

Is Montessori Worth It? — Every Parent's Question **Communication Builds Trust and Confidence**

by Tim Seldin

Parents need evidence that their children are getting a world-class education.

Americans, parents and educators alike, are terribly confused about what we want from our schools. We hear that our students lag far behind the rest of the world, and agonize over what should be done. We talk about longer school years and higher standards, but we don't seem to want to create schools that are intensely competitive pressure cooker environments like many other countries.

We want our children to think for themselves and have high self-esteem, but at the same time we say that they should buckle down and do hard work for which they have no love or interest because that's the way the real world works! Do you sense the conflict here?

We've never been able to resolve the issue of how much emphasis should be placed on the cultivation of children's curiosity, self-confidence, and spontaneous interest in learning, versus society's expectations for academic progress.

Normally, Americans think of a school as a place where one generation passes down basic skills and culture to the next. From this perspective, a school only exists to cover a curriculum, not to develop character and self-esteem.

But in all too many traditional and highly competitive schools, students memorize facts and concepts with little understanding, only to be quickly forgotten when exams are over. Research shows that most bright American students are passive. They've learned to rarely ask probing question, challenge their teacher's cherished opinions, or think for themselves.

Montessori schools have a very different set of priorities, and very low regard for mindless memorization and superficial learning. Montessori students may not memorize as many facts, but they do tend to become self-confident, independent thinkers who learn because they are interested in the world and enthusiastic about life, not simply to get a good grade. Montessori schools seek to develop culturally literate children and nurture their fragile sparks of curiosity, creativity, and intelligence.

Mario Montessori spoke to this issue at the 1966 AMI conference in Washington, D.C. His remarks define the tightrope Montessori schools walk as we attempt to establish and maintain a careful balance in both our work with the children and in communicating with parents.

"The problem faced by Montessori education in America is caused by the influence of the press and public opinion on the process of education, especially in the teaching of young children how to read, write, and do mathematics. This goal of producing accelerated early scholastic achievement for its own sake is not part of the Montessori method, although early academic development is often one outcome of our work with young children.

The real essence of the Montessori method is to help the natural process of human development, to create integrated personalities; that is, people who have a sense of responsibility, who know their limitations, who have a sense of duty toward themselves and society, and who, having a

clear vision, can make a positive contribution to solving social problems.

The essential factor in the Montessori outlook is that it is not the adult who creates the child; it is the child who, through his experiences, creates a human being. Dr. Montessori did not consider her work simply a method of education, but rather a means of helping the creative energy in the child to reach its end. The central objective of Montessori education is to assist in the creation of the man that God meant him to be - not the man who turns his increased intellectual ability to purposes of destruction.

American Montessori schools have, in many instances, departed from this ideal. They place their emphasis on quick and easily observed results. But the heart of the matter—the integrated personality—is often forgotten. Schools where this is true do no harm to children; but, they give both children and parents far less than they have the right to expect.

The sources of the problem are complex. However, a key is a mistaken impression of Montessori that leads many parents to see this as a way to give their children a head-start in the race to Harvard. This is exacerbated by the commonly weak role of the American parent in providing close guidance and moral/ethical education, in contrast to places like India and Ceylon, where parent-child relationships are closer and Montessori education is flourishing.

What Dr. Montessori offers is far more than a curriculum leading to a rich intellectual life. She offers a key which gives clarity and focus to the inner energy which leads the child during his development.

A Montessori teacher who has mastered the curriculum and supporting materials, who prepares a beautiful environment for children, and gets from her children the desired results of early reading, writing, and mathematics, is considered a great success. But her success is minimal if she does not equally develop children with integrated personalities."

More Effective Communication Is The Key

Parents typically come to Montessori schools seeking academic excellence, a safe loving atmosphere that will teach their children the right values, and excellent programs and services.

However, the on-going impact of a Montessori program and its long-term outcomes is not always visible and clear to parents. Many struggle to understand how Montessori works, but all too often come away confused and worried that they might be setting their children up for failure when they transfer to a traditional classroom.

This leads many parents to have ambivalent thoughts about their long-term relationship with Montessori. They will stay as long as their children are happy and "doing well," but may expect to transfer them to a traditional school when they reach the age when their education "really counts."

Even very supportive parents may worry whether their investment in Montessori is going to pay off, and they look for evidence as to whether or not it is really working.

Montessori teachers reassure parents every year that their fears are misguided, and that children who transfer from Montessori programs normally make a smooth adjustment to their new schools and typically end up as honor students. Even though parent concerns may be groundless, it is up to Montessori schools to give parents tangible evidence of the positive contribution that Montessori is making to their children's intellectual growth and character development.

