



Fairfield County Parent

M A G A Z I N E

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Mis for
Montessori

Back-to-School

**Bucket List of
Summer Fun**

“M” is for Montessori

by Teri Linkov

Dr. Maria Montessori was a forward thinking woman, way ahead of her time. Born in Italy in 1870, she broke gender barriers and expectations when she enrolled in classes at an all-boys technical school, wanting to become an engineer. She soon had a change of heart and began medical school at The University of Rome, where she graduated — with honors — in 1896. Upon graduation, she continued her research at the university’s psychiatric clinic, and became co-director of the Orthophrenic School, an institute for training teachers in educating mentally disabled children, with an attached laboratory classroom. In 1906 Montessori was invited to oversee the care and education of a group of children of working parents in a new apartment building for low-income families. She was interested in applying her work and methods to typical children, and the Casa dei Bambini, or Children’s House, opened in 1907. The rest, as they say, is history.

Montessori’s philosophy, methods, techniques and child-centered approach to education are as relevant and beneficial to children today as they were more than 110 years ago. The American Montessori Society explains that in a Montessori classroom the teacher, child and environment create a learning triangle. The multiage groupings foster peer learning, students have uninterrupted blocks of work time with a guided choice of work activity.

Connecticut Parent Magazine has teamed up with some local Montessori schools to give you a comprehensive, inside look into this “revolutionary” educational philosophy.

According to Rhonda Bielik, founder and guide at the **Willow Tree**

Montessori School in Bethany, “One of my greatest joys is sharing our Montessori classroom with new families. The beauty of the materials, order of their placement, and purpose of this specially prepared environment can raise emotions which can be startling to new parents entering our Casa for the first time. Each Montessori environment is prepared with the same components as Dr. Montessori’s great experiment. This is the science of our work and a distinguishing characteristic from other forms of education. It is this scientific approach to education that supports the child’s



Photo courtesy of Willow Tree Montessori.

self-constructing nature.”

Bielik continues, “The academic materials found in language and math, or the didactic materials of the sensorial area, or perhaps the wonderfully ordered practical life items that replicate those items found in one’s own home, may initially draw parents to this method. But in my experience, the uniquely defining trait that most aptly sums up the many piques of interest activated upon entering the Casa is opportunity. It is an opportunity for their child to build most fully upon their self-construction in becoming the person they are meant to be, and the opportunity to belong within their community in this time and place in history.”

Adding to this, Bielik stresses, “The Montessori child has the opportunity to grow into the completeness of his potential over a three-year period. Living everyday life, he is a part of a community that respectfully supports his individual development. Now he is ready to enter the world outside the Casa dei Bambini and is ready to be interdependent with his social community as a productive member of the human family.”

Bielik states that “a Montessori environment supports three basic freedoms: movement, choice and repetition. The *freedom to move* allows children to respond to their own interests or directives of nature. The Guide, whose primary role is facilitator, observes these interests and connects the child to a supportive work. We ‘follow the child’ in their quest to act upon these inner directives of self-construction.”

She continues, “The *freedom to choose* provides children the opportunity to experience natural decision making. This is unusual for the young child in most educational experiences. The Guide, having connected children to a work corresponding to their interest, moves away and allows them to freely choose that particular material without asking.”

Finally, Bielik adds, “The *freedom to repeat* work until their own inner directives are satisfied is a hallmark of Montessori education. Each person is given the opportunity to fully explore, work with and repeat a material until particular qualities of the work have been extracted as needed.

“With these three basic freedoms supported, the relationship between the Guide and the child results in a mutual respect allowing the child to act upon his natural inclination to develop academically, socially and emotionally,” Bielik concludes.

Sharon Healy, Head of School at **Farmington Valley Academy Montessori**, shares that, “Young families today come in much more prepared than in the past years. What always seems to pique parents’ interest is how we at FVAM stay true to our

Montessori mission, as a 21st century learning environment. The advancements and forward-thinking philosophy at FVAM, starts with our prepared classroom environment, classroom design and the targeted programs we have developed to meet the needs of our students in our ever-changing, global world.

“Montessori teachers very much facilitate a child’s learning by observing their interests and fully preparing the classroom environment to incorporate both needs and interests.”

