

Education, Freedom and Respect

Marking 40 Years of Montessori Education at Lincoln Montessori School

On 19 September 2009, Lincoln Montessori School, 2615 Austin Drive, celebrated 40 years of service to families in Lincoln. Former parents and their adult children, graduates of the school, were invited to join with staff and friends to mark this important anniversary.

Montessori has become more mainstream than it was 40 years ago. People have heard about the approach, and currently its methods are being confirmed by brain research, educational research and psychology, but in 1969, when Lincoln's Original Montessori School opened its doors, the Montessori renaissance was just getting underway in the United States.

In 2007 Montessori schools throughout the world celebrated 100 years of service to children. Montessori is said to be the fastest growing educational system in the world today. It flourishes on every continent meeting the universal needs of children from all walks of life and economic strata, for spontaneous activity, meaningful work and positive peer relationships.

Dr. Maria Montessori, founder of the method, was a physician and anthropologist who in the early 20th century observed children and identified certain basic developmental needs. Consequently, Montessori set about meeting these needs through a revolutionary approach to learning. She came to define education as an aid to life as opposed to a curriculum designed to be taught to children. Her observations led to the creation of a 'prepared environment' in lieu of a classroom per se. The prepared environment is a bright, open, well-ordered and equipped room in which children can develop their natural tendencies, their inherent love of learning, their intense interest in doing things with their hands, in face engaging both mind and body in activities that lead to the construction of an individual and self-confident 'self.'

One of the features that distinguishes a Montessori environment from most traditional classrooms is that children from ages three to six (or six to nine in elementary classrooms) are grouped together. This allows the younger children to learn from the older ones and gives the older children opportunities to mentor and model for the younger ones. Indirect learning accompanies the individual work in which the children engage.

The idea that children can choose and direct their own learning in a Montessori setting is one that is frequently misunderstood. But freedom to choose in a Montessori environment is not license. In the first place the adult shows each child how to handle the materials from which he/she may choose. This presentation ensures that a child knows what to do with the activity. Once having been shown the child is free to choose the material, to work with it, to repeat as often as he/she wants and to return it to its place on the shelf when done. Children rarely get in over their heads because they quickly learn the ground rule that choice is limited to what they have been shown. Returning the activity to the shelf not only maintains order in the environment but informs others in the room that it is available for their use.

One piece or set of each material might seem limiting to the uninitiated, but this is another built-in premise that allows Montessori environments to run smoothly and peacefully. Concepts such as sharing, respect, patience and consideration for others are inherent in having to wait for an activity to be returned to the shelf, watching without interrupting, making sure one's materials are put away in order for the next person's use; all of these behaviors encourage an awareness of the needs of others. The peer group helps everyone realize that each person within it has a role to play in ensuring the same rights to freedom and respect as everyone else.