

Why Montessori is a Good Choice for Deaf Preschoolers

If you visit a Montessori class at playtime or circle time, it will look pretty much like a nursery school. But if you visit around 10 o'clock, what you see might surprise you. A typical scene would be children working alone or in pairs with intense concentration on a great variety of projects, for example, polishing a table, counting sticks, making pottery, learning names of insects, practicing tying shoes, reading a book, or little ones just watching. The children's attitudes are serene and marked by concentration and satisfaction.

Why would deaf children do well in this kind of environment?

1) Instruction is primarily visual.

Montessori activities are introduced to the children individually or in small groups with great care given to making the lesson clear, interesting, and brief and to providing the child immediately with some way to explore and practice the concept to be learned in an active way. The child has previously seen older children do the activity and has seen the teacher demonstrate it. If the explanation were signed, deaf children would be on an equal footing with hearing peers. The activities and materials have been designed in such a way that their use is clear and often self-explanatory.

2) Expression is an integral part of all activities.

As the child has new ideas and feelings, he is drawn to express them as part of his "work". Many forms of expression are provided, such as story-telling, poetry, songs, dance, mime, painting, and pottery. The Montessori class provides a calm receptive environment for even the shyest and least articulate child. For a deaf child, the materials, especially the language materials, provide a stimulating topic for children to talk about. Non-verbal forms of expression provide a language-delayed child with ways of expressing complex ideas and feelings.

3) The child learns to explore systematically.

The Montessori program is designed to develop in the child curiosity and

a systematic approach to exploration. For deaf individuals, getting good and complete information is crucial. Getting the habit early of self-reliance, of active inquiry, and of not being satisfied with the first answer would be invaluable to a deaf child in later schooling and life.

4) The children develop self-confidence.

It is sad to read reports about the state of most deaf school-age children. Not only are they academically weak, but a large percentage have habits and attitudes that stymie learning. Many deaf children, for example, are overly dependent on adults, have an impulsive learning style, rarely stop to think about solving a problem, and are fearful of making mistakes.

A Montessori teacher is taught to carefully observe the child and tailor his work so that he will be successful. The materials are designed so that activities of increasing difficulty and complexity can be performed. The teacher plans this increasing difficulty in small increments. Thus, in his first experience with learning, a child builds up a feeling of competence and self-confidence.

Much of this feeling of self-confidence comes from the degree of independence afforded children in a Montessori class. Child-sized tools and furnishings and adaptations of everyday objects permit child^{ren} to do many things for themselves. In a Montessori class, teacher direction is definitely there, but subtle. Activities and materials are designed so that children can take them out, work on them, and put them away themselves.

There are many other assets of the Montessori approach. I will provide the board with several books on Montessori and on deaf children which might be helpful. The four points I have made above are features which seem to me to be especially promising for deaf children.

For the purposes outlined for the TRIPOD lab school, the Montessori system has the advantage of being a structured, well-articulated curriculum. Within that structure, innovative techniques of language learning, auditory training, and speech development can be implemented without confusion or disruption of the children's daily routines. In fact, some of the most promising techniques are

quite compatible with Montessori materials and procedures.

Questions

Can a child trained in Montessori adjust to other school settings?

A Montessori child should not have difficulty adjusting to a good teacher, that is, one who explains clearly, plans interesting work, and recognizes and provides for individual differences. If a child has a bad teacher, it is also likely that he will be able to continue to learn on his own, but he may be more outspoken in his objections to things which seem to him to be unreasonable.

Is Montessori so idiosyncratic that other schools will feel different?

I'm not sure what you mean. Montessori did not seem odd or abnormal to me either as a parent or as a teacher. My own children were pleased to change to public schools at age nine because they wanted to meet more children. They look back on Montessori with great fondness as a place where they learned many exciting things and were happy.

What....after Montessori?

This is big question that should surely be addressed by parents and faculty together. Placement for children in elementary programs should be explored with specific recommendations about the strengths and weaknesses of each. Montessori preparation may well increase the options for a deaf child in that elementary Montessori programs would then become a possibility.

Cynthia LeBuffe
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for TRIPOD, Inc.

Since TRIPOD preschool began in Los Angeles 4 years ago, we have been using the Montessori curriculum with our deaf preschoolers. Montessori methods are based on the assumption that children have strong innate tendencies: a tendency to learn, a tendency to explore, a tendency to try more and more complex movements, a tendency to become more organized, a tendency to express themselves in art and language, a tendency to become independent, and a tendency to perfect the skills they already have. Parents and teachers who can take advantage of those tendencies will help children develop to their fullest.