Even when their children are very young, parents don't want to hear that Montessori schools don't believe in report cards, workbooks, homework, and tests. No matter how impressed with Montessori, few parents can simply blindly trust any school with their children's future. They expect to be kept informed about their children's progress and the classroom program.

Unfortunately, many parents complain that communication from their children's schools is poor, sporadic, or non-existent.

Because most parents are neither professional educators nor available during the day to spend time at school, they tend to rely on feedback from other parents about the school that may be confused, misinformed, or inaccurate.

It should be obvious that few parents are willing to make a life-long commitment to educate their children they Montessori way. They swear no oath of loyalty, don't think of themselves as Montessori parents, and will only keep their children in a Montessori school as long as they clearly sense that the quality is good enough to justify the "risk" and investment.

Therefore, it is very important for Montessori schools and parents to build lines of communication and trust based on solid information and explanations that are easily digested. They don't really need to understand Montessori. What they want is to be able to put their finger on what unique and exceptional programs and opportunities their child is getting in Montessori.

Communication is the key; communication that carefully and honestly responds to legitimate questions.

Communication, trust, and confidence is built by parents, teachers and administrators working together. The ideas that follow represent a number of channels potentially available to build better communication between home and school.

Each involves an investment of time and often dollars, which are always in short supply. Parents reading this list of suggestions may wonder why their child's school doesn't do them all; schools may feel defensive. Remember that there is a price for everything and we often cannot afford to do everything that we would like. We have to develop a sense of our priorities as a school community, calculate the cost, assess our resources, and make choices.

Here are some communication strategies that your school community might want to consider:

- **Be sure that parents perceive that teachers like and respect the child and her family,** demonstrated through teacher initiated **monthly telephone contact, personalized notes** (especially one's that share something nice that happened in school), and **face-to-face meetings**.

Parents often complain that they rarely hear from teachers unless there is a problem. Many feel that they have to initiate important communication, whereas they clearly expect schools to take the lead.

Just as regular patrons of a restaurant love it when the owner warmly greets them by name and gives them special attention, so do families normally respond when they are warmly greeted every day and called by name. Parents begin to bond with a school that communicates warmth, credibility, diplomacy, and a sincere interest in their child.

- **Try to encourage conversations between the teachers and parents** that communicate how much they respect and support the school. Nothing will stir up more parental concern than the impression that a teacher is not happy with the school or its administration.

- **Encourage parent participation as volunteers in the classroom or as guests or chaperones** in special programs and experiences that underscore the unique character of the school, such as exceptionally exciting field trips, guest speakers, visiting performing groups, science fairs, plays, or festivals.
- **Offer parent education programs** that succinctly explain the nature and scope of the entire program: both academic and character development.
- **Sponsor Montessori Parenting Conferences:** The New Gate School in Sarasota, Florida hosts for weekend parenting conferences a year that are open to the entire community. Run like a mini-convention, parents register to attend workshops introducing the Montessori approach and on a wide-range of interest to parents, such as helping children learn about money, nutrition, family celebrations, positive parenting, working with infants and toddlers, coping with divorce, summer camp programs in the community, and selecting the right school.
- **Publish news about special programs and experiences at school** that underscore its unique character:
 - Monthly letters sent home from the classroom teachers
 - Articles in the weekly or biweekly school newsletter that spotlight children's progress or special programs and experiences
 - Articles about the school in the local media
 - Announcements of upcoming special events at school (open houses, international festivals, plays, workshops, fund raisers, etc.) that are open to the public, in the free community announcements in the local newspapers, radio, TV, or cable
- **Schedule an initial family conference before school reopens:** Consider having each family meet with the teachers at the start of the school year to go over the parents' initial reflections. Betsy Coe at the School of the Woods in Houston, Texas asks elementary and middle school students to prepare self-evaluations and participate in family conferences. During the meeting an **Individual Learning Plan** is prepared for the first three months.
- **Individual Learning Plans** set forth specific individualized educational goals for each child that parents, teachers, and elementary and middle school students mutually agree to consciously work toward during the next few months ahead. The student's progress toward fulfilling his or her Individual Learning Plan is a primary focus of subsequent conferences, progress reports, and student self-evaluations.
- **Parent-Teacher conferences** are terribly important, and most parents expect and appreciate a one-to-one meeting with their child's teachers at least twice a year, even though some may grumble or resist having to take the time from work to come in to school. Parents normally need confirmation every few months that their children are doing well and happy. If not, they will often start looking at new school options.
- **Written Progress Reports** are equally important and an essential communication tool. Because Montessori Schools do not compare students against an arbitrary standard or the performance of their classmates, familiar letter grades are rarely used. Narratives are generally considered the ideal and represent an excellent opportunity to communicate with parents about both the children's development and how the Montessori program is contributing to their growth.
- **Test Results** - Many Montessori schools do not believe in testing children. They argue that the tests are inaccurate, misleading, and stressful for children. Any good teacher who works with the same

children for three years and carefully observes their work knows far more about their progress than will be revealed on any paper and pencil test. Unfortunately, many parents see test results as the only objective evidence available of how well their children are doing in comparison to children attending traditional schools.

