



# Spotlight on Maria Montessori

Maria Montessori believed that "... all children are endowed with (the) capacity to absorb culture" and, if exposed to things, can learn without feeling like they are being taught. She said that the teacher's role is not to "teach," but to prepare and arrange a series of learning opportunities that each child can move through instinctively. She saw that in this way and through exposure to cultural activities, children learn happily and spontaneously, with creativity and without tiring. Her observations started with reading and the then-astonishing finding that many children, with proper access to resources, can easily learn to read at age four and then expand their learning to a vast array of other areas, from botany to mathematics.

Maria Montessori was born in 1870 in the Italian province of Alcona. While her family was educated, they were not wealthy. She defied her father and conservative Italian society by studying science and becoming the first female physician in Italy. She worked mostly with the poor, and in poor children Montessori saw vast potential. She understood that intelligence is actually common, but is uncommonly tapped.

Montessori was appointed director of a branch of the University of Rome that was an asylum for "deficient and insane" children. Under her leadership, children with intellectual disabilities, who had previously been confined to their rooms and deprived of attention and stimulation, were brought out into the daylight, so to speak. She instructed the asylum staff to speak to the children with respect. The children were provided with purposeful activities, including self-care and educational pursuits.

Montessori drew upon the studies of the "Wild Boy of Aveyron," who was found in a forest in the 1800s and had been without human interaction for about 10 years. Physician Jean Itard had studied him at length, considering him raw material and prime for studies about the relative importance of "nature versus nurture." When the "wild boy" failed to learn to speak or perform other basic functions, Itard speculated that in the course of human development, there are periods when growth and learning potential is prime, and that the "wild boy" had missed the prime window of opportunity for learning speech. Itard also believed that it was essential to carefully observe the educational process to determine the best times for presenting learning opportunities. Montessori agreed with Itard's concepts, and they became the backbone of her methods.

Through careful observation of the mentally challenged children in the Rome asylum, Montessori was able to determine what worked best with each child and when. It was easy to see that developmental stages were different for each child, and that optimum learning occurred when the child was ready. Montessori observed that the teacher had to be ready, too, always watching for signs that it was time to present more learning material. In the course of two years, many of Montessori's "deficient" students were able to pass standard tests for Italian school children. Montessori was lauded for this achievement.

Montessori went on to suggest that public schools should be able to get far better results with her methods than with their traditional ones, but the government in Italy didn't allow her to implement her methods in the public schools. Montessori's response was to found a "Children's House" and work with very poor children who were too young to attend public school. The lives of those children exemplified the worst that poverty can do to people. At first, even Montessori doubted that her methods would work. Nonetheless, the successes these children achieved were even greater than those of the mentally challenged children in the asylum. The children of poverty did not need to be prompted to participate as the children of the asylum did; they were eager to learn and begged for more. They were fascinated by numbers and were adding four and five-digit numbers at the ages of four and five. Their enthusiasm was so great that Montessori spent many nights awake into the wee hours making new learning tools for them. Her style of math blocks and tiles are still in use, in fact.

During her time at the "Children's House" she founded, Montessori stopped working as a physician and focused exclusively on advocating for children's educational opportunities. She observed that if children have an orderly place to work and learn, they take great pride in that place and care well for the learning tools. In such a setting, children are able to sit quietly and learn for long periods of time - far longer than in normal, everyday settings. Montessori had carpenters build the first-ever child-sized school chairs and desks to make them more comfortable for learning. She also created seating areas on the floor with rugs and pillows, and standing learning stations, as well.

Montessori went on to introduce her methods in many countries, including Africa, Sri Lanka, India, various parts of Europe, and the United States. Notable figures such as Anna Freud, Jean Piaget, Alfred Adler, and Erik Erikson all studied under Montessori and went on to make their own contributions to the understanding of education. In addition to her work in early childhood education, Montessori was known as an altruistic person and championed women's rights and child labor law reforms. She was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize three times, in 1949, 1950 and 1951. She died in Nordwijk, Holland in 1952, but her work lives on.

