



**AMERICAN MONTESSORI SOCIETY®**  
education that transforms lives

## **Characteristics of Montessori Programs for Infants and Toddlers**

Maria Montessori's careful observations and in-depth studies are the foundation for Montessori Infant and Toddler Programs which emphasize the importance of meeting both the physical, social-emotional and cognitive needs of very young children from an early age. Montessori programs foster the growth and development of very young children by providing them with unique environments for living and learning, with specially trained caregivers who have a deep practical and philosophical understanding of children at this age level.

### **Developmental Characteristics of Infants and Toddlers (Birth to age 3)**

During the first three years of life the child is developing more rapidly than at any other time. This applies not only to physical and language development but also to brain development. Data collected by the Rauch Foundation concluded that nearly 85% of a child's brain development occurs by the age of three years. Specific sensitive periods in a child's life create optimal windows of opportunity for the development of new abilities in favorable circumstances. The sensitive periods for movement, language, and order have a significant impact on development in the early years.

From random, uncontrolled movements the infant acquires purposeful, coordinated ones. Gross-motor coordination develops as the child moves from lying down to rolling over, crawling, and finally standing upright and walking. Fine-motor skills are developed as the child reaches for and handles a variety of objects. Motor development plays a profoundly important role in overall development. The quest for movement represents the first step towards achieving personal independence and autonomy, increasingly enlarging the young child's field of action and cognition.

The child is also acquiring language, beginning with development of the auditory system and receptive language skills. Infants understand much of what is being said long before they utter their first words. As they develop expressive language skills, children progress through several distinct stages, including crying, babbling, and uttering first words. By the age of three, most children can speak in complete sentences, express their wants and needs, and carry on conversations with an adult.

The sensitive period for order is evident at birth as the newborn child responds to daily routines. These routines reflect the structure provided by the adults in the child's life as they respond respectfully to the child's needs and maintain an orderly environment. As children get older and become more independent, they naturally seek and create order in their surroundings, strengthening their internal cognitive processes as the capacity for conscious thought emerges.

### **Philosophical Background**

*We should try to understand that there is an intelligible reason behind a child's activities. He does nothing without some reason, some motive.*

Montessori, Maria, *The Secret of Childhood*

Maria Montessori referred to this period in a child's life as the stage of the unconscious absorbent mind, when children have the innate drive and capacity to absorb large amounts of information from their environment effortlessly and without conscious thought. Through self-initiated efforts they learn to walk and talk simply by observing and imitating what they see around them. This learning process stimulates further brain development. In order to maximize development, children need plentiful opportunities to engage in positive, ongoing, experimental interactions with the environment. Since young children learn through physical, sensory, and emotional interactions with their caregivers and their environment using their hands, mouths, and bodies, the adult cannot "teach" the child directly. It is with this in mind, that a specialized Montessori environment is designed and created to be responsive to the developmental needs and sensitive periods of child development.

In this child-centered approach the nurturing adult encourages the child's spontaneous activity, in an environment which is carefully designed and prepared to meet the interests and needs of each child.

### **Program Models and Age Groupings**

Multi-age groupings are an essential characteristic of all Montessori programs. Children from birth to age 3 may be grouped in varying multi-age configurations that promote social interactions with children of different ages, and mirror the social dynamics of the world outside of the classroom, including intergenerational family dynamics.

A typical program model at the Infant and Toddler level offers two age-groupings:

- a) Infants – approximately 6 weeks to around 15-18 months (or when walking)
- b) Toddlers – from around 15-18 months (or when walking) up to 3 years

Transfers to an older age group should be made based on a child's developmental profile rather than the child's age or the school calendar. Normally, children will transfer to the Montessori early childhood classroom sometime between the ages of 2 1/2 to 3 years.

Schools that offer Montessori programs for infants and toddlers may provide the following:

Parent-Child Class: A Montessori Parent-Child class provides an environment in which parents and their children interact alongside a Montessori-trained teacher who prepares the environment to encourage exploration, and facilitates interactions. The Parent-Child class encourages parents to support their child's discovery and investigation of the learning environment on their own, and allows parents and children to experience an environment set up which encourages development of movement, acquisition of language, and refinement of visual, auditory, and tactile perception.

