

MONTESSORI FOR NOW: THE CHILD-CENTRED ENVIRONMENT

**A Montessori perspective on creating
child-centred learning environments**



Maria Montessori was amongst the first educators to emphasise birth to five years as a crucial stage of development, establishing the foundations for all future learning. Any Early childhood setting that is truly child-led will reflect the children who are attending and it should also be reflective of the community in which they are. Yet you may well see similar things happening in the settings, and you may also see similar activities and resources being used. The question that then arises is:

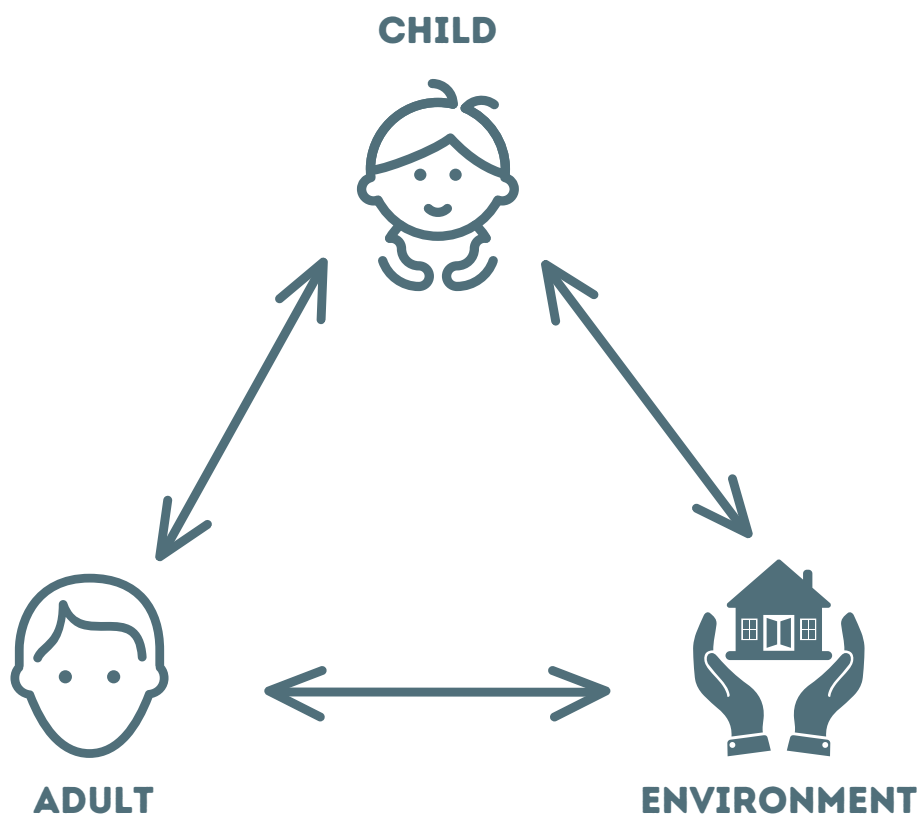
What are the fundamental aspects that should be present in a child-centred environment?



In Dr. Maria Montessori's first 'Children's Houses' in Rome she observed that children would use apparatus or 'materials' spontaneously. Children were able to freely choose which apparatus they would use; this allowed the spontaneous choice to occur. From the use of the apparatus she further observed in children natural traits of childhood such as concentration, repetition, self-discipline and need for order, which would together guide the routines, organisation and interactions within the classroom.

By meeting the needs of the children, the children were able to show their true nature. Whilst the core principle “We must meet the needs of the child” may sound obvious, there is both a great depth to this principle, and it is recognisable when it is absent. Montessori saw that there were two key factors, alongside the child themselves, that influence development.

These were **the environment** the child was in, and **the experienced adults** who created that environment and shared it with the child.



The environment in each setting plays a unique role in supporting the rapidly evolving needs of children - at any age. Children's physical, social, emotional and personal development grows and changes rapidly, so the environment must stay relevant and appropriate to the child. In this way, the relationships between these features are dynamic; always evolving and adapting to best meet the needs of the child.

