

Benefits of freedom of movement in the classroom

We are very lucky that over 100 years ago, Maria Montessori observed the need to have freedom to move around in the child. She designed a method of education that not only respected the child's drive for movement, but used and harnessed it to aid academic learning. In the Montessori classroom we find not only freedom of movement, but children using movement to enhance their learning and understanding. We find children independently walking about, carefully avoiding rugs that friends are working on, transitioning freely from indoor to outdoor space, choosing to go to the toilet or have a snack without needing to ask permission.

There is an optimal balance between freedom of movement, "liberty within limits" and structure in a Montessori classroom. With its established rituals and predictable "prepared environment" Montessori classrooms provide a much needed structure for a child. Everything in the classroom has a proper place and defined purpose. Although the children are given freedom to move around, they need to abide by ground rules that are meant to preserve order in the classroom. Each child may choose where he/she would like to work, with whom, with what materials and for how long. However, a child is not allowed to interfere with another child at work (unless invited) or interfere with his personal space, which may be a table or a rug.

Montessori went even further than this freedom of movement. She observed that when movement was part of the learning activity, children were focused and engaged, and understanding was deepened. And thus, the works she developed were geared towards this type of learning. In a Montessori classroom, you will find a little girl reading an Action Card that says 'jump', and jumping energetically around the table before she returns to read the next card that instructs her to 'gallop'. We find a boy taking ten trips back and forth from the shelf to his rug to bring each cube of the Pink Tower before attempting to grade them in sequence – and in those ten trips absorbing a clue about the workings of the decimal system. Another child listens intently to a Sound Box on one table, and walks halfway across the classroom to another table, where he listens to several before deciding on which is the pair. A couple of children count out the quantity of beads they have added together on the rug, and head off to another rug to fetch the cards to match 5,793.

Movement is found all around within a Montessori classroom. Ways for students to move are embedded in almost every Montessori lesson. Some Montessori classrooms also have implemented a movement shelf which includes a variety of prepared movement lessons such as yoga cards, hopping lesson, and jumping rope for students to utilize during work period. By providing these simple opportunities to get students moving within a lesson will help them be more focused and able to learn the material.

Visitors to a Montessori classroom notice right away the importance of movement. The children are free and encouraged to move around, rather than sitting for long periods of time at one desk. As Maria Montessori said, **"The task of the educator lies in seeing that the child does not confound good with immobility and evil with activity."** She was talking about the "old-time discipline" (which still carries through today!) in which sitting still was rewarded as "good behavior" while moving around was often punished as "bad."

Many have remarked on the spontaneous self-discipline that arises in the Montessori environments – many have remarked with wonder at how it is possible these environments are calmer and more peaceful than traditional classrooms where children are made to stay seated and immobile, and where there would seem to be less potential for noise or disturbance. It seems many are now discovering the paradoxical secret about movement.

Several news reports proclaimed about the innovation of the ‘stand-up desk’, the desk that allows school children to stand while they work. The desks were the idea of a teacher who had observed that one boy preferred to ‘shift his weight from one foot to the other as he figured out his fractions’ and another who ‘liked to lean on a high stool and swing his right foot under a desk’. Teachers who decided to give the desks a try were stunned at the impact on focus and improvement in classroom behavior. It is a little sad, though, that given the recognition of how important it is for children to be able to move, and the proven benefits on both behavior and academic achievement, the furthest traditional classrooms are able to go is a longer recess, a bouncing ball for a chair, or a standing desk. It seems very difficult to develop a method that not only allows movement, but embraces it. The freedom of movement that is proving so important to children’s optimal functioning seems to be something very difficult to accommodate in conventional classrooms.

“The hand is the instrument of the intelligence,” Maria said. And if you’ve ever watched an infant grab for and hold onto a brightly colored toy, especially if the toy has an interesting texture, you know what we are talking about. You can almost see the wheels turning in their head as they move the toy around in their hand. **From the very first moment a child sets foot in a Montessori school, he or she is taught to embrace movement as an essential aspect of the daily routine.**

References:

American Montessori Society