Infant Class: A Montessori classroom for infants, sometimes referred to as "The Nido" (Italian for "nest"), accommodates infants in a peaceful environment, where babies can safely explore and feel secure. The prepared environment for infants is furnished to avoid unnecessary restrictions on the infant's spontaneous movement and budding independence, with individual floor beds/mats or cribs,

and infant-sized tables and chairs. Specialized equipment may include bars that babies use for pulling-up, low stairs for climbing practice, and an array of objects for sensory and manipulative exploration.

Toddler Class: A Montessori classroom for toddlers is designed to support the drive to do things for themselves, developing self-confidence and a sense of efficacy. The safe, structured environment enables children to work collaboratively and independently, explore freely, and express their curiosity. The adults speak clearly and carefully, providing an enriched spoken language environment so that children have strong language models and learn to express their needs.

### **The Classroom Environment**

*Just as a physical embryo needs its mother's womb in which to grow, so the spiritual embryo needs to be protected by an external environment that is warm with love and rich in nourishment, where everything is disposed to welcome, and nothing to harm it.*

Montessori, Maria, The Secret of Childhood

Infants and toddlers have freedom to explore in safe environments that provide freedom for unrestricted physical movement and are visually attractive, organized, tidy, clean, and uncluttered. Manipulative materials foster concentration, problem solving, and a sense of achievement and are fully accessible to the children on low, open shelves. The variety of interesting materials combined with the child-sized utensils and furnishings make it possible for children to select and complete activities independently. An essential component is a self-care area where toilet awareness and independence in maintaining personal hygiene is encouraged.

### **Curriculum**

The routines of everyday living are the foundation of Montessori curriculum for both infants and toddlers, and all activities promote the development of order, coordination, concentration, and independence, while nurturing social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth. Based on daily observations by the teachers, new materials and activities are introduced that meet the needs of individual children and the community as a whole. These activities are designed to allow the child to recognize when a task has been completed successfully, or to correct an error without adult intervention, all the while permitting multiple repetitions of an activity, if desired:

- Self-care: washing, dressing, toileting, and eating according to each child's individual capacity
- Care of the environment: cleaning, food preparation and meal time; plant care and animal care, etc.
- Large-motor activities (indoors and out): walking, stepping, climbing, running, spinning, jumping, balancing, pulling up on bars, climbing steps, carrying heavy objects, etc.
- Fine-motor skills: reaching, grasping, picking up objects, transferring objects, using tools and utensils, art work, etc.
- Language: naming objects, describing actions and intentions, discussing pictures, conversation, visual and auditory perception, music, singing, finger-plays and looking at and reading books with the teachers
- Social: developing manners and appropriate social skills through spontaneous interactions throughout the day as well as in adult-led small group games.

- Outdoor experiences: nature walks when the adults accompany children at their own pace, cultivating the children's interest and wonder in the natural world, and laying the foundation for a deep respect for nature.

### **Daily Schedule**

An uninterrupted work period ensures that children have the time to settle into tasks that interest them, and that their concentrated efforts are not interrupted. The daily schedule reserves long, uninterrupted periods of time for spontaneous activity when children are free to choose their own activities. Their independent and spontaneous work is supported by the Montessori educator through thoughtful guidance and engagement and age-appropriate help. Whole group activities, such as outdoor play, group meals, or adult-led story time and singing are scheduled outside this uninterrupted period. Infant and toddler sleep time is according to individual need.

### **Role of the Teacher at the Infant/Toddler Level**

*... the child does not want to get anywhere; he just wants to walk, and to help him truly, the adult must follow the child, and not expect him to keep up. The need for following the child is clearly demonstrated here, but indeed it is the rule for all sides of education and in all fields. The child has his own laws of growth, and if we want to help him grow, we must follow him instead of imposing ourselves on him.*

Montessori Maria, To Educate the Human Potential

### Lead Teachers

Credentialed Montessori teachers have completed a highly specialized course of training at the age level and are viewed as facilitators and guides, rather than as teachers who provide direct instruction. Montessori Infant & Toddler credentialed teachers have in-depth knowledge of child development from birth through 3 years of age, and possess an intimate knowledge of Maria Montessori's philosophy for meeting the needs of this age range. The teacher has an understanding of the specific activities that should be provided to each child based on his or her unique stage of development and observes individual children and the dynamics of the group like an anthropologist. These observations are the basis for careful recording of each child's activities, behaviors, knowledge, and skills. These records then become a document of the child's activities and progress. Using these along with developmental checklists, the teacher knows which activities to offer next to each child, and where there may be areas of strength or weakness.