When Healy was asked how a Montessori program will benefit children and prepare them for the future, she explained, “In a Montessori school, the program is designed and contoured to fit the needs and interests of the individual child. This is different from traditional education, in which the child has to conform to a set program. This difference allows the teachers to awaken and guide the child’s natural desire to learn and grow. Encouragement of the student’s inner desire to learn is a noticeable benefit associated with a Montessori education. Students also learn the responsibilities of collaborative learning in a

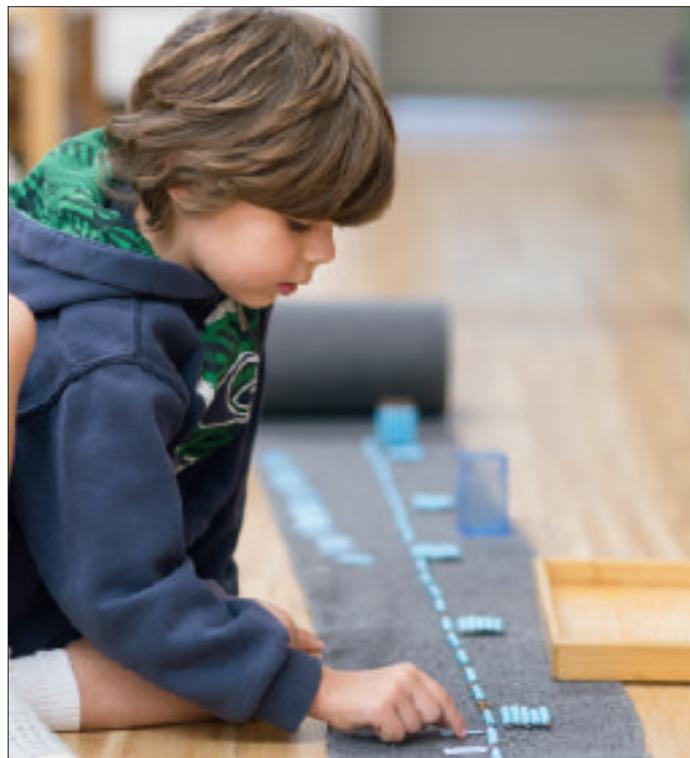


Photo courtesy of The Montessori School.

community, and they develop the social skills that accompany being part of a group. Each child is able to develop to their fullest potential rather than spend time waiting for peers to catch up. In short, a Montessori education supports

each child’s development in reaching their potential. This process fosters self awareness, inner happiness and the



Photo courtesy of Farmington Valley Academy Montessori.

love of learning.”

The Montessori School in Wilton is a well-established school founded in 1964. When asked about some of the defining traits of a Montessori education, Head of School Lisa Potter explains, “Inherent in Montessori’s philosophy of ‘educating the whole child’ is a foundation that naturally includes the expression and cultivation of values and character. In our continual dialogues with parents, consistent themes arise that I refer to as the three ‘I’s: teaching children independence, industriousness and integrity. At the core of our parent community is an admirable

thoughtfulness and intention.”

Since the classroom is really the domain of the children, Ashley Grob, admissions director states “Each Montessori environment has been carefully prepared to serve the needs of

the child during a particular phase of development. Great thought and care is put toward designing a space that

allows for independence through freedom and responsibility.”

According to Potter, “The Montessori approach is steeped in a child’s physical, emotional, social and intellectual development, and a deep understanding of humanity. In addition to supporting each individual toward becoming an inspired and engaged learner, an important aspect of Maria Montessori’s teachings is to help students grow as contributing members of a peaceful society.”

When asked about mixing Maria Montessori’s methods with today’s high-tech society, she adds, “Technology is simply yet another tool available to support our students’ comprehensive and balanced learning.

“A Montessori education supports the development of confident, resourceful, self-reliant and adaptable learners and students, who are not dependent on, but supplement their learning with, resources and technology available in the ever changing high-tech world.”

Maria Montessori would be proud to see how her enlightened approach to education has transcended time, and has stayed true to her core values from one century to the next. The timeless nature of her ideas and her keen understanding of how children think, feel and experience the world will continue to influence the growth of students for generations to come. ♥