



FAQ

Isn't Montessori elitist?

Montessori is an educational philosophy and approach that can be found in all sorts of settings, from the most humble to large, well equipped campuses. In general, Montessori schools consciously strive to create and maintain a diverse student body, welcoming families of every ethnic background and religion, and using scholarships and financial aid to keep their school accessible to deserving families. Montessori is also found in the public sector as magnet public-school programs, Headstart centers, and as charter schools.

Is Montessori opposed to competition?

No. Dr. Montessori simply observed that competition is an ineffective tool to motivate children to learn and work hard in school.

Traditionally schools challenge students to compete with each other for grades, class rankings, and special awards. For example, tests are graded on a curve developed from the performance of the students in that class. Students are constantly measured against their classmates, rather than considered for their individual progress.

In Montessori schools, students learn to collaborate with each other rather than mindlessly compete. Students discover their own innate abilities and develop a strong sense of independence, self-confidence, and self-discipline. In an atmosphere in which children learn at their own pace and compete only against themselves, they learn not to be afraid of making mistakes. They quickly find that few things in life come easily, and they can try again without fear of embarrassment.

Dr. Montessori argued that for an education to profoundly touch children's hearts and minds, they must learn because they are curious and interested, not simply to earn the highest grade in the class. Montessori children compete with each other every day, both in class and on the playground. Dr. Montessori, herself an extraordinary student and a very high achiever, was never opposed to competition in principle. Her objection was to using competition to create an artificial motivation to get students to achieve. Montessori schools allow competition to evolve naturally among children, without adult interference unless the children begin to show poor sportsmanship. The key is the children's voluntary decision to compete, rather than having it imposed on them by the school.

Is it true that Montessori children never play?

All children play. They explore new things playfully. They watch something of interest with a fresh, open mind. They enjoy the company of treasured adults and other children. They make up stories. They dream. They imagine. This impression stems from parents who don't know what to make of the incredible concentration, order, and self-discipline that we commonly see among Montessori children. Montessori students also tend to take the things they do in school seriously. It is common for them to respond that "this is my work," when adults ask what they are playing with. They work hard and expect their parents to treat them and their work with respect. But it is joyful, playful, and anything but drudgery.

Is Montessori opposed to fantasy and creativity?

You will not generally find play kitchens, dress-up corners, or dolls in a Montessori class for children under age six, because children are using real tools and doing real things, instead of pretending. However, fantasy and creativity are important aspects of a Montessori child's experience.

Montessori classrooms incorporate art, music, dance, and creative drama throughout the curriculum. Imagination plays a central role as children explore how the natural world works, visualize other cultures and ancient civilizations, and search for creative solutions to real-life problems.

In Montessori schools, the arts are normally integrated into the rest of the curriculum. They are modes of exploring and expanding lessons that have been introduced in science, history, geography, language arts, and mathematics.

Art and music history and appreciation are woven throughout the history and geography curricula. Traditional folk arts are used to extend the curriculum as well. Students participate in music, dance, and creative movement with teachers and specialists. Students' dramatic productions make other times and cultures come alive.

What if a child doesn't feel like working?

While Montessori students are allowed considerable latitude to pursue topics that interest them, this freedom is not absolute. Within every society, there are cultural norms; expectations for what a student should know and be able to do by a certain age. Experienced Montessori teachers are conscious of these standards and provide as much structure and support as is necessary to ensure that students live up to them. If for some reason, it appears that a child simply needs time and support until he or she is developmentally ready to catch up, Montessori teachers provide it non-judgmentally.

Is Montessori opposed to homework, tests, and grades?

Many parents have heard that Montessori schools do not believe in homework, grades, and tests. This is really a misunderstanding of Montessori's insights.

Homework

Most Montessori schools do not assign homework at all below the elementary level. When it is assigned to older children, it rarely involves page after page of busywork; instead, it involves meaningful, interesting assignments that expand on the topics that the children are pursuing in class. Many assignments invite parents and children to work together.

Homework should never become a battleground between adult and child. One of our goals as parents and teachers should be to help the children learn how to get organized, budget time, and follow through until the work is completed. Ideally, home challenges will give parents and children a pleasant opportunity to work together on projects that give both parent and child a sense of accomplishment. They are intended to enrich and extend the curriculum.

Homework doesn't need to be boring! Montessori challenges children to think, explore, and pursue tangible projects that give them a sense of satisfaction. Homework is intended to afford students the opportunity to practice and reinforce skills introduced in the classroom.

Moreover, there is a certain degree of self-discipline that can be developed within the growing child through the process of completing assignments independently.

Many elementary Montessori classes send home packets of *At-Home Challenges* for each age group in the class. The children have an entire week to complete them. When the week is over, teachers will normally sit down with the children to review what worked, what they enjoyed, and what they found difficult or unappealing.

