

# F.Y.I. at The Caedmon School

## What is Montessori?

## What is Modified Montessori?

*“Teaching children  
according to their  
individual needs...”*

### Introduction

At the time that The Caedmon School was founded in 1962, Montessori education was undergoing its second rise in popularity in the United States. When first introduced by Maria Montessori herself in 1913, her philosophy had galvanized Americans during a time when the expectations of elementary education in this country amounted to little more than “reading, writing, and ‘rithmetic”.

Notwithstanding, over time the distinctly European flavor of her methods caused the initial popularity of Montessori schools to wane – even as her philosophy continued to play a major role in revolutionizing education around the world. It wasn’t until the 1950s that Dr. Nancy McCormick Rambusch, a protégé of Dr. Montessori, successfully reintroduced Montessori schools into this country by reinterpreting the methodology to fit the expectations and demands of the American educational culture.

Just as Dr. Montessori always adapted her lessons to fit the child being taught, Montessori philosophy has adapted and grown to keep pace with the culture in which it is being implemented. This brochure seeks to summarize both the original premises of Montessori education, as well as the ways in which it has evolved at The Caedmon School.

### The Montessori Philosophy

Maria Montessori, Italy’s first female physician, based her educational philosophy and methodology on observations of young children in a school she founded for poor and middle-class Italian children. The essence of

her philosophy, developed early in the 20th century, lies in a number of basic principles in four different areas:

#### Attitudes toward children:

Montessori considered childhood as a separate stage of life and observed that children think and learn differently than adults. She thought it necessary to honor these differences by creating an educational program that is centered upon the child, not the adult teacher. Inherent in her approach is the absolute respect the adult has for each child as an individual.

#### How children learn:

Montessori observed that young children learn best when presented with new concepts using concrete materials. The manipulation of objects in the environment seemed to directly affect their cognitive development. Her contention was that their eventual ability to conceptualize as adolescents was a result of their sensorial experience as young children. (This was later affirmed by Piaget in his theory of cognitive development and is commonly accepted today as the “hands on” lessons for pre-K and elementary children.) Teaching children through the use of such concrete “manipulatives,” therefore, is a major tenet of Montessori’s philosophy.

Traditional schooling is designed around the subject matter to be covered, rather than the child to be taught. In a Montessori environment, there is an understanding that we teach children, not just subject matter. As a result, Montessori teaching takes into account that children have individual learning styles. They progress at their own rates through the varied stages of social and

cognitive development. They often display great variability in performance, perhaps being well advanced in small motor skills, but below average in visual perception. The Montessori program is individualized to take these factors into account.

### **Combined grade levels:**

Since children of the same age often vary widely in particular skills and learning styles, Montessori created her own “grade levels” that combined traditional age-based grades into more versatile classroom environments. Children are thus able to receive the level of challenge and support that best suits their needs in any given subject matter.

### **The physical environment:**

The Montessori classroom is a social and instructional “home base”. It is a carefully prepared environment in which self-directed, independent learning can take place. The teacher acts as facilitator. By preparing “learning situations” and (in the elementary levels) scheduled instruction in the core curricular areas, the teacher guides the children in the discovery of new skills and understanding.

Standards for the physical and aesthetic appearance of the classroom are very high and the children participate in maintaining them. Materials and furniture are organized, clean, and well cared for. By “owning” their environment, the children develop a whole-group identity that encourages independence, self-guided learning, and responsibility.

### **Behavior and behavior management:**

It was Montessori’s premise that the best behavior management was based in self-control. She believed it was necessary to educate children to manage their own behavior, rather than depend on outside “discipline” to do so. She began with the presumption that children enter the school community unfamiliar with the appropriate ways of acting. It then becomes the responsibility of the adult to teach the children what is acceptable, by giving them the words and actions, and modeling the appropriate behavior.

Montessori considered behavioral skills as important as reading, writing, and arithmetic, since they create an atmosphere of respect and cooperation, and make possible an environment in which academic learning can take place.

### **Modified Montessori**

Considering how radically innovative Maria Montessori was in her own time, it seems certain that her views would have changed over the course of the century, just as children themselves have changed in response to our changing culture and advancing technology.

Caedmon considers Montessori education to be an organic process, one that evolves as children evolve. Current Montessori practices at Caedmon, therefore, incorporate a number of modifications to Montessori’s original methodology. For instance, while traditional Montessori combines three age groups into each academic “level”, Caedmon combines only two, retaining the first year of school (Beginners), first year of elementary school (Kindergarten), and final year before graduation (fifth grade) as “transitional” single-age grades.

### **In the Early Program:**

Contrary to Montessori’s original priority, fantasy play is encouraged at Caedmon using open-ended activities and materials that lend themselves to creative play. Likewise, art, music, and movement are emphasized by providing a variety of materials and activities to encourage free expression and artistic ideas.

Interpersonal socialization is key. A great deal of attention is given to how individual children get along with one another.

### **In the Elementary Program:**

Fewer of the specialized materials designed by Maria Montessori are used, many of which are no longer appropriate for children who are growing up in the fast-paced, New York City culture of today.

Direct instruction in math and language arts is organized around small instructional groups, within which individual differences in learning style are accommodated.

More “traditional” elements, such as homework, classroom testing, and standardized testing are incorporated in order to prepare children for middle school after graduating from Caedmon.

### **Conclusion**

At Caedmon, our interpretation of Montessori has evolved thoughtfully over forty years. As a result, what we call the “spirit” of Montessori prevails and the most important aspects of her philosophy continue to be implemented at all levels.