

# Answers to Some Frequently Asked Questions About Montessori

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## Is Montessori for every child?

The short answer is yes - there is no child who would not benefit from a Montessori education. First of all, every child wants to learn but each is unique in areas of interest and rate of learning. Montessori addresses this uniqueness because it is an individual program tailored to the strengths and challenges of each student. One child may spend two days learning multiplication while another may require two weeks or even two months. A trained scientist, Maria Montessori spent a lot of time observing exactly how and why children learn. She understood that all children, whether they have strengths or challenges in particular areas of learning, need their own time to master it. They don't need to be constantly worried about being "ahead" or "behind" anyone else. Every Montessori school is the living legacy of this educational breakthrough. Montessori works for every child no matter who they are or where they came from.

## Why doesn't Montessori grade students?

Grades (letters or percentages) focus strictly on results and are only a measure of what a student knows at that particular moment in time. Grades become the end itself. What is worse, they can distract the child from the natural enjoyment of learning and developing true enthusiasm for a subject that can last a lifetime, not just until the end of the test. Instead of grades, Montessori provides informative and descriptive reports on what your child's focus of interest has been and how he or she is progressing. Montessori children repeat activities or correct mistakes until they gain competency. When students make the transition to other schools that do testing, they usually test well and perform a grade level or two above their peers.

## Why does Montessori have mixed-age groups in each class (i.e., three-year age groups: 3-6, 6-9, 9-12, and so on)?

Maria Montessori discovered that putting older and younger children together helps them learn from and teach each other. This is good for the older children because they can be useful and helpful to the younger ones, which not only reinforces what they have learned but enhances their self-esteem as well. The younger children in turn have role models to follow and are integrated into the classroom by these helpful other children. If you think about it, every normal community has a mixed grouping of ages.

## What does polishing a mirror and washing a table have to do with education?

One unique aspect of a Montessori classroom is the Practical Life area. Through repetitive, hands-on and very purposeful activities, the child learns to do things for herself. At the same time, indirect learning beyond polishing a mirror, using a tweezers, folding laundry or opening and closing bottles is occurring. The children learn concentration, coordination, manual dexterity, order and independence. Far from being trivial, these skills form the necessary foundation for all future learning as they stir important areas of the brain. In addition, children are interested in learning real things in the real world, which accounts for the tremendous popularity of these exercises. As Maria Montessori once said: "Children don't play, they work."

## What makes a Montessori teacher different?

In the simplest terms, a Montessori Director teaches individually. Picture a traditional classroom: the teacher stands at the front of a classroom in which the students are all sitting in rigid rows of desks, all receiving the same lesson at the same time. This is the factory approach that is convenient for school systems, but not conducive for learning. In the traditional school environment, the child is treated as an empty vessel, with information poured in at the same rate to all children until the bell rings.

In a Montessori classroom your child is taught individually or in small groups. This allows the teacher to get immediate feedback and to be sensitive to how well the child is absorbing the lesson and what questions or needs the child has. Simply put, there is nothing that works so well in education as individual attention. This focus on your child's needs is heightened by the fact that each Montessori teacher has been trained in the science of observing children. They spend time every day observing the class: how it is functioning as a whole and how the children are progressing with their work. They have also been trained on how to teach using the Montessori materials, all of which have been scientifically designed to enhance the learning experiences. In fact, the word "teacher" is not always used in a Montessori classroom. A teacher is someone who knows something and gives it to you. A Montessori teacher is often called a Director or a Guide, because what they do is direct the child toward what he needs to teach himself. The child does this by using the specially designed materials. The Montessori Director has been trained to observe your child and to determine his or her level of development, and what guidance the child needs to progress to the next level.

If my child has a Montessori education, can he go into another kind of education program that is not Montessori based?

Because Montessori does such an excellent job at creating a love for learning, as well as the ability to focus, concentrate, cooperate with others and work independently, Montessori children thrive in any school, work or social situation.

Can my child stay in a Montessori school until post secondary, or should she transfer to a traditional school at some point?

One of the most enduring misconceptions about Montessori is that it is only for young children. In fact, research has shown that Montessori students consistently outperform those from traditional schools in social, moral, cognitive and emotional levels throughout their entire school life. A recent study, *A Comparison of Montessori and Traditional Middle Schools: Motivation, Quality of Experience, and Social Context*, by Kevin Rathunde, had this to say about older Montessori students:

"Results [of the study] showed that Montessori students reported a singularly better quality of experience in academic work than the traditional students. There were strong differences suggesting that Montessori students were feeling more active, strong, excited, happy, relaxed, sociable and proud while engaged in academic work. They were also enjoying themselves more, were more interested in what they were doing, and wanted to be doing academic work more than the traditional students."

The study concluded that the primary experience of the traditional students was what famed educator John Dewey called "drudgery" while the Montessori students were more intrinsically motivated. In other words, they want to do academic work, so they don't have to be driven to it by threats or rewards (extrinsic motivation).

Many successful people who were educated in the Montessori system will tell you that Montessori is based on the concept that an individual must tap into the inner motivation of a child in order to be truly successful. Montessori utilizes and nurtures the natural desire in all children to learn and reach their full potential, providing the foundation for future growth. Montessori graduates range from the founders of Google, Amazon.com, the youngest Rhodes scholar, to the youngest artist to ever exhibit at the United Nations. There are hundreds of thousands of Montessori graduates whom you may have never heard or read about, who are successfully well-adjusted and meeting the goals they have set for themselves.

Montessori's understanding of how and why children learn allows the classroom to create an excellent foundation for a young child that opens educational doors instead of closing them. For the very same reasons that Montessori benefits younger children, older students continue to benefit from a Montessori education. Montessori, like life itself recognizes the need for change at every level of life and adapts to the student's changing needs and challenges.

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