

THE Montessori METHOD



Barbara Isaacs suggests creating an outdoor experience to delight children's senses...

Montessori education is well-known for its sensory focus, which lies at the heart of young children's learning. The sensorial apparatus, activities and materials are designed to enhance the child's understanding of shapes, colours, textures, sounds, tastes and smells.

In Montessori settings exploration using all the senses provides the starting point of the early years curriculum. Practical life and sensorial activities offer young children opportunities to develop manipulative skills and eye-hand coordination, as well as problem solving and thinking skills. This early independence and exploration are the foundation for creative thinking, as well as the basis for later more academic work.

Many of these activities are available to children inside the classroom and are extended to the outdoors when appropriate. The key is to build on learning facilitated by these materials and place it in context of the child's everyday experience. Many of the

sensory materials develop cognitive frameworks which support the child's organisation and classification skills. These learning opportunities can be applied to the free-flow nature of early years practice advocated today; however, Montessori (2007), along with Froebel, recommended close contact with nature and talked about "taking the inside out and bringing the outside in".

Exploring textures

When speaking about textures we usually consider experiences which involve children's hands in finding out about rough, smooth, sticky, knobbly, spiky, silky surfaces. Children in Montessori settings explore fabrics, papers, stones, trees and other natural materials for texture. Starting with spontaneous exploration of treasure baskets and heuristic bags, Montessori toddlers gradually progress on to the more formal activities, matching and grading textures of sand paper and fabrics as well as a variety of different types of paper.

This exploration is accompanied with conversations and discussion during which the child and adult describe the shared experience.

The final stage of this learning is evident when young children begin to use the rich experiences and language originally associated with Montessori sensory

materials in the every day context of their nursery life.

Have you considered providing some of these experiences by organising a sensory walk in your garden and offering children more than just the chance to encounter different textures? Sounds and smells can be easily incorporated into the sensory walk in which textures will guide the children in their exploration.

If you are in the process of designing your garden, you may consider planning for a permanent sensory walk, but you could also design a less permanent experience with opportunities for changes in the surfaces reflecting seasons and providing children with a 'sensory obstacle course'.

Using old tyres you could offer children sensory areas for their feet. There are an array of materials with which you could fill the tyres to make this walk exciting for young children – for example, different textures of sand, pebbles, leaves and grass cuttings, as well as off-cuts of different types of fabrics, paper or plastic materials. You could also mix herbs and scents with your textures to enhance the experience.

And to make it even more fun you could connect the tyres or areas of exploration with walkways using wooded planks to make the challenge of reaching the next 'tyre of discovery' a little more exciting. Using different types of footwear according to the season with bare feet in the spring and summer could make this activity even more fun for the children.

taking it further

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