love of
learning is
encouraged*



*A sense of unity,
excitement and joy
should permeate
throughout a well
run Montessori
classroom*



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SAMA
South African Montessori Association

If you are reading this as a parent, then you are probably asking questions about Montessori and searching for some answers regarding whether Montessori education is right for you and your children. You are also likely to be seeking a clearer understanding of what Montessori education is. We hope to give you some guidance and insights from this booklet, as well as answer some of your questions.

Introduction

The word "Montessori" is used to refer to an approach to education developed by Italian doctor and educator Maria Montessori. Although Montessori education is now over one hundred years old, its fundamental principles have endured and are now validated by the findings of developmental neuroscience. This approach helps children to develop the skills necessary for success in an ever-changing world.

Diversity

Many people think that Montessori is a brand or franchise. This is not the case. From its inception, Montessori education began to spread around the world, in each location it was adapted to local needs. Although good Montessori schools share common features and certain essential principles must be present for schools to be truly Montessori, there is no single regulating authority. This means that there are many differences between schools. This is often confusing for parents. This booklet is intended to help you to understand the essential features of Montessori and to help you to choose the right school for your child.

Montessori in South Africa

Montessori education has been in South Africa for a long time. A South African attended the first international training course held in Rome in 1913, and there were Montessori schools in Cape Town in the 1920s. Montessori education blossomed in the 1980s and 1990s. Not all Montessori schools are members of the South African Montessori Association and today we are uncertain of how many schools there are in the country. Our membership has been steadily growing, however, indicating a need to ensure good quality schools and a commitment to professionalism in Montessori education across the age span of birth to 18 years of age.

Principles of Montessori

Based on research

From its start, Montessori education has taken a research-based approach. This means that, rather than drawing from a predetermined philosophy or aim, its principles have emerged from careful observation of children, as well as reflection and analysis of what is known about child development. It draws its methodology from an understanding of human nature informed by scientific research. Certain principles and processes have endured and form the basis of good practice today. All of these principles have been confirmed by recent research to result in excellent academic, socio-emotional and physical outcomes. Please find links at www.samontessori.org.za

Groupings and ages

Unlike conventional schools, which separate children into grades, Montessori classes are multi-age and non-graded. The age divisions relate to child development rather than curricular requirements. Children in Montessori are grouped in the class that will best meet the child's individual needs. The groupings are ages 0 to 3, 3 to 6, 6 to 9, 9 to 12, 12 to 15 and 15 to 18 years.

This ensures that the children are allowed to develop at their individual pace and their potential is not limited. It also supports collaboration, peer learning and shared ideas among the children. As they reach the end of each age cycle they consolidate their understanding by sharing or "teaching" this to the younger child, thus the benefits of completing each cycle of three or six years is important.

Discipline

Montessori classrooms are orderly and prepared as respectful places where children go about their learning calmly, purposefully and with extreme focus and concentration. Discipline is thus achieved through a careful orchestration of providing appropriate activities which draw the child's attention to his own work combined with the direct and deliberate teaching of appropriate behaviour and modelling by the adults in the environments. Children tend to benefit most from this approach when it is supported in the home.



The Montessori “teacher”

Maria Montessori used the term directress or director to describe the role we now commonly call teacher. A directress guides and facilitates learning. The focus is on helping the child develop an interest in learning, and thus the teacher gives individual presentations, which enable the child to work independently. This is achieved through specifically designed educational materials that both inspire curiosity and develop skills and knowledge. The directress only intervenes to redirect a child, or to impart information, when absolutely necessary.

A directress will often sit quietly observing and recording the children’s progress. These observations help her to know exactly what intervention is necessary for each individual child. Her records of observations form the basis of assessment and planning.

Prepared environment

This refers to the whole school, not just the classroom space. It includes the less tangible aspects that affect the child. Maria Montessori maintained that a beautiful environment scaled to size and responsive to the needs of the child, promoted learning. Everything in the environments is clean, orderly and in good condition, ready to be used by the children. When we refer to environments we also refer to the outdoors to ensure that the children are exposed to and work in the natural world as much as possible. You will find a free-flow for the children between indoors and outdoors.

The Montessori didactic materials

A key component at all age levels is the set of specially prepared materials that the children use. In a way, the materials replace the directress as the main source of knowledge for the children. These materials invite the child to manipulate and explore. Because they are designed to highlight specific concepts, the child is able to learn through active participation. This type of learning underpins a theory called constructivism, which essentially holds that knowledge and skills are individually constructed.

Because of these materials, Montessori schools tend to place significantly less emphasis on rote memorisation and much more on problem solving, exploration and deep understanding than is normally the case. Children come to understand abstract

principles of mathematics and science through direct experience. The didactic materials provide the foundation for creativity and abstract thinking at a later stage.

