

Myths about Montessori teaching

Myth # 1:

Claims that Montessori education is more effective than traditional methods of education are exaggerated and based on opinion, not science.

Over 100 years of Montessori practice, there have been many objective analyses of the method's effectiveness. One of the latest, published in the journal *Science* (September 29, 2006), compared outcomes of children at a public inner-city Montessori school with children who attended traditional schools. The study indicates that Montessori education leads to children with better social and academic skills.

Lillard, A. and Else-Quest, N.(2006). Evaluating Montessori Education, *Science* (313:5795) 1893-1894. Available at the following website: <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/313/5795/1893.full.pdf>

Myth #2:

Montessori classrooms are chaotic; the children are allowed to do whatever they want.

Although this may appear true to the untrained eye, (especially in September!) anyone who observes in a quality Montessori classroom for several hours during the morning work time will see something very different than chaos. Children's unrestricted movement can be jarring to the adult! The Montessori system at its best is all about allowing children the opportunity to do things for themselves. We encourage self-discipline even in the very young child, and always aim for a minimum of interference from the adults in the environment.

The "teacher" is really more of a "guide" – he enables the child to educate himself using the materials that have been designed for that purpose. Children are not moved about the classroom in groups and asked to all do the same activity at the same time. Rather, a wide range of self-correcting (auto-didactic) materials are made available to the child.

After the initial demonstration of a material by an experienced adult or an older child, the child in a Montessori classroom is free to choose whatever activity is interesting to him. The student is left alone to experiment and practice with the material, teaching himself and developing concentration, coordination, and independence in an orderly world that does not require the interference of any authority. A classroom should be like a hive of bees, busily humming with self-directed activity.

Discipline and Freedom are the principles applied to "classroom management"; Montessorians believe that the normal state of any child is to be relaxed, peaceful and absorbed in activity. Self-discipline emerges from freedom of choice. In the normalized classroom, (leave September to us: come back in April!) disputes between children are almost always settled by the children themselves. They absorb conflict management skills from the teachers, who are trained to be deeply respectful of themselves, others and the world around them. The role of the adult (teacher) in the classroom is observer of activity and facilitator of self-discipline as opposed to director of activity and enforcer of rules. Trust me. It works!

Myth #3:

There's little, if any, opportunity for the young child to develop creatively in the Montessori environment. Fantasy play and creative endeavor are frowned upon and discouraged.

Let's deconstruct this a little, shall we? First of all, what do we mean modern American culture by "creativity"? All too often in early childhood education, coloring book pages and teacher-imposed, parent-pleasing "crafts" are regarded as creative activity. But let's face it: there's not much true creativity involved in following directions to make a Thanksgiving table placeholder card with a picture of a turkey on it. More likely, creativity is fostered by finding a new way to express oneself.

In my view, creativity is encouraged in our children when they are provided with constructive materials and a safe place; and then allowed free reign. Any place that claims to engage young children's creativity and that doesn't allow them free access to pencils, pencil sharpeners, markers, crayons, chalk, paint, scissors, glue and a stapler (minimum) – along with cardboard, paper, chalkboards, easels, etc. – well, they're just plain fooling themselves. Children in a Montessori classroom are taught to be truly creative by being allowed freedom of access to a wide variety of materials and then not inhibited by adults trying to "teach" them the "right" way to use those materials. (Okay, here it comes: of course we demonstrate safe usage of the scissors and etc.! Remember I said we provide a "safe place"?)

If Junior wants to use a magnifying glass along with sunlight to melt the crayons into a blob of wax, and use the softened wax to bind together 5 or 6 reclaimed paper towel tubes into a periscope – well, as long as there are enough crayons left over for other children to use in the conventional way, that's okay with me. If another child prefers to paint a genteel still life after the style of Renoir in the Artist of the Month corner, so be it. Let us not impose thick black lines and cartoon characters upon these budding artists!! Let us refrain from instilling in them the idea that a "real craft" is something that can only be accomplished with the help of the teacher! In the authentic Montessori classroom, if the teacher has to help, it's not a true Montessori activity.

Problem-solving. Isn't that really the seed out of which creativity grows?

Now, on to the Fantasy/Free Play issue. New observers in the Montessori classroom often feel that we're too strict about the usage, for example, of the sensorial materials – especially the ones that look like building blocks. It's true that Montessori teachers don't allow the children to simply build with the sensorial materials. We'd like for them to have the chance to form muscle memory of the mathematical concepts that these materials so deftly demonstrate, and there are specific manners of use that we teach in order to emphasize those concepts.

However, once a child has mastered the usage of such things as the Knobbed & Knobless Cylinders, Pink Tower/Brown Stair/Red Rods, etc. - and shown that they can handle them with the utmost care and respect; then they are encouraged to combine these materials in a myriad of ways. If you've never seen a group of five year olds working together to build a "Sensorial Tower" – you've got a real treat coming.

Dramatic play like "princesses" or "action heroes" is not overly encouraged at a Montessori school, it's true. I think the main reason for this is that we want the children to make the optimal use of their uninterrupted work cycle – especially in the morning. There is so much to absorb in the Montessori environment! We want to respect the students enough to assume that they are ready for serious,

beautiful, meaningful activities that will enable them to educate themselves.

Maria Montessori understood adults' insistence on children's fantasy play as just a tad patronizing; that's one of the reasons she worked so hard to come up with alternatives. I think that modern day Montessorians generally feel that there are plenty of opportunities for fantasy/dramatic play in our children's lives. That's why we encourage the children to work during work time and play during play time.

If you observe the children during their outside time, there will inevitably be this type of fantasy/free play going on. Children need time to develop friendships, and we always want to honor that. The ideal Montessori environment accommodates children's expression of their selfhood in all kinds of ways. You're more likely to see a box full of native costumes from around the world in the cultural center.

Myth #4:

Montessori teachers are strict and overly concerned with academics; they're discouraged from being affectionate or loving with the children.

This one's easy. At its core, the Montessori philosophy is based on respect. Respect for the planet, for ourselves and for each other. What Montessori teachers are actually being with the children is: respectful. To some, this might at first appear as emotional distance or hard-heartedness. It's not! Respect for the child runs deep and means, among other things, that we don't invade their personal space without being invited.

We use their proper names instead of terms of endearment like "sweetie" or "hon". We try not to define children by their appearance, so we don't make a habit of remarking on their outfits: as a matter of fact, we feel that it's more important that the child dress him or herself than that their socks match!

As teachers, our love for your children runs very, very deep indeed. You'll find, as the children do, that it is a firm, fair, steady type of affection without hysteria and not conditioned upon "good" behavior. We strive to avoid patronizing the child; our voices when speaking with them are our normal voices, not high-pitched or saccharine sweet. We cherish children, and when your child needs that extra helping of compassion, hugs and kisses you can rest assured that he will find it at BMS.