

Montessori and me

Dr Aric Sigman, a scientist and father of four shares his view of Montessori education.

I've spent the past five years researching and writing books, papers, and articles on the effects of electronic media on children – in other words, concentrating on the things children should not be doing, or at least doing less of. But, more recently I've been looking at what children should be doing. And this is where my interests collided with Montessori – in the nicest possible way.

I am not one to buy into a particular brand of schooling, nor sign on to a campaign or philosophy for education. But as a scientist, when I look at what research in cognitive neuroscience and child development tells us about what children need, it often seems to me that the researchers could have saved themselves all that time and money by simply asking a Montessori teacher. In fact it often angers me to think that our society feels the need to confirm that real hands-on play and self-generated enquiry are vital for child development and superior to staring at a computer screen.

And so I have a great respect for Montessori teachers and schools who have trusted their instincts and used something that we're told doesn't have any scientific foundation – common sense.

In so doing they've bucked the popular fashions and defied the pressures in education today. They seem to intuitively understand the obvious: that while the outside world has changed and become more complex and technological, children's developmental needs remain the same. While many people surrender to what they see as the inevitable need 'to prepare our children for the world they will be growing up in', I see many at Montessori saying the opposite: the best way to 'to prepare our children for the world they will be growing up in' is to cordon off and protect a child's early years, to create a buffer zone or sanctuary. This will allow a child to



develop a resilience and self-sufficiency in the timeless way that has always been necessary.

Our culture suffers from a phobia of a child being – God forbid – 'understimulated'. Allowing our children to entertain and pacify themselves with few, if any, external props is often misconstrued as being, in some way, neglectful. And yet giving our children the gift of boredom is one of the greatest contributions we can ever make as parents and teachers. Children at Montessori schools will benefit tremendously from being

be told. In short, this kind of hands-on play and learning appears to 'exercise' the brain in a variety of ways that go far beyond the capacities used for the specific task at hand. This type of Montessori life has far-reaching positive consequences for the cognitive, intellectual and social development of children.

While this is not a scientific study, my eldest daughter attended a Montessori school only 300 yards from our front door. Not only was this extremely convenient, but I don't think it's pure coincidence that she recently

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allowed to learn how to stimulate themselves, using their own imagination and resourcefulness. This fosters a form of emotional and intellectual self-sufficiency, a skill that will provide them with enormous advantages in every area from school to marital relationships. Yet the current trend in spoon-feeding entertainment and stimulation to children means they are being deprived of the right to be bored, and, in turn, deprived of learning the process to escape that boredom. It's the cognitive equivalent of preventing any physical exertion in our children to the point that they become unfit through never having had to exert themselves.

The second aspect of Montessori that I love is the sheer amount of three-dimensional real-world, 'non-virtual' experience children have every day. Children are encouraged to touch and examine the real world around them with their own hands. And guess what – this is precisely what research is showing us is best, as if we needed to

started to study for a University degree at the London College of Fashion. I believe that her time at Montessori allowed her creativity and imagination to blossom.

I increasingly find that at times our house resembles a Montessori classroom. I bring all of my scrap printer paper home from my office so the younger children (above) can continue to draw, paint and create paper models either individually or together for hours on end. They intersperse this with skipping rope playing made up games with a ball or any old object. And in this year's bad weather they made things out of snow. People who walk by look wistfully at them with a sense of nostalgia. But I don't see this as old fashioned at all, because it's now even supported by unnecessary scientific research. ■

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