Within a Montessori environment all activities are purposeful. Incorporating indirect objectives of independence, concentration, social skills and order, the environment guides the child towards becoming a competent member of society.



Before exploration and learning can take place, the fundamentals of physical and mental well-being must be nurtured. Children need to feel seen, heard and respected. This is where the spiritual environment plays a fundamental role.

Children in the learning environment, exist within their own context and community. Each child comes from diverse family dynamics with unique cultural and religious backgrounds, which will shape the identity of the child and their sense of self.

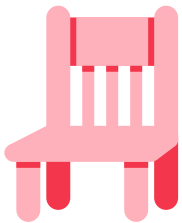
The learning environment becomes an extension of the child's community. Understanding the children's backgrounds fosters a sense of belonging, they feel the adults around them understand who they are. Children recognise themselves in the environment and feel part of the setting community.

What considerations must be present in the Physical Environment?

INDOOR



Free-flow of all areas of the environment, including access to the outdoor environment, allows children to be independent in their access to activities and choice of where to work. This allows children to play and explore independently and in groups. They are engaged in active learning and are able to engage creatively with the resources provided whilst having opportunities for thinking critically. They learn to moderate their behaviour, understand themselves and their bodies and learn to be part of a community.



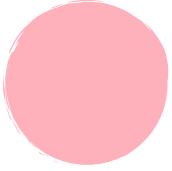
Child sized furniture with accessible activities supports children's independence and freedom of choice. Having safe materials available at the child's level engages their interest and allows them to independently reach for items to explore. The Montessori principles of providing real-life, hands on experiences means materials, equipment, furniture and utensils used are child sized and real - so that children can learn the different properties of, and how to handle, china, glass, wood and metal.

It will be through purposeful movement in engaging with the activities offered, that the child will begin to realise their potential. The basis of each activity is the drive towards independence and providing the coordination and refinement of purposeful movement using real materials. When a child first accesses an activity, it will be the movement that will be interesting not the purpose. The purpose will be achieved when the development of will is achieved e.g., pouring a glass of water and stopping when the glass is full.

With young children using these materials, as supposed to plastic versions, there is a risk that for example meal times will be messy or items will get broken, however changing our perception about these outcomes can provide fantastic invaluable learning opportunities for the child. Having materials to hand to help with cleaning up can also be fun for children. As much as is appropriate for their age, involve them in as much of the process as possible from setting up to clearing away.



Open, clear floor space allows children to move freely in their learning environment, not restricted by obstacles. The children are able to make choices of where they want to work; how long they want to work and with whom – promoting independent choice and decision making.



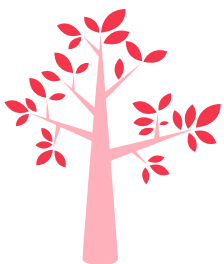
Natural, soft, neutral colours are preferred to bright colours, as are simply decorated spaces to avoid overstimulation or distraction from busy wall decorations. This allows the children to focus on their chosen work. Whilst having natural light is ideal for children's visual development and well-being.



Soft furnishings provide a homely and welcoming atmosphere, supporting children's transition from home to the setting. Belongingness is fundamental to enabling happy and healthy children who can flourish in their learning.

The sense of belonging strongly links with human tendency for gregariousness and the sensitive period for social aspects, so the child will be particularly aware of their social interactions and be driven to build relationships with others. Environments that establish a sense of community and togetherness will allow the child to flourish in this aspect of their development.

OUTDOOR



The outdoor environment is crucial for children's development and wellbeing. It provides holistic learning opportunities and supports development at the child's own pace as they follow their interests. Always having access to the outdoor environment support children in managing their behaviours, their time, their choices and their style of learning.

This can sometimes be challenging for the adults as they may feel that learning opportunities may be limited or that opportunities cannot be offered because of staffing. However if the adults consider the outdoor environment as an extension to the indoor environment then this opens up further opportunities for the child to explore and consolidate their learning.



