

Parents are just as surprised by what they don't see — no lecturing teachers prodding reluctant kids to complete assigned work. This ability to focus at a young age is a hallmark of Montessori education, but it's revolutionary to parents who haven't seen a Montessori classroom in action.

Montessori learning is hardly novel — Maria Montessori's first school opened its doors in 1907. But a trend toward mindfulness in education is sparking new interest in this century-old style of education, and new science is showing how this type of learning benefits today's young minds.

Mastering Mindfulness

Over the past decade, organizations like Mindfulness in Education Network, Association for Mindfulness in Education, and Mindful Schools have sprung up, training teachers, hosting conferences and producing research aimed at helping children become more focused, motivated and intentional in the classroom.

Just what is mindfulness, exactly, and why does it matter? Mindfulschools.org paints mindfulness as a deep, in-the-moment focus, characterized by self-awareness and internal motivation. In a world filled with chaotic distraction, advocates of mindfulness say it can be a salve for the conflict, impulsiveness and stress plaguing modern students and schools.

Maria Montessori didn't coin the term "mindfulness," but she was an early advocate for sustained focus and internal motivation. Her methods deliberately encourage intense concentration as the best context for early learning.

Eric Dustman, director for The New School Montessori in North Avondale, and the only school in Cincinnati to have accreditation

from both the American Montessori Society and the Independent Schools Association of the Central States, explains how a Montessori education can enhance mindfulness: when children are able to move about the classroom, select materials on their own (or with a little bit of gentle guidance from a teacher), kids not only grow self-esteem, but they also gain independence. And when they have the freedom to work on what interests, they learn to concentrate and focus.

Whole Body, Whole Mind

A Montessori education is about more than just increasing a child's attention span. Montessori's approach to motor development actually stimulates cognitive development and deep concentration. When children begin Montessori education at 3 or 4, they work on motor-skills activities like sweeping, polishing silverware and pouring. These aptly named "Practical Life" activities prepare kids for greater independence and self-reliance in daily tasks, but there's something bigger going on — the development of higher cognitive functions essential to concentration and attention. Even something as simple as playing with Play-Doh has purpose, according to Dustman. "It exercises the hands and helps develop fine motor skills, which are necessary for writing."

Montessori can even enhance the ability to understand consequences through simple objects and activities. Dustman gives the example of how The New School Montessori might opt to use glass bowls in their classroom rather than plastic. Even though plastic bowls are certainly easier to manage, children learn that glass bowls require careful handling. "There's value to using glass over plastic," he explains, "because it

teaches kids to self-regulate, to be careful and to be mindful." This whole-body approach is part of the reason numerous studies show that Montessori-educated children actually have an academic edge over children educated in traditional classrooms.

It also helps that children are often in a classroom with others of varying ages. Younger kids can learn from older students, and older students have a chance to be leaders and good role models, which supports social development, according to Dustman. "It's important to support kids academically," he says, "but it's equally important to support them emotionally and socially. There's so much concentration on outcomes and on test scores, and it comes at a loss to the emotional and social growth of a child."

Happy Work: Environment, Schedule, and Shared Focus

One way Montessori promotes focus is through a carefully prepared environment, a key component of Montessori learning. In Montessori classrooms, specially-designed materials — from child-size brooms to lacing cards to counting beads — are prepared to be aesthetically appealing and accessible for young children; simplicity, beauty and order are paramount.

Montessori schools incorporate concrete learning goals into a child's educational plan, but children are free to choose when and how to complete their work within a specified time frame. "Obviously, we have a curriculum and outcomes we expect to have," says Dustman. "It's not just chaos in the classroom. But even with guidance from the teacher, we're still giving children a choice." So a teacher might want to encourage a child to work on math if he's been ignoring it lately, but she or he will give the child a choice on which math work he wants to do. And when their own interests motivate children, deep

concentration is a natural result.

Typically, the materials a child needs for his selected work are contained on a tray, so once he selects his work, he can take the tray to his space on the floor or at a table, and complete it by himself. Working through this natural sequence promotes competence and mastery; children can repeat the activity as many times as they want, without being told to hurry up and move on to something else. When they've finished, they return everything to its proper place so that it's ready for the next child, which is another lesson in social development. Children are taught to think about others and how their action of putting back materials (or not) will affect their fellow students.

Though the terms focus and concentration conjure up images of a child working alone, mindfulness isn't always a solo pursuit. Montessori-style learning helps kids learn the fine art of shared concentration by encouraging them to engage in tasks with a classmate or two — a critical skill in the age of teamwork.

Mindful Together

How does this Montessori-style mindfulness benefit children? Greater confidence, longer attention spans and natural self-motivation are a few of the rich rewards. "Montessori provides children with the opportunity to be themselves, to feel safe and exercise their own will, and to learn on their own. What we try to do here is create a safe environment where it's OK to come in and not know everything a child needs to know," says Dustman. Each child is unique and not everyone has the same abilities at the same age, he explains, and that's just fine. "We believe that in a Montessori classroom, every child has the right to learn." ☺

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