

The Cobbler

Ephesians 6:15

The Newsletter of the Christian Montessori Fellowship
June 2004

National Conference
June 24 – 26
San Antonio, Texas

That's a Good Question.

Ninth in a series of questions often asked about what is Montessori.

What's the difference between regular education and Montessori?

This is the one of the simplest questions to answer but the hardest to digest and condense into a concise answer that doesn't overwhelm the questioner with a hundred salient points delivered with the enthusiasm of a fire hose or better yet a waterfall of information.

Just as three points define a triangle and four a square and five a pentagon so there are as many points that define a Montessori education. If you leave one point out of a geometric figure you wind up with a different figure. With Montessori you have this incredible interplay between the various elements that do make up a Montessori education. Any one of them by itself does not describe the difference but each element adds to the definition and the whole picture of what really is Montessori.

Today's educational world has appropriated many of the Montessori distinctives – yet without really becoming Montessori. Many people now do hands on activities – with

“centers” but that's not what Montessori is.

Each of us will have at least five or six things that we will start out with to give a definition and lend definition to Montessori – hands on, individualized etc. But the significant base from which all of the Montessori benefits flow has to be with the fundamental respect for the child.

Respect for the child is more than soft voices and kind words but a respect for the embryonic spiritual being whom God is creating and ordaining. It is a respectful awe for the incarnation that is happening right before our eyes.

Theologically when we speak of the incarnation we think of Christ becoming human. This new incarnation that we witness and nurture is the human becoming divine. It is God coming to live in us. That is what gives us a sense of awe and a sense of respect for the child.

This IS the base of our Montessori approach. There are many aspects and each of them add another dimension to our understanding of Montessori. If we have three dimensions we create a triangle, if we have four, we make a square. Each line, each dimension changes the structure and the appearance of what we are creating.

The **second** dimension of what makes Montessori different is the emphasis on the prepared environment. The child's first prepared environment is the womb that God has so wonderfully crafted for the nurture, protection and growth of the

child. Everything that the child needs is present in this first environment. The second environment that God creates for the nurture and protection of the child is the family. What makes Montessori different is that we are creating the third environment designed to meet all of the child's needs. That is why a true environment must also meet the child's spiritual needs.

The **third** dimension, which is very much a part of the prepared environment is the emphasis on the aesthetics. The adult world tends to minimize the impact and effect of aesthetics on the child. "Oh, it doesn't matter to them.", "They won't appreciate it." and "It's not important to children." are comments you might often hear directed at the subject of aesthetics for children.

Aesthetics, not only transforms us, but uplifts us. Education is not only of the mind but of the senses and of the spirit. If the Creator of the universe took great care to create even vegetables in a variety of pleasing colors, shapes and tastes we should pay attention to the example and lesson He gives us.

Part of the environment and of the aesthetics is cleanliness and order.

The **fourth** dimension is the role of the guide. There is a spiritual preparation that transforms the guide not just in a religious sense but in the sense of harmony, teamwork and purpose. The guide, foremost, is a model – quiet, deliberate, focused, joyous, enjoying the discoveries found in the environment by the children and enjoying immeasurably the discoveries in the children.

Let's take a long parenthesis here and talk about why Dr. Montessori changed the name from teacher to guide. Under the old system teachers were autocrats, masters, sovereigns. Montessori chose the word guide in a context of

servanthood and leading children to learn rather than driving them. Teacher is a wonderful word if we become like Him who was called Rabbi – teacher.

The **fifth** dimension is our classic Montessori "hands on" learning. Montessori, quoting ancient Greek philosophers, restated "There is nothing in the mind that is not first in the hand." Montessori also states that the hand is the tool of the intellect. It is the hand that brings into being that which the mind conceives. We talk about Montessori as multi-sensory learning and it is the hands on aspect that fuels this multi-sensory approach.

The **sixth** dimension is the individualized nature of instruction. It has been said that in Montessori we don't teach classes, we teach children. Individualization allows the child to focus all of his abilities at the point of his learning potential. He is neither hurried nor hindered.

And because he is learning at the peak of his potential he enters into the **seventh** dimension which is the joy of discovery. It is this discovery that does give his learning joy. It is this adventure of discovery that gives rise to his intense focus and concentration and brings this remarkable satisfaction and peace not only to the child but to the environment. This excitement is not just about discovering the environment but also of discovering themselves and who God made them to be. Ultimately they will get the great joy of discovering God and who He is.

The **eighth** dimension in Montessori is the child centered nature of the environment. Everything is for the child. It is his size. It is for him to touch. For him to experience. And it is this experiencing of the environment that will lead the child to independence. By

independence we mean the ability to govern oneself.

This independence is part of the **ninth** dimension which is the ability of the child to make choices and in choosing learning to make wise choices. Choices always involve consequences. Good choices bring us good consequences. Poor choices bring us bad consequences. Often in life the best lessons are learned from the contrast between the outcomes of choice.

The **tenth** dimension of a Montessori program is the multi-aged nature of the environment. The multi-aged classroom is closer to the family model than to the litter approach of a same age classroom. As in the family, a Montessori environment allows for both modeling and peer teaching. Just like older brothers and sisters teaching younger siblings so is the instruction in the environment. When students teach each other both the “teacher” and the “student” have their learning reinforced.

The ultimate “success” of these ten dimensions is found in the **eleventh** dimension – the concept of mastery. In a Montessori environment you work on something until you master it. You neither have to keep up with people or slow down as the focus is on the individual’s mastery of the material.

Passing a test is never the goal of mastery. Mastery is its own goal. To achieve mastery requires the development of a work ethic. You work at it until you master it. You are not finished until you are finished. This one concept alone will do more to ensure professional success than the passing of many tests.

The dimension of mastery will create a real sense of accomplishment, success and self-esteem.

I am sure we can find many more dimensions to a Montessori environment. We can expand and add to the dimensions noted. However if we leave any of these dimensions out we in essence undo the integrity found in a Montessori environment.

Does that mean we have to do them all perfectly? Nobody has done it yet – perfectly. But that does not disparage our efforts. We will always be a work in progress because the integrity of the environment is not found in the perfection of the environment but in the process of meeting the children’s needs.

Every guide has strengths and weaknesses – deviations Montessori calls them - that impact the recipe of the environment. Then, even if we get it all together the next group of children who come to the environment will bring a different set of needs and challenges that will require us to be resourceful, creative and flexible.

Ultimately, a Montessori environment has to be flexible to meet the changing needs of the children because then again the ultimate difference between traditional education and Montessori is that the environment is made for the child and not that the child is made for the environment.

We all learn in different ways. A Montessori environment provides for as many ways as possible for a child to learn and master the material. But not only to learn but to learn joyously and to continue to learn their whole lives.

**There is still room for YOU
at the
National Conference**

June 24-26
The Absorbent Mind
The Absorbent Heart

The conference begins at 10:00 A.M.
Thursday June 24th and runs through
Saturday evening.

Conference cost is \$325 (\$300 for
CMF members) and includes 3 lunches,
2 full breakfasts, morning and afternoon
breaks and Saturday dinner. More details
are available on our websites:

www.christianmontessorifellowship.com

www.crossmountainforum.com

Or call 210-698-1911

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Lodging costs \$98.28 (tax included)
Double or single
Rates are good if you register for the
hotel by May 24th

Conference topics include:

The Special Needs Child
Helping Hurting Children

Math Extensions

Hands on Bible

Art in the Classroom

Record keeping

Parent conferences

And more!

**We will be doing a special two session
discussion and book review of the
“Secret of Childhood “**

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Make your reservations at

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Across from the Alamo
1-800-292-1050