Outdoor spaces not only open up **opportunities for big movements:** crawling, walking, running, jumping, kicking and playing physical games. They also provide **moments for focused concentration**, to zone in on a tiny insect or flower growing in the grass. Whatever the child's age, interest or ability, nature can provide relevant and suitable engaging exploration.



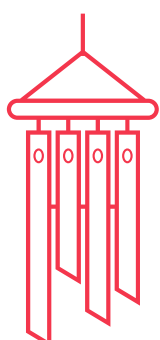
Providing natural objects in a variety of textures, shapes and weight or that make different sounds can be a great way to introduce outdoor sensory experiences, particularly key during children's sensitive period for refinement of the senses. These can then also support learning in other curriculum areas.



Activities and objects that promote muscle development such as balls, objects to squeeze, small ramps to climb and short tunnels are fun and engaging ways to promote children's independent movement.



Creating a comfortable space for both mobile and non-mobile children to **watch the world go** by is a simple way of providing stimulating outdoor experiences. The clouds in the sky, birds flying by, trees moving in the wind, all provide interest and allow children to begin to learn about the world around them.



For children developing their senses, **new sights, sounds, textures and tastes are of great interest**. Hanging wind chimes and mirrors can provide gentle but interesting sounds for children to listen to as well as being visually stimulating.

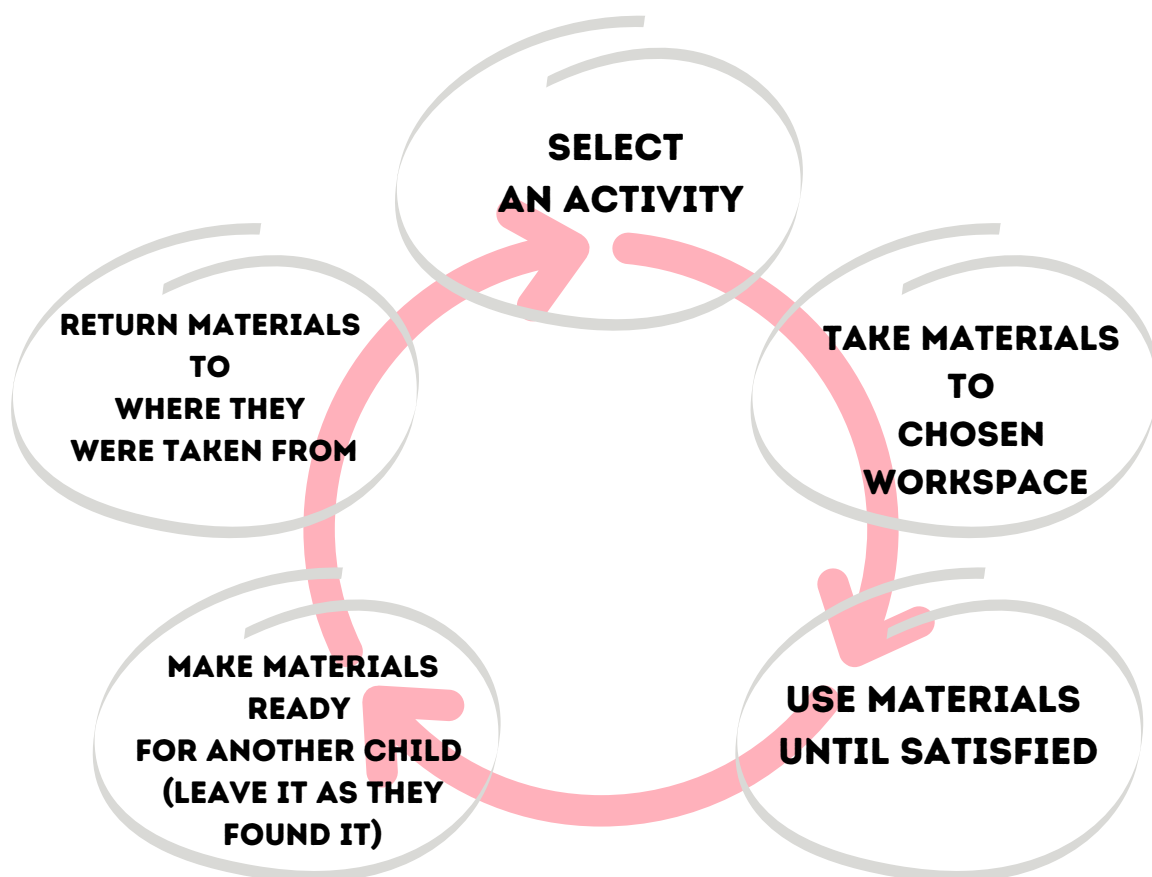
What considerations must be present in the Spiritual Environment?

