

# Montessori schools celebrate 100 years of independent learning

There aren't many things that last 100 years, but when it comes to Montessori education, the ideas set into motion a century ago continue to grow.

Jan. 6 is the 100th anniversary since Dr. Maria Montessori opened the first Casa dei Bambini in Italy. Today schools and daycares that prescribe to Montessori's teachings are dotted throughout communities over the world. In Southwest Portland there are eight Montessori schools, more than any other region in the state according to the Oregon Montessori Association.

Dr. Montessori, the first woman in Italy to become a physician, developed her method by observing young, underprivileged children. Her findings led to the Montessori method of education, an

approach that focuses on the individuality of each child in respect to his or her needs or talents. A goal is to help all children maintain their natural joy of learning.

"The way I explain it to most people, is that in a traditional school the teacher would have a lesson plan for the class, but in a Montessori classroom there is a lesson plan for each student," explained Hilary Smith, founder of Cedar Montessori School in Hillsdale.

So where a typical classroom may have designated times for reading, writing, math and science, a teacher in a Montessori classroom will make every toy or activity available to the children and they choose when they want to use it and for how long.

Mercedes Paine Castle, founder of All Roads Learning Center in Multnomah, said that one thing people always notice about the classroom is how calm and quiet it is. She said this is because the children are concentrating on their "work."

"We call all activity that children are purposefully engaged in as work," she said.

The concentration comes from letting the children choose how they want to spend their day.

"All the activities are out on shelves that are on their level and each activity has a purpose," said Smith. "They are free to work with things the teacher has shown them how to use. They can work on it as long as they like. The child is able to follow their own outlines and their own interests."

In most cases, the toys in a Montessori classroom are simple and made of natural materials like wood. They may include blocks of varying sizes to stack, wooden sticks to count or large letter cutouts to spell words.

Generally, Montessori education focuses more on real play versus make-believe play.

Instead of playing with plastic food in a pretend kitchen, children are given real bananas to cut and oranges to juice, for example.

Sponges, brooms and dustpans are provided as well and any mishaps are not cause for punishment but instead an opportunity to show responsibility by cleaning up after oneself.

"We do a really good job of removing obstacles. There's nothing in this classroom that the children can't touch or feel or explore," Castle said.

A handful of the Montessori ideas might be controversial to some parents — for one, Montessori teachers don't use rewards or punishments in training children how to behave. Peace is important to the Montessori method of education so teachers take a different approach to aggressive behavior like biting or hitting. You won't see a Montessori teacher yelling, "No!" and wagging a finger at a mischievous child.

"We come at it with a sense of understanding," Castle said, explaining that

## Montessori terms

■ **Prepared environment:** Maria Montessori's concept that the child's environment can be designed to promote independent learning and exploration

■ **Gentle redirection:** Encouraging a child to a new activity or behavior that is more productive.

■ **Work:** The students' activities are not called play because the child is learning and engaged.



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

Montessori educators believe that aggression like generally stems from feelings of frustration. "We do a lot of observation of the child," claiming that an observant teacher can usually "stop the behavior before it starts."

If anticipating a meltdown doesn't work, the teachers gently guide the student to something more productive.

"We never give a timeout. We believe that if a child is 'misbehaving,' that's a call for some one-on one-time or a redirection toward purposeful activity," Castle said.

With the 100th anniversary of the first Montessori school taking place this month, some schools will celebrate with candle lightings, family gatherings or other festivities. For more information about Montessori education in, please visit [www.oregonmontessori.org](http://www.oregonmontessori.org). All Roads Learning Community can be reached at 503-939-8235 and Cedar Montessori School can be reached at 503-548-7280.



**Top, The community at All Roads Learning Center at work. Above, In Montessori education, students like Maeve Sievertsen learn by doing simple activities like scrubbing a chair.**