We have found that because we work with children's innate strengths and drives, our jobs are easier and we are more effective. We believe that if our teaching or parenting methods work against the powerful forces of development inside the child, the results could be counterproductive and frustrating.

Why is TRIPOD so enthusiastic about Montessori for deaf children? We chose it originally because it has an orderly curriculum with carefully designed materials in a specifically prepared environment and for its emphasis on the child's exploration and self-expression. With five years experience under our belts, we realized that Montessori was a more radical departure from the traditional deaf education than we anticipated and that the benefits for both children and teachers are much more than we expected.

In a typical deaf education classroom, the teacher sits at a U-shaped table surrounded by five or six deaf children. The teacher has her materials in a box behind her, and takes them out one at a time. She decides the topic of conversation, she decides who will speak, she decides when the child can speak, and she decided what they can touch. Researchers have determined that the results of this kind of educational experience are that children become passive, lose self-confidence, initiative and motivation. Researchers call this state "learned helplessness".

Montessori classrooms provide a dramatic contrast to the example stated above. In a Montessori classroom, all materials are available on open shelves so that children can choose what they want to work with, remove the materials from the shelves and replace them easily and by themselves. Throughout the day, teachers are always present, and they do guide the children to various materials. But once they have shown the children the proper use of the materials, they step back and allow the children to explore the materials and work by themselves. Most important is the fact that our Montessori classroom is indistinguishable from a "normal" classroom: our children walk around freely, talk with each other and with the teachers, are assrtive in asking questions, are comfortable with visitors whom, they do not know, and are interested in the world around them.

How can we, parents and teachers, achieve this? We can recognize the innate capabilities in children by observing them, educating ourselves about child development, and training ourselves to have respect for the child. A child's timetable is not our timetable. The child's way of learning is not our way. Piaget described the development of children from birth to six years as sensori-motor; everything is learned through the senses and through the child's movement. What is learned is spontaneous and what has meaning to the child is learned easily.

Montessori teachers are trained to observe, listen, and support. Throughout the day, there is a careful balance between teacher direction and child's free choice. All parents and teachers can do this. Adults, parents, and teachers who impose their will on the child are in effect saying to the child: "I don't trust you. You can't choose the good. I must choose for you. Without me, you are bad (or ignorant)."

Maria Montessori encapsulated her suggestions for adults in the concept of the "prepared environment". Adults, instead of spending their time and energy making all kinds of decisions for the child, can re-organize their schedules, their homes, and their communities so that children are surrounded by opportunities to grow and become good and intelligent people. In the home, this means the child is given the opportunity to help with all household tasks: pitchers light enough for pouring, all personal belongings positioned low and small enough for the child to take care of themselves. When the child brings up a topic, someone listens with interest and responds without correction. When there is a misunderstanding, the adults change their language mode to make their meaning more accessible. When the child destroys something, that becomes a chance to make amends with loving support from adults.

In the school, there are materials and activities for every facet of child development. There are low and open shelves encouraging the child to select their own materials. Teachers demonstrate how to make use of them and then stand back. The child decides when to begin the activity, and how long to work on it, and how often to repeat it. The child's time frame and his need for repetition are respected. The teacher's lesson plan is well-prepared but entirely flexible.

For teachers and parents, instead of anxiously standing over the child, constantly correcting and deciding what the child should learn, they are busy working on themselves, making sure the child's environment is rich, and making their homes along with classrooms more conducive to child growth. They look for gym and swimming classes, find friends, use parks and public facilities, and create opportunities to attend cultural places such as museums, galleries, libraries, and theatre. They delight in the child's progress, and do not focus on what their child lacks. The child sees smiling, proud, and confident adults and takes that esteem into himself.

Our experiences at TRIPOD have shown that deaf children do indeed have these same strong positive tendencies and when given the opportunity, they grow quickly and well. This growth happens in all aspects of the child - emotional, intellectual, linguistic, and social. In summary, the Montessori Method lets adults go with the flow as determined by the child. Our efforts are in harmony with the strong forces within the child. All the things we want for our children -- language, knowledge, independence, skills, happiness are acquired. Our efforts are light and easy, and so are the child's.

By Cindy LeBuffe and
Charles Katz
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