

“Help Me Do It By Myself”

Linda Stone talks to the owner of **Milkshake Montessori Nursery** in Whitton about how the **Montessori Method** helps children become independent learners.

Sonya Kanchan-Lal was working as a fashion buyer when her father, a GP, first discussed his retirement and selling the building that housed his surgery. “Don’t sell it, dad!” said Sonya “I want to turn it into a nursery.”

“My father was a carer” she goes on. “I suppose it was natural for me to start a nursery. And I chose Montessori because the philosophy truly fosters a love of learning and equips children with a very high level of skills to take into Reception.”

So what actually is the Montessori Method? Sonya explains. “It was developed 100 years ago by Dr Maria Montessori and recognises that children want to be free to learn by themselves and will naturally do so in the right environment. In the Montessori classroom, which provides carefully planned activities and specialised equipment for different levels of learning, a child is completely free to choose how he or she learns.”

Although Milkshake Montessori caters for children from age 6 months, a Montessori education starts at age 2. A Montessori nursery traditionally divides a day into 2 x 3 hour “work cycles.” During this time, children choose the “work” they want to do using both the indoor and outdoor areas of the nursery. I’m slightly horrified by the use of the word “work.” Sonya laughs. “It’s only adults that make the distinction between work and play and often suggest that play is more fun” she explains. Dr Maria Montessori believed that the “normalised” child is happy when industriously involved in a challenging activity which he or she is gradually mastering. In this situation, a child is “at one” with himself and his learning environment and experiences joy.”

Nevertheless, the afternoon “work cycle” is broken up by cooking, music and movement, dance, songs, stories, rhymes, yoga and art taught by specialist teachers. “I think it’s vital that our curriculum includes these” she says. “They provide different types of stimulation and learning opportunities.”

Each child has a personal work mat, much as an older child would have a desk for study. This fosters independence and gives a child ownership both of the space and the activity with which he or she is engaged. At a Montessori nursery or school, there is only ever 1 piece of each equipment. When a child is using a particular piece, other children must ask permission to join in. Otherwise, a child must wait until that piece of equipment becomes free. “It really teaches the children about sharing” comments Sonya. “Children learn that although they are industriously involved in their individual work, they are also part of a co-operative community.”

Sonya tells me more about the Montessori equipment. Each individual piece is designed to teach a range of specific skills. Once shown how to use a piece of equipment, a child can then experiment until he gets it right. Then, the equipment is designed to provide another challenge, so that learning becomes progressively more difficult, providing great opportunities for children to progress and experience a corresponding sense of accomplishment.

The Montessori Method also encourages children to focus on their own individual needs. For instance, they help themselves to a drink or snack when they are hungry rather than

eating at a prescribed time, which encourages them to focus on their actual appetite. Children also use adult plates, cups and crockery - there is no plastic! They learn from an early age how it feels to hold a cup and plate, how heavy it is and what happens if something breaks. In so doing, they learn to respect the things they are handling.

Sonya shows me round the nursery. The atmosphere is calm and the children are happily and industriously engaged. When I see the equipment, the penny drops for me and I finally understand what the Montessori Method is all about. If, after reading this article, you feel you still don't quite get it, I'd encourage you to go along to your nearest Montessori nursery and see for yourself. The experience will be enlightening.

Extra

Sonya Kanchan-Lal is the owner of **Milkshake Montessori Nursery** in Whitton. For further information, visit www.milkshakemontessori.co.uk