Depending on the child's level, as-

signments usually involve some reading, research, writing, and something tangible to accomplish. They may be organized into three groups: 1) **Things to be experienced**, such as reading a book, visiting the museum, or going to see a play; 2) **Things to learn**, stated in terms of skills and knowledge, such as *See if you can learn how to solve these problems well enough that you can teach the skill to a younger student*; and 3) **Things to be submitted**, such as a play, essay, story, experiment, or model.

When possible, teachers will build in opportunities for children to choose among several alternative assignments. Sometimes, teachers will prepare individually negotiated weekly assignments with each student.

Tests

Montessori children usually don't think of our assessment techniques as tests so much as challenges. Early childhood Montessori teachers observe their children at work or ask them to teach a lesson to another child to confirm their knowledge and skill.

Most elementary Montessori teachers will give their students informal, individual oral exams or have the children demonstrate what they have learned by either teaching a lesson to another child or by giving a formal presentation. The children also take and prepare their own written tests to administer to their friends. Students are working toward mastery, rather than being graded using a standard letter grade scheme.

Standardized Tests

Very few Montessori schools test children younger than the first or second grade; however, most regularly give elementary students quizzes on the concepts and skills that they have been studying. Many schools ask their older students to take annual standardized tests.

While Montessori students tend to score very well, Montessori educators frequently argue that standardized testing is inaccurate, misleading, and stressful for children. The ultimate problem with standardized tests in our country is that they have often been misused, mis-

stood, and misinterpreted in other schools. Tests can be fairly useful when seen as a simple feedback loop, giving both parents and school a general sense of how students are progressing.

Although standardized tests may not offer a terribly accurate measure of a child's basic skills and knowledge, in our culture, test-taking skills are just another practical life lesson that children need to master.

Reporting Student Progress

Because Montessori believes in individually paced academic progress, and encourages children to explore their interests rather than simply complete work assigned by their teachers, we don't assign grades or rank students within each class according to their achievement.

At the elementary level, students will often prepare a monthly self-evaluation of the previous month's school work. When completed, they will meet with the teachers, who will review it and add their comments and observations.

In many Montessori schools, children compile a collection of their work that is pulled together in a portfolio of the year's work.

Most schools schedule family conferences two or three times a year to review their children's portfolios and self-evaluations and go through the teachers' assessment of their children's progress.

Typically, once or twice a year, Montessori teachers will prepare a written narrative evaluation of the students' work, social development, and mastery of fundamental skills.

What about children with special needs?

Every child has areas of special gifts, a unique learning style, and some areas that can be considered challenges. Each child is unique. Montessori is designed to allow for differences. It allows students to learn at their own pace, and is quite flexible in adapting for different learning styles. In many cases, children with mild physical handicaps or learning disabilities may do very well in a Montessori classroom setting. On the other hand, some children do much better in smaller, more structured classrooms. Each situation has to be carefully evalu-

ated individually to ensure that the program can successfully meet a given child's needs and learning style.

Is Montessori right for my child?

Most Montessori educators would agree that Montessori is a good fit for most children — but it may not be the right match for their parents.

Everything depends on what your family believes to be true about your children and important in their education.

Do you believe that children should be treated with dignity and respect and be encouraged to be independent, self-confident, and self-disciplined?

Do you believe that the best way to discipline is by being consistent, modeling the correct behavior, and by consciously teaching children how to do things correctly?

Do you believe that education should be enchanting, intriguing, and delightful, rather than traditionally structured and highly competitive?

If so, Montessori may be right for you.

But aren't there some children who just won't do well in Montessori?

The answer is both *yes* and *no*. Montessori schools are often successful with children, who would challenge any school, including the highly distractible and impulsive ones, for whom parents typically have the most concern. The reason why should be obvious: Montessori is designed to be flexible, adapting the program to meet the needs of each given child. It also allows children to move about, socialize independently (rather than work as part of a group), and progress at their own pace.

This doesn't mean, though, that every class and every Montessori teacher can meet the needs of every child. This is especially true if a child is violent, destructive, or excessively disturbing of the peace and order of the classroom. Each decision has to be made on a case-by-case basis.

Why is there so much variation among Montessori schools?

Many people assume that all Montessori schools are essentially the same. In reality, Montessori schools can differ dramatically, in size, facilities, programs, and emotional climate. They share a common philosophy and basic approach, but there may be tremendous variation among schools that use the name *Montessori*. There are more than four thousand Montessori schools in North America, but every one is unique. Even within the same school, each class may look and feel quite different from the others, reflecting the interests and personalities of the teachers; however, certain characteristics will be found in all classes that are honestly following the Montessori approach.

Dr. Montessori was a brilliant student of child development, and the approach that has evolved out of her research has stood the test for more than ninety years in Montessori schools around the world. **The Montessori approach has three great qualities: the model is replicable, it can be adapted successfully into all sorts of new situations, and it is sustainable.** (Montessori programs don't tend to self-destruct after a few years, as do many other educational reforms.) However, the only 'pure' Montessori educator was Dr. Maria Montessori herself. The rest of us interpret and filter her ideas through our personalities and experience. 🌱

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