The spiritual environment should reflect the following principles



Trust: the adults trust and belief in the child – their abilities, choices and decisions; their trust in preparing an environment that meets the child's interest/need/stage of development as well as the child's trust in the caring adults around them. Routine offers security to children, as through routine the environment becomes predictable, controllable and reliable. Children can engage with the environment independently within the safety of boundaries and routine. Whether it's a daily work cycle or numerous cycles of activity, children understand the expectations and can take ownership over their day, knowing what's happening when.

During daily life in a Montessori learning environment, you will see children aged over 2 years old completing what are called 'cycles of activity'.



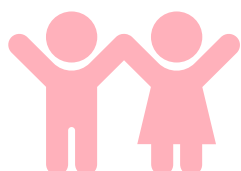
It is important that the cycle is completed every time a material is taken and used. This not only keeps the classroom in good order (taking away the concept of tidy up time), and ready to be accessed by anyone, but the children are taking responsibility for the upkeep of their own environment. **This is the beginning of social responsibility.**

If the setting supports children to engage in uninterrupted work cycle, they become more disciplined, calmer, and more satisfied. By **following their natural rhythms** throughout the work cycle they will be able to concentrate at increasingly deeper levels, leading to an immersion in the activity sometimes called **a state of 'flow'**.

It is important to note that here uninterrupted means **the child is not needlessly interrupted** by an adult. For example, if the adult organises a group time/story time/outside play that the adults says the child must take part in, then that would count as a needless interruption. If the child chooses to stop an activity and join the group then this is not an interruption as it is their choice when they stop.

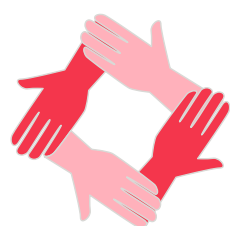


The respect for the child: valuing them as an integral member of the community and listening to the voice of the child. When children have a voice, when they feel that they are listened to, they become at one with their environment.



Freedom of movement: giving children the space and time to explore, investigate, take considered risks and move to follow their individual curiosity. As educators, children's well-being is central to our role. Our work revolves around supporting children's needs, ensuring their well-being and keeping children safe.

This safety may be physical or emotional, and it is the duty of the adult to do all they can to ensure the child comes to no harm. This does not mean the adult allows no risks to be taken, on the contrary. Risks are welcomed by the adult who is aware of and can manage the dangers involved, as taking risks allows the child to better know themselves and their world.



Responsibility, independence and time: providing children with independence and responsibility for themselves and others around them, nurtures a sense of community. Children are able to follow their own interests through independent exploration, boosting confidence, self-esteem and perseverance (if given time).

Maria Montessori identified the need for respectful, kind, committed and knowledgeable educators to support children in reaching their full potential. Having established educators, working in partnership with the child and their families, plays a crucial role in creating these nourishing and nurturing environments to establish strong foundations for children's future learning.

'Thus by preparing a free environment, an environment suited to this moment of life, natural manifestation of the child's psyche, and hence revelation of [their] secret, should come about spontaneously'

Maria Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, 1963



Further topics to follow:

Vertical Grouping

Time

Professional love and empathy

Spiritual Embryonic Stage