Further, in our culture, test taking skills are just another practical life lesson that children need to master sooner or later. The Montessori Foundation recommends that schools use standardized tests and regularly give students quizzes on the concepts and skills that they have been studying. The problem with tests is how they have been used and interpreted in other schools, rather than with challenging students to demonstrate skills and knowledge. When tests are used as a feedback loop, at times indicating that a student needs a new lesson and more practice, instead of a mark of shame and failure, then they can be quite useful.

- **Homework assignments** - This is for many parents the most visible sign to the parent of what's being taught and how well their child is doing. Some parents are fine if the school doesn't assign homework; it interferes with their evening time and forces them to get involved in ways that they may prefer to avoid. Parents will often begin to question the school's academic standards if elementary children are not asked to do any work at home. If the school assigns too much, or if the assignments clearly represent *busy work*, most parents will complain. On the other hand, when they perceive that homework is appropriately challenging and interesting, they will tend to believe that the school is setting high standards and expectations.
- **Corrected Assignments** - If parents sense that no one is checking their child's work for quality and accuracy, and insisting that sloppy work be done over, most will seriously question the teacher's standards and credibility.
- **Study Guides:** At the elementary and middle school levels, student's work plans are typically divided between teacher assigned basic expectation, and reading and research initiated by the student's individual interests. Some Montessori schools send home a weekly Study Guide with older students that sets forth the goals, expectations, and assignments for the week ahead for both in-class work and at-home assignments. They will often be customized for individual students.
- **Student Self-evaluations:** Some Montessori schools have their students prepare a self-evaluation of the reporting period just ended, in lieu of or in addition to teacher-prepared narratives. When completed, the students go over their self-evaluations with the teachers, who may add their comments and observations. The students present their self-evaluations to their parents at the upcoming family conference.
- **Class Meetings:** Some Montessori schools schedule one evening a month during the school year where the parents of each class meet together with their children's teachers. Their conversations typically include a review of the past month, special units just completed, and a look ahead at upcoming special lessons and activities. This gives parents and teachers an opportunity to acknowledge one another and explore questions that normally come up about the educational program. Some schools use these evenings as parent forums to discuss ideas brought forth in articles from Tomorrow's Child.
- **Community Meetings:** As a community owned school, after the classroom meetings are over, the New Gate School in Sarasota, Florida holds a monthly meeting which is open to all parents, teachers, administrators, trustees, and interested students. The Community Meeting discusses issues of general interest and offers its feedback and advice to the board and administration. Parents and teachers who participate tend to gain a much deeper understanding of the school's mission, strengths, and the issues that challenge it. They treasure the opportunity to have a direct voice in the life of the school.

- **People Nights:** Like many Montessori schools, in the fall and spring the Barrie School in Silver Spring, Maryland holds "People Nights" an event in which students get to bring two people (normally their parents) to school. On People Night, parents become the students and the children show them how to do the actual work that they are doing in class.
- **Written Progress Reports:** Twice a year, in January and May, as each semester comes to an end, the teachers will prepare a written narrative evaluation of the student's work, social development, and mastery of fundamental skills. They will go over their narrative with the students and compare their views to the students' self-evaluations.
- **Portfolios of Student Work:** At the School of the Woods and the New Gate School, students and teachers go through the children's completed work in the late fall, winter, and spring and make selections for their portfolios. The portfolio itself is a 4" three ring binder with clear plastic sleeves for a cover and spine card, filled with perhaps 100 plastic page protectors. The student presents the completed portfolio to his or her parents at the upcoming parent conference. At year's end, it becomes a permanent record of the child's best drawings, math problems, stories, spelling words, essays, and special reports, possibly along with photos taken at school, the teacher's narrative reports, the child's self-evaluations, etc.
- **Self-Study Leading to Accreditation for your School:** One of the best ways to help a significant number of parents gain a deep and realistic insight into the challenges and opportunities facing the school is to begin the one or two-year self-study process leading to accreditation by one of the state, regional or national groups that accredit Montessori schools.

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