



What is Montessori?

By Kimberley Tolley

As a parent of two primary students at Damariscotta Montessori School, I'm often asked by curious neighbors and family members, "What exactly is Montessori, anyway?" I've come to discover that there are quite a few myths and misunderstandings circulating out there about Montessori education.

Montessori is not a cult nor is it a religious school. Many believe that the children in the classroom are unsupervised and they can just "do whatever they want." This couldn't be further from the truth. While the Montessori experience is definitely a departure from what people consider to be traditional education methods, it is one that has stood the test of time and the parents of Montessori educated children couldn't be more pleased with the results.

Here's a bit of background on the Montessori philosophy:

Montessori Education was founded in 1907 by Maria Montessori, Italy's first female doctor of medicine and a woman who was truly ahead of her time in so many areas. She based her educational philosophy on the scientific observation of children's learning processes and developed an educational methodology that was centered on the child, not on the classroom curriculum.

Montessori discovered that children have an extraordinary ability to "absorb knowledge" and that the peak time for their "absorbent mind" is from birth to age six. Guided by her observation that children take real pleasure in learning and that independence, self reliance, and the ability to do for one's self is an essential part to learning, Montessori designed a "prepared environment" where the children could freely choose from a number of developmentally appropriate activities.

The classrooms in a Montessori environment are multi-aged, allowing for peer interaction and

learning, and they operate without traditional grades, rewards, and/or punishments. Respect, personal dignity, and social graces are prevalent and reinforced as important qualities for a young child to develop. Each child is allowed to progress at his or her own rate, making it a truly child centered educational experience, not a teacher directed one.

Every child benefits from being exposed to a Montessori environment and that includes those who are gifted and those who are challenged, making it very unique to today's "modern" teaching methods. Maria Montessori believed that school should be a place where the child is able to develop his or her full potential as a student and as an individual contributing to society.

Montessori education emphasizes learning through all five senses, and experiencing the lessons hands on using manipulative learning tools. The materials specifically in the primary (preschool, ages 3 to 6) Montessori classroom are beautiful, intrinsically interesting, self-correcting, and reality-based. They are composed around five distinct areas of learning: Practical Life, Sensorial, Language Arts, Cultural, and Personal/Social Development.

Each of these areas contribute to a well rounded educational experience that not only brings out the best in each child but teaches important life skills such as decision making, conflict resolution, and self-discipline that will reap benefits through the rest of his/her academic and personal life experiences.

If you'd like to tour a Montessori classroom or are interested in finding out more about Montessori education for your child, please contact the Damariscotta Montessori School at 563-2168 or visit www.damariscottamontessori.org.

(Kimberley Tolley of Waldoboro is a Montessori parent and certified Montessori preschool teacher.)