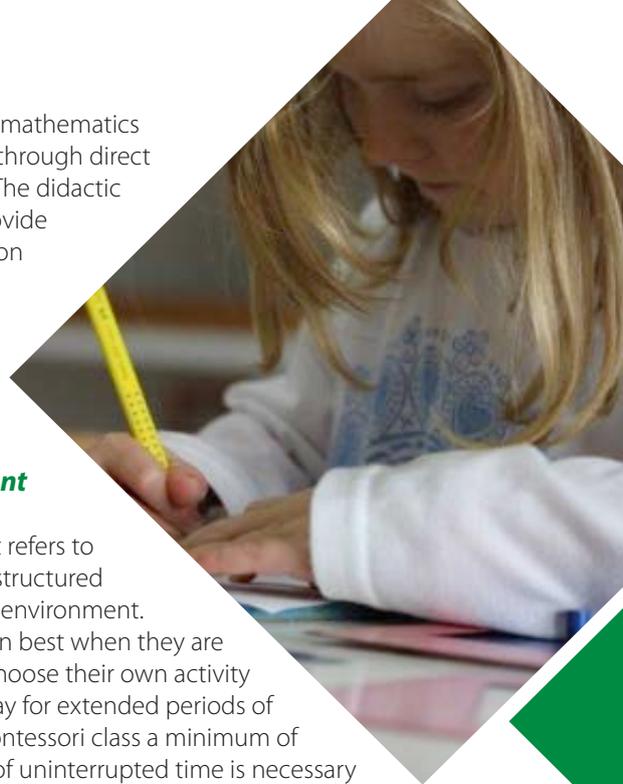
Temporal environment

Temporal environment refers to how time is structured in a learning environment. Children learn best when they are allowed to choose their own activity and work/play for extended periods of time. In a Montessori class a minimum of three hours of uninterrupted time is necessary so that a child may become fully engaged in learning and developing deep concentration. This is called the three-hour work cycle. There are no interruptions for special activities or whole group lessons during this time.

Temporal also refers to the way the curriculum is structured. The Montessori curriculum is structured around developmental periods, allowing the child a full three years in each level to obtain the goals required for that level. This allows children to develop to their maximum potential because they are able to learn concepts when they are ready to receive them.

Emotional environment

The days follow a predictable rhythm that accords with the natural needs of the children. The pace is unhurried and the ethos is respectful of individual needs. Montessori promotes peaceful resolution of disagreements and avoids the use of authoritarian methods based on fear and punishment. Our children are encouraged to be confident and assertive, yet polite and considerate. Maria Montessori regarded the happiness of children to be the best measure of the success of an educational system.



The Montessori Curriculum

Through a global, integrated and developmentally appropriate curriculum, which is adapted to reflect the culture of the children's community, the children engage in prepared activities that develop and support them in a holistic way, as opposed to broken up units of information. The focus is on learning not on teaching.

Maria Montessori outlined four successive planes of development from birth to adulthood, spanning approximately six years each. Each plane is characterised by the way children in that plane learn, building on the achievements of the plane before and preparing for the following one.

For infants and toddlers, the focus is on supporting the physical and socio-emotional development of the child, as well as providing the foundations that will support later learning in language and other subject areas. These foundations are provided in a way that is appropriate to natural development and not through direct teaching or more academic style lessons. The Montessori infant and toddler programmes provide activities that would happen in any home where a child is cared for by an informed and concerned adult.

Daily routines are emphasised, giving the child the opportunity to become involved in caring for the environment, helping to prepare meals and cleaning up afterwards, learning to care for his or her own personal needs (toileting, dressing, eating), and developing concepts and vocabulary that will become the basis of all future learning. Recent research into early development has highlighted the importance of vocabulary development for later reading and writing skills. Movement and music facilitate both the gross and fine motor development essential for later learning, as well as promote brain development in those areas that deal with mathematical thinking.

In the preschool, the learning environment provides five main areas, both indoors and outdoors, where children can move freely and responsibly in spontaneous activity. These areas are: practical life (real-life activities that help the child develop skills that lead him to independence in everyday life); sensorial (where children explore and discover dimensions, shape, colour, smell, taste, temperature, weight and sound through specially prepared materials); mathematics, language and cultural studies (botany, zoology, geography, history and science); alongside art, music and drama. The curriculum is placed throughout the classroom in the form of materials and activities. The

Montessori hands-on materials allow the children to explore and discover various concepts, give real experiences, and encourage open-ended exploration.

In the primary learning environments (6 to 12 years), the curriculum is developed to build on what children have already learned in the preschool. Maria Montessori's vision for this age group is what she called Cosmic Education. These are called the "Five Great Lessons" and impart impressionistic images to give the children a cosmic perspective of Earth and humanity's place within the cosmos, and to open up lines of inquiry within each child. They cover the five key areas of interconnected studies. Subjects are not separated into different learning areas of science, maths, language, geography and history, but rather are woven into and out of each other. Literature, art, music, dance, drama, history, social issues, political science, economics, architecture, science, and the study of technology all complement one another in the elementary curriculum. This integrated approach is one of the great strengths of the elementary Montessori programme.

The Montessori adolescent or middle school programme (12 to 15 years) focuses on creating a space where the children can engage in occupations or services through practical experiences in community and social interactions. Montessori advocated a boarding school to support this age. The adolescent can make great cognitive leaps while integrating ideas and values in conjunction with current events, home life, or community activities.

Montessori did not write or leave a detailed outline for the child of 15 years to 18 years. However, Montessori schools have adapted their programmes by weaving Montessori philosophy into them and ensuring each child is fully prepared for his or her entry into the adult world. This period of Montessori education is still very young in South Africa. There is a smattering of schools offering a matric through either the IEB or Cambridge programmes.

Throughout the differing age groups there is a theme of education as a whole approach using a set of universal principles in guiding our young children towards becoming competent, independent, caring, social and responsible South African or world citizens.

There are many websites with visual aids that you may find resourceful for further understanding of Montessori schooling for your child.

Try:

www.samontessori.org.za

www.montessoriguide.org

www.montessorimadness.com

www.montessori.org.nz/choosing-montessori

