

Montessori – what does it mean?

Joanna Godbolt, Principal of Casa dei Bambini and a trained Montessori teacher for over 25 years, talks through what it means to give your child a Montessori education and how it may differ from a traditional education.

Montessori has been around for over a hundred years. Created by Dr. Maria Montessori, it is a method of education which focuses on the child as an individual, rather than simply one of the class. Dr Maria Montessori, physician, anthropologist and pedagogue, studied children of all racial, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds for over fifty years. Her intense scientific observation of the human being from birth to maturity allowed her to distill a body of philosophical, psychological and pedagogical principles. These, together with a vast range of auto-didactic materials, came to be known as the Montessori Method of Education.

Montessori education is based on the premise that children have an innate ability to learn and that when supported by an appropriate environment and educator, they are guided through their developmental needs to reach their full potential, at their own pace.

Traditional versus Montessori

In traditional education adults decide what children need to learn and the ability to retain and reproduce information is used as a measure of academic success. The teacher is the active giver of information.

In the Montessori approach it is all about the activity of the child.

The teacher takes on a different role, that is, to provide the right kind of circumstances so that children can be guided to find what they need from what is on offer. Children then become active learners and are able to reach their own unique potential because they are learning at their own pace and rhythm focusing on their own particular developmental needs at that moment.

The classroom

A Montessori classroom exists for the development of the child at his/her own pace; it is child-centered learning at its best.

Walk into a Montessori classroom, and you will see a beautiful and enticing space. Great care has been taken to create a learning environment that will reinforce the child's independence and natural urge towards self-development. This is achieved in three ways: beauty, order and accessibility.

A typical Montessori classroom consists of mixed age children, so you will find three- to six-year-olds working together or a classroom of seven- to nine-year-olds. The children remain in the same class with the same teacher for a three year period. The Montessori classroom is not merely a place for individual learning. It is a vibrant community of children, where the child

learns to interact socially in a variety of ways. The three-year age range enables older children to teach the younger and learn much themselves from the experience, while the younger children are inspired to more advanced work through observing the older ones. With such a variety of levels in the classroom, each child can work at his or her own pace, unhindered by competition and encouraged by co-operation.

Materials

The Montessori materials are beautifully handcrafted and are displayed on low open shelves. Each piece of material has a specific purpose and is presented to the children in a manner that will enable them to direct their own learning.

The Montessori materials are tools designed to stimulate the child into logical thought and discovery. They are provocative, enticing and simple. Each piece of material presents one concept or idea at a time and has what is known as a "control of error". If the child has done something incorrectly it will be self-evident. The geometric shape, for example, won't fit the hole; pouring too much water will result in a spill on the table or when pairing up labels, the last label will not match the last picture. Being able to see his or her own mistake allows the child to work



independently, make his or her own correction and avoid being told they are wrong by the teacher, which can trigger negative feelings in a child.

The initial Montessori materials are ones developed by Edouard Seguin for working with special needs children, and were adapted by Montessori in the early 1900s. You will often find the identifiable Pink Tower in a Montessori classroom. The Pink Tower, for example, is not merely a tower of blocks of increasing size, but instead is a carefully calculated instrument to educate the



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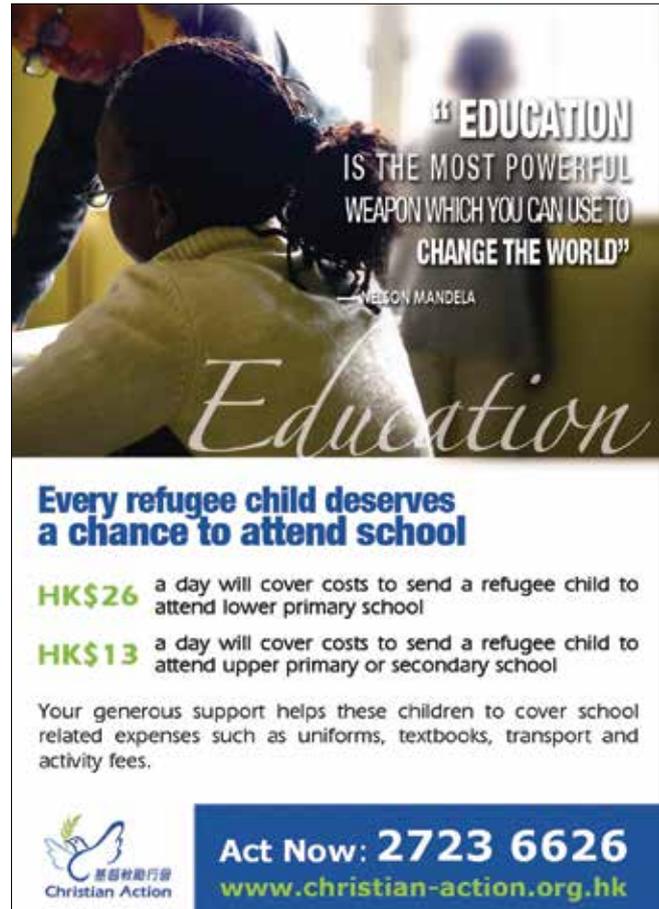
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senses and the motor system, and to implicitly introduce the decimal system and the notion of cubing. Each block is one centimetre longer on all sides than the one that came before, and there are ten such blocks going from one cubic centimetre to ten. The increasing size is reflected not only visually but also haptically and baricly: each block is heavier by an exponentially increasing magnitude. The child uses the Pink Tower in a specific way: carrying each cube to a rug, and then reassembling the tower from memory, from the largest to the smallest cube, carefully centring each subsequent cube on top of the preceding one. The material is treated with great care; the teacher is to intervene when materials are handled roughly. When finished, the tower is admired then carefully dissembled and returned to its original location.

Montessori teaching

Montessori teachers typically have a standard teacher qualification as well as an additional Montessori specific training. The teacher is a guide or facilitator whose task it is to support the young child in his or her process of self-development. They are foremost

an observer, unobtrusively yet carefully monitoring each child's development, recognising and interpreting each child's needs.

The teacher provides a link between the child and the prepared environment, introducing the child to each piece of equipment when he or she is ready in a precise, clear and enticing way. The most important attribute of a Montessori teacher is the love and respect she holds for each child's total being.

Formative years

The formation of children's fundamental capacities is hugely important during the first years of life – not just academic learning but the ability to concentrate, persevere and think for themselves as well as the ability to interact well with others. Children who have been given the right kind of support during these formative years grow into adults who are self-motivated, love learning, can think flexibly and creatively.

The Montessori approach provides:

- An environment that serves the particular needs of each child's stage of development

- An adult who understands child development and acts as a guide to help children find their own natural path
- Freedom for children to engage in their own development according to their own particular developmental timeline

Montessori sustains children's love of learning. There is an inner drive in every one of us, an inner voice that, if we listen to it, tells us which way to turn, which option to choose. If we allow children to listen to this voice, to follow their interests from birth, they are likely to learn a lot about themselves and their world as they grow. They will learn what they like and what they don't like. They will come to know what they are good at, and how they are challenged. The focus that comes from doing what interests them will allow them to learn many things and become confident learners. When learning is not overly prescribed, children love learning! Learning is a happy experience. If one is able to harness a child's innate delight in discovery, to make use of a child's self-motivation, there is no reason why this enthusiasm for school should fade. 📖

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 Character formation cannot be taught. It comes from experience and not from explanation.
 - Maria Montessori

