



Play the Montessori Way

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Grown-ups think of play as a purposeless occupation that keeps children happy and out of mischief, but actually when children are left to play by themselves very little of their activity is purposeless.

Maria Montessori Speaks to Parents, p. 17

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From an adult's viewpoint it often seems that all children do is play! They play until they are of school age, then they go off to school and start to learn. They play until they are big enough to really begin to “learn”

Or so it seems to grown ups.

From a child's point of view, play takes on a different meaning. Play to a child IS learning! They learn to play and play to learn. Play is extremely important to a child. It is not a distraction. It's not something they do to take up time.

It is the life of the child.





From an early age, while we are still babies, we play. It starts with sucking a toe or waving our legs and arms in the air. As we develop and grow our play becomes more sophisticated, and start to gain more control of our bodies so we start to ride bikes and climb trees etc. All this occurs through a journey, at birth the infant is setting forth to explore a very new and strange place – the world, of which it is to become a part of. The child at that age does not know how the world works or how they fit into this world. They do not know that when you drop something it goes down, that balls roll, or that things far away look smaller than they really are. Infants are born beginners in life and in order to become part of the world that they are born into they must set about learning about everything!



And by learning, we mean learning everything about everything!!!

Not only does an infant child not know about the things that the adults take as given knowledge, they also do not know that they can learn to do the things they need to do to get along in the world. They do not know that they can learn to turn over, sit up, walk, and feed themselves or even talk, in fact they do not even know that they require these skills. But they do learn these things – and they learn them in the four or five years of their life. The greatest development in a child's holistic development occurs between the ages of 0-6 years – this is why these early years are so important.

By the age of four or five, if all has gone well the child is on a first-person, first-hand term with their immediate surroundings. They know what common things are like, what they will do, and what they can do with them.

They have learned these lessons in the best possible way – through play.

It is through play that children develop essential life skills, they learn about the world and themselves, they learn how to interact with their peers and with adults, they learn how to become social beings and deal with challenges, they learn how to run around, play games and sports, they learn to be creative, to adopt, adapt and develop new skills, and they learn about a whole range of emotions, all of which can be explored within the safe environment of play.



Through play children are able to experiment with ideas without the fear of failure or worry about making mistakes, which encourages them to tackle other activities as a challenge rather than with reluctance.

THIS BUILDS CONFIDENCE, SELF ESTEEM, SOCIAL SKILLS, INTERACTION, RESILIENCE, INDEPENDENCE, CONCENTRATION, CURIOSITY, ABILITY TO COPE WITH CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

In the Montessori prepared environment all the activities that are placed on the shelves or organised in the classroom are planned to meet specific instructional and developmental objectives. The child however continues to feel that they are playing rather than working because the onus is on them to choose and follow through with the activity.

All the activities that seed the environment are more than just interactives. They are carefully and scientifically resources designed to meet the ever-evolving needs of the children as they reveal their interests, developmental needs and styles of learning. The Montessori learning materials are designed to follow several principles.

- Beauty –
 - attractive and appealing whilst being aligned to the children's interests and developmental stages
 - complete,
 - clean,
 - purposeful – goal directed with clear steps that support the child's drive for independence
 - ordered
 - and comprised of real resources.
- Simplicity as well as having a control of error are necessary attributes of the material if children are to be drawn to explore and learn from them.

Montessori wrote that she did not set out to teach any "subjects". Instead, the child, through active involvement, will develop independence, self-confidence, concentration, and critical thinking skills through engagement with resources that support a clear aim/objective. With such activities, the child is prepared to become a more independent, responsible learner – capable of being a leader in their learning journey.

All the materials and each activity that the child has access to is/should be designed to teach only one new concept at a time. The thinking behind this is that the child's attention is better focused when there is only one new piece of knowledge to be learned; this then scaffolds the next bit of learning. An especially important aspect of the materials is that they can be used repeatedly at different developmental levels. In a multi-age (vertically grouped) classroom, where children can remain for up to three years, it is imperative that each material has multiple levels of challenge. This challenge is built in independently after a brief, personalised lesson. Then the child repeats and explores for as long as interest remains – alongside consolidating a skill or a concept, thus learning to be responsible for themselves and their own learning. In this way, the curriculum follows the child – the opposite of the more common approach in which all children must conform to the standardised curriculum.

The Montessori activities are an integral and central part of the Montessori philosophy – hands on approach to learning. The activities facilitate children's cognitive development from concrete learner to abstract thinker.

Having said all of that, what do the children really learn when they are “playing” with the activities that are set up for them. Below are just a few examples, the list could be quite exhaustive.



When I am “playing” with transferring activities (Activities of Everyday Living/ practical life) or science experiments (Knowledge and Understanding of the World (KUW)/Cultural) with water I am learning:

That some things sink and some things float
To observe changes as water takes different form in different containers
About different temperatures
About wet, dry and evaporation
What happens when you add soap
Eye/hand coordination as I learn to pour
Concepts of empty and full, volume and weight, relevant to mathematics

When I examine objects at the nature table or in nature, I am learning:

New vocabulary

Concepts of texture, colour, weight, size, etc...

To group objects into categories and observe likeness and difference

To appreciate nature and develop a sense of wonder.



When I am “playing” on climbing equipment (indoors or outdoors), I am learning:

Self-confidence as I develop new skills

Physical strength, coordination and balance

To use my imagination

To cooperate with others when involved in some dramatic play

To solve problems

To take risks (assessed ones)

To become resilient

To develop language

To become part of the community (socialisation)

To develop/consolidate mathematical skills (counting/gauging distance etc)



When I string beads (Activities of Everyday living/ Practical life), I am learning:

Eye/hand coordination
Concepts of colour, as well as more, less, longer and shorter
To create and reproduce patterns
Pride in accomplishments

When I sort things (Activities of Everyday living/Practical life), I am learning:

To notice details and likeness and differences in objects and form categories, essential for math & map reading etc
Concepts of colour size and shape
Numerical concepts of more and less
Logical reasoning

When I use scissors (AEL/practical life, art and craft), I am learning:

To control the small muscles of my hand
Concepts of shape, size, colour and location.
To exercise my imagination and creativity

When I use glue and collage materials, I am learning:

To exercise my imagination and creativity
Concepts of shape, size, location and design, relevant to learning to read
About things that are sticky and things that have different textures.
How to create patterns and designs, a math skill
To distinguish patterns from background, a reading skill



When I paint at the easel, I am learning:

To develop my imagination and creativity
Eye/hand coordination, helpful for learning to write

The names of colours and how to make new colours

To distinguish shapes, and purposely create shapes

To notice patterns from backgrounds,
necessary for learning to read

To express my feelings and ideas and that my ideas have value

Relationships of space and size, necessary for maths

Concepts of symmetry, balance and design



The value of play – especially unrestricted play that has been allowed to develop over a period of time without any interruptions or uninvited interjections from well meaning adults, will be full of learning.

Play time should not be about “taking a break” from work but integral to all learning and developmental experiences with supportive empathetic adults facilitating through the seeding of the environment rather than setting an agenda.

ENJOY AND ENCOURAGE PLAY!