All adults in the environment contribute to making the classroom a **peaceful community** in which respect for the independence and character of each child is paramount. Adults move slowly, and are consistently calm, gentle, soft-spoken, patient, and trusting. They demonstrate respect and compassion, using eye contact, kneeling to the level of the child, addressing children by name, and speaking before touching or moving them. The classroom environment provides a calm, soothing atmosphere, with consistent caregivers who create an emotional safe haven for those in their care. To cultivate a growth mindset, teachers focus on acknowledging each child's efforts without using praise or punishment.

### Classroom Assistants

Most schools employ classroom assistants who provide support to both teacher and children. The

assistant is often trained on the job, though some assistants may have attended training courses or workshops. Sometimes, this position is filled by an intern who is enrolled in a Montessori teacher education program.

### Adult/Child Ratio

State licensing requirements determine minimum adult/child ratios, and these are fully adequate for the needs of a Montessori classroom. In fact, it is desired that Montessori classrooms have a higher adult/child ratio, as this fosters independent learning, and encourages children to learn from their multi-aged peers.

### **Role of the Family**

When an infant or toddler joins a Montessori community, it is often the parents' first experience leaving their child in the care of another adult outside the family. The teacher seeks to establish a strong partnership with parents and other adult caregivers in the child's life, and to help families understand ways to provide an optimal home environment. Parents can expect to be invited to observe the Montessori class in action, and regular parent/teacher conferences provide opportunities for dialogue, to assist both parents and teachers in understanding the child's interests, activities, and skills. Parents are encouraged to take advantage of parent education opportunities the school provides which often include discussions about ways the Montessori approach may be implemented and supported at home, and also to become familiar with the school, the program, teachers, and other children in the program. Parents should be involved and engaged in their child's education and maintain an open dialogue with the teachers about their child and their family life, as teachers can better support each child's unique needs when they better understand the other aspects of the child's life. When parents develop a sense of trust and comfort with the school they are better able to communicate to their child a positive attitude about going to school each day.

### **References**

#### Books

Eliot, Lise. *What's Going on in There? How the Brain and Mind Develop in the First Five Years.* (1999). New York: Bantam Books, (1999)

Gopnik, Alison, Meltzoff, A., Kuhl, Patricia. *The Scientist In the Crib.* (2009 ). New York: Harper Colins, (2009).

Montanaro, Silvana. *Understanding the Human Being.* (1991). Mountain View: Nienhuis, 1991.

Montessori, Maria. *The Child in the Family.* (1948). Amsterdam: Montessori-Pierson, 2007.

Montessori, Maria. *What You Should Know About Your Child.* (1966), Madras: Kalakshetra Publications, 1966.

#### Articles

Baker, Kay. Optimal Outcomes along Social, Moral, Cognitive, and Emotional Dimensions, The NAMTA Journal 25:2, Spring, 2000

Higham, Michael. "Early Childhood Education Importance, 85% of Brain Develops Before Five", (2013), Education, April, 2013.

Kuho, Patricia. Ted.com Talk "The Linguistic Genius of Babies" (2011).

Paul, Annie Murphy. Ted.com Talk. "What Babies Learn Before They're Born". (2011).

Zero to Three. [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

#### AMS Resources

The Montessori Uninterrupted Work Period: See [www.amshq.org](http://www.amshq.org) > School Materials

AMS School Accreditation Standards and Criteria: See [www.amshq.org](http://www.amshq.org) > AMS School Accreditation

AMS Suggested Materials Lists: See [www.amshq.org](http://www.amshq.org) > School Resources > Classroom Materials