

Maria Montessori:

A Sensory Approach to Learning



When she was only 10 years old, a seriously ill Maria Montessori told her mother, "Do not worry Mother, I cannot die; I have too much to do." With such a strong will, it's not surprising that Montessori's achievements were so extraordinary. She began by becoming the first female doctor in Italy, but today she is known worldwide for her work with young children.

Montessori turned her attention to education for the first time while working with mentally disabled children as a doctor at the Psychiatric Clinic of the University of Rome. Although the children had been dismissed by both teachers and doctors as unteachable, Montessori viewed their disabilities as a failure of teaching methodology rather than a medical problem. She established a special form of education for these children using the principle, "First, the education of the senses, then, the education of the intellect."

The nation was shocked when her students learned to read and write and passed the same examinations given to "normal" children of the same age!

Her successful work with these children inspired her to undertake a new project in education: to understand how best to educate children in ordinary classrooms. During Montessori's time, classrooms were crowded and teachers used rigid drill methods for teaching young children. Montessori insisted that teaching involved great devotion and an understanding of how young children learn.

Surprisingly, Montessori's famous first class, the "Children's House," was actually a child care center in an apartment in a poor neighborhood. Montessori refused to impose arbitrary tasks on the children. Instead she showed them ways to develop their own skills at their own pace, a principle she called "spontaneous self-development." Her classroom had low cubbies where children could take out and put away their own supplies, child-size furniture, a garden and pets for them to care for, and assorted objects to encourage children to teach themselves.

Montessori made a breakthrough in the education of children when she realized that the way to teach a skill is not to have a child try something over and over but to prepare the child to learn skills by teaching the movements and actions necessary to perform them. For example, to teach her students how to write, she cut up large sandpaper letters and had children trace them with their fingers, and later with pencil or chalk. Soon, her 4-year-old students were able to write letters—and then words—on their own! The Montessori classroom was the first of its kind, with its emphases on cultivating a warm and comfortable environment and on independent and active learning.

Today, schools worldwide have discovered the wisdom of Montessori's methods, grounded in her own belief that — early childhood education is the key to the betterment of society."

