

Dr. Maria Montessori, MD

Maria Montessori was always a little ahead of her time. She was born in Italy in 1870, and in 1896 became the first female doctor in Italy. Dr. Montessori based her work on the direct observation of children. She accepted no preconceived opinions or theories about their abilities, nor did she attempt to manipulate their behavior by rewards or punishments toward any end.

In her work at the University of Rome's psychiatric clinic, Dr. Montessori developed an interest in the treatment of children and for several years, wrote and spoke on their behalf. She constantly experimented and developed materials based on the needs, interests, and developing abilities of children. At age twenty-eight, Dr. Montessori became the director of a school for "unhappy little ones" which was what she called the mentally disabled children. She spent eleven hours a day at the school, and late into the night at home, working on this project.

After two years under her guidance, these children, who had formerly had been considered uneducable, took a school examination along with normal children and successfully passed. Educators called Dr. Montessori a miracle worker. What was her response? If mentally disabled children could be brought to the level of normal children, Dr. Montessori wanted to study the potential of "normal" children.

She went back to school to study anthropology and psychology and finally, in 1907, was asked to take charge of fifty children from the dirty, desolate streets of the San Lorenzo slum in the city of Rome.

Like others I had believed that it was necessary to encourage a child by means of some exterior reward that would flatter his baser sentiment, such as gluttony, vanity, or self-love, in order to foster in him a spirit of work and peace. And I was astonished when I learned that a child who is permitted to educate himself really gives up these lower instincts. I then urged the teachers to cease handing out the ordinary prizes and punishments, which were no longer suited to our children, and to confine themselves to directing them gently in their work.

The news of her amazing success soon spread around the world and people came from far and wide to see the children for themselves. She was as surprised and awed as visitors to the Casa dei Bambini.

Supposing I said there was a planet without schools or teachers, where study was unknown, and yet the inhabitants - doing nothing but living and walking about - came to know all things, to carry in their minds the whole of learning; would you not think I was romancing? Well, just this, which seems so fanciful as to be nothing but the invention of a fertile imagination, is a reality. It is the child's way of learning. This is the path he follows. He learns everything without knowing he is learning it, and in doing so he passes little by little from the unconscious to the conscious, treading always in the paths of joy and love.

Invited to the USA by Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, and others, Dr. Montessori made an appearance at Carnegie Hall in New York by 1915. The following is from a 1913 letter from Alexander Graham Bell:

Dear Dr. Montessori,

On behalf of the Montessori Educational Association of America, I have the honor to inform you that we have elected you as its first Honorary member and to express to you in this way our deep appreciation of your great work for humanity.

Dr. Montessori was then invited to set up a classroom at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco so that more interested people could observe her methods. A room was built with a glass wall behind which spectators sat and watched the children. Twenty-one children, all completely new to a Montessori environment, attended for four months. The observation seats were filled every day and at noon, when the children served lunch to their classmates and washed up afterwards, there was standing room only in the audience. The two gold medals awarded for education at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition both went to the Montessori class.

After WWII, Dr. Montessori's concern with education for peace intensified and she was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. She instituted the study of Cosmic Education for the child from six to twelve years of age, since she could see that in meeting the needs of the child, the needs of the world would also be met. Cosmic Education is the child's gradual discovery, throughout the whole of childhood, of the interrelatedness of all things on earth, in the past, in the present, and in the future.

Dear Madame Montessori,

You have very truly remarked that if we are to reach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with children and if they will grow up in their natural innocence, we won't have to struggle, we won't have to pass fruitless idle resolutions, but we shall go from love to love and peace to peace, until at last all the corners of the world are covered with that peace and love for which, consciously or unconsciously, the whole world is hungering.

M. Gandhi, 1943