



## Montessori Terminology

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Dr. Maria Montessori introduced many new terms and concepts to describe how children grow and learn. Here are definitions of some widely used Montessori words and phrases.

**Absorbent mind** – From birth through approximately age 6, the young child experiences a period of intense mental activity that allows her to “absorb” learning from her environment without conscious effort, naturally and spontaneously.

**Casa dei Bambini** – In Italian, “Children’s House,” and the name of Dr. Montessori’s first school.

**Children’s House** – In many Montessori schools, this is the classroom for children ages 2.5 (or 3) to 6 years; other schools call the classroom for this age group Casa, preschool, or primary school. Some schools use this term to refer to the entire school.

**Concrete to abstract** – A logical, developmentally appropriate progression that allows the child to come to an abstract understanding of a concept by first encountering it in a concrete form, such as learning the mathematical concept of the decimal system by working with Golden Beads grouped into units, 10s, 100s, and 1,000s.

**Control of error** – Montessori materials are designed so that the child receives instant feedback as he works, allowing him to recognize, correct, and learn from his mistakes without adult assistance. Putting control of the activity in the child’s hands strengthens his self-esteem and self-motivation as well as his learning.

**Cosmic education** – Maria Montessori urged us to give elementary-level children a “vision of the universe” to help them discover how all parts of the cosmos are interconnected and interdependent. In Montessori schools, these children, ages 6 – 12, begin by learning about the universe, its galaxies, our galaxy, our solar system, and planet Earth—everything that came before their birth to make their life possible. As they develop respect for past events, they become aware of their own roles and responsibilities in the global society of today and tomorrow.

**Didactic materials** – Didactic meaning “designed or intended to teach,” these are the specially designed instructional materials—many invented by Maria Montessori—used in Montessori classrooms.

**Directress or guide** – Historically, the designation for the lead teacher in a Montessori classroom; some schools still refer to the lead teacher as “guide.” In Montessori education, the role of the instructor is to direct or guide individual children to purposeful activity based upon the instructor’s observation of each child’s readiness. The child develops his own knowledge through hands-on learning with didactic materials he chooses.

**Erdkinder** – German for “child of the earth,” this term describes a Montessori learning environment for adolescents ages 12 – 15 that connects them with nature and encourages them to form a society of their own; often designed as a working farm school.

**Grace and courtesy** – Children are formally instructed in social skills they will use throughout their lives, for example, saying “please” and “thank you,” interrupting conversations politely, requesting rather than demanding assistance, and greeting guests warmly.

**Montessori** – The term may refer to Dr. Maria Montessori, founder of the Montessori Method of education, or the method itself.

**Nido** – “Nest” in Italian, this is a Montessori environment for infants ages 2 – 14 months.

**Normalization** – A natural or “normal” developmental process marked by a love of work or activity, concentration, self-discipline, and joy in accomplishment. Dr. Montessori observed that the normalization process is characteristic of human beings at any age.

**Normalizing event** – Within the prepared environment of the Montessori classroom, children experience a normalizing event every time they complete a basic work cycle, which includes 1) choosing an activity; 2) completing the activity and returning the materials to the proper place; and 3) experiencing a sense of satisfaction.

**Planes of development** – Four distinct periods of growth, development, and learning that build on each other as children and youth progress through them: ages 0 – 6 (the period of the “absorbent mind”); 6 – 12 (the period of reasoning and abstraction); 12 – 18 (when youth construct the “social self,” developing moral values and becoming emotionally independent); and 18 – 24 years (when young adults construct an understanding of the self and seek to know their place in the world).

**Practical life** – The Montessori term that encompasses domestic work to maintain the home and classroom environment; self-care and personal hygiene; and grace and courtesy. Practical life skills are of great interest to young children and form the basis of later abstract learning.

**Practical life activities** – Young children in Montessori classrooms learn to take care of themselves and their environment through activities such as hand washing, dusting, and mopping. These activities help toddlers and preschool-age children learn to work independently, develop concentration, and prepare for later work with reading and math; older children participate in more advanced activities.

**Prepared environment** – The teacher prepares the environment of the Montessori classroom with carefully selected, aesthetically arranged materials that are presented sequentially to meet the developmental needs of the children using the space. Well-prepared Montessori environments contain appropriately sized furniture, a full complement of Montessori materials, and enough space to allow children to work in peace, alone or in small or large groups.

**Primary classroom** – In some Montessori schools, this is a classroom for children ages 3 – 6 years; however, the American Montessori Society uses the term Early Childhood and defines the age range as 2.5 – 6 years.

**Sensitive period** – A critical time during human development when the child is biologically ready and

receptive to acquiring a specific skill or ability—such as the use of language or a sense of order—and is therefore particularly sensitive to stimuli that promote the development of that skill. A Montessori teacher prepares the environment to meet the developmental needs of each sensitive period.

**Sensorial exercises** – These activities develop and refine the 5 senses—seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling—and build a foundation for speech, writing, and math through the use of sensorial materials. The exercises also bring order to the barrage of sensorial impressions the child experiences from birth onward.

**The 3-period lesson** – A 3-step technique for presenting information to the child. In the first—the *introduction* or *naming* period—the teacher demonstrates what “this is.” (The teacher might say “This is a mountain” while pointing to it on a 3-dimensional map.) In the second—the *association* or *recognition* period—the teacher asks the child to “show” what was just identified (“Show me the mountain”). Finally, in the *recall* period, the teacher asks the child to name the object or area. Moving from new information to passive recall to active identification reinforces the child’s learning and demonstrates her mastery.

**Work** – Purposeful activity. Maria Montessori observed that children learn through purposeful activities of their own choosing; Montessori schools call all of the children’s activities “work.”