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CELEBRATING 150 YEARS

On 31 August 2020 the world celebrated 150 years since the birth of Maria Montessori. In commemoration, we share the highlights of her remarkable life.

Biography of Maria Montessori (courtesy AMI)

Maria Montessori was born on 31 August 1870 in the town of Chiaravalle, Italy. Her father, Alessandro, was an accountant in the civil service, and her mother, Renilde Stoppani, was well educated and had a passion for reading.

The Montessori family moved to Rome in late 1874, and in 1876 the young Maria enrolled in the local state school on Via di San Nicolo da Tolentino. As her education progressed, she began to break through the barriers which constrained women's careers. From 1886 to 1890 she continued her studies at the Regio Istituto Tecnico Leonardo da Vinci, which she entered with the intention of becoming an engineer. This was unusual at the time as most girls who pursued secondary education studied the classics rather than going to technical school.

Upon her graduation, Montessori's parents encouraged her to take up a career in teaching, one of the few occupations open to women at the time, but she was determined to enter medical school and become a doctor. Her father opposed this course—medical school was then an all-male preserve—and initially Maria was refused entry by the head of school. She was undeterred, apparently ending the unsuccessful interview with the professor by saying, "I know I shall become a doctor".

In 1890 Montessori enrolled at the University of Rome to study physics, mathematics and natural sciences, receiving her diploma two years later. This enabled her to enter the Faculty of Medicine, as one of the first women in Italy, and the first to study at the University of Rome. Montessori stood out not just because of her gender, but because she was actually intent on mastering the subject matter. She won a series of scholarships at medical school which, together with the money she earned through private tuition, enabled her to pay for most of her medical education.



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Her time at medical school was not easy. She faced prejudice from her male colleagues and had to work alone on dissections since these were not allowed to be done in mixed classes. But she was a dedicated student, and on 10 July 1896 became one of the first female doctors in Italy, and with this distinction also became known across the country.

In September of the same year she was asked to represent Italy at the International Congress for Women in Berlin, and in her speech to the Congress she developed a thesis for social reform, arguing that women should be entitled to equal wages with men. A reporter covering the event asked her how her patients responded to a female doctor. She replied, "... they know intuitively when someone really cares about them.... It is only the upper classes that have a prejudice against women leading a useful existence." [1]

On her return to Rome, in November 1896, Montessori went to work as surgical assistant at Santo Spirito Hospital in Rome. Much of her work there was with the poor, and particularly with their children. As a doctor she was noted for the way in which she 'tended' her patients, making sure they were warm and properly fed as well as diagnosing and treating their illnesses. In 1897 she volunteered to join a research programme at the psychiatric clinic of the University of Rome, and it was here that she worked alongside Giuseppe Montesano, with whom a romance was to develop.

As part of her work at the clinic she would visit Rome's asylums for the children with mental disorders (as they were called in those days), seeking patients for treatment at the clinic. She relates how, on one such visit, the caretaker of a children's asylum told her with disgust how the children grabbed crumbs off the floor after their meal. Montessori realised that in such a bare, unfurnished room the children were desperate for sensorial stimulation and activities for their hands, and that this deprivation was contributing to their condition.

She began to read all she could on the subject of children with learning differences, and in particular she studied the groundbreaking work of two early 19th century Frenchmen, Jean-Marc Itard, who had made his name working with the 'wild boy of Aveyron', and Edouard Séguin, his student.

In 1897 Montessori's work with the asylum children began to receive more prominence. The 28-year-old Montessori was asked to address the National Medical Congress in Turin, where she advocated the controversial theory that the lack of adequate provision for children with mental and emotional disorders was a cause of their delinquency.

Expanding on this, she addressed the National Pedagogical Congress the following year, presenting a vision of social progress and political economy rooted in educational measures. She asked for the foundation of medical-pedagogical institutes and a special training for teachers working with special needs children. This notion of social reform through education was an idea that was to develop and mature in Montessori's thinking throughout her life.

In 1899 Montessori visited Bicêtre Hospital in Paris where Séguin had further developed Itard's technique of sensorial education in his schools for children with disabilities. Montessori was so keen to understand his work properly that she translated his book *Traitement moral, hygiène et education des idiots* (1846) into Italian. Highly critical of the regimented schooling of the time, Séguin emphasised respect and understanding for each individual child. He created practical apparatus and equipment to help develop the sensory perceptions and motor skills of intellectually challenged children, which Montessori was later to use in new ways.



Montessori's involvement with the Lega nazionale per l'educazione dei fanciulli deficienti led to her appointment as co-director, with Giuseppe Montesano, of a new institution called the Orthophrenic School. The school took children with a broad spectrum of disorders and proved to be a turning point in Montessori's life, marking a shift in her professional identity from physician to educator. Until now her ideas about the development of children were only theories, but the small school, set up along the lines of a teaching hospital, allowed her to put these ideas into practice. Montessori spent two years working at the Orthophrenic School, experimenting with and refining the materials devised by Itard and Séguin and bringing a scientific, analytical attitude to the work; teaching and observing the children by day and writing up her notes by night.

The relationship with Giuseppe Montesano had developed into a love affair, and in 1898 Maria gave birth to a son, named Mario, who was given into the care of a family who lived in the countryside near Rome. Maria visited Mario often, but it was not until he was older that he came to know that Maria was his mother. A strong bond was nevertheless created, and in later years he collaborated and travelled with his mother, continuing her work after her death.



In 1901 Montessori left the Orthophrenic School and immersed herself in her own studies of educational philosophy and anthropology. In 1904 she took up a post as a lecturer at the Pedagogic School of the University of Rome, which she held until 1908. In one lecture she told her students, "The subject of our study is humanity; our purpose is to become teachers. Now, what really makes a teacher is love for the human child; for it is love that transforms the social duty of the educator into the higher consciousness of a mission"[2].

During this period Rome was growing very rapidly, and in the fever of speculative development, some construction companies were going bankrupt, leaving unfinished building projects which quickly attracted squatters. One such development, which stood in the San Lorenzo district, was rescued by a group of wealthy bankers who undertook a basic restoration, dividing larger apartments into small units for impoverished working families. With parents out at work all day, the younger children wreaked havoc on the newly completed buildings. This prompted the developers to approach Maria Montessori to provide ways of occupying the children during the day to prevent further damage to the premises.

Montessori grasped the opportunity of working with typical children and, bringing some of the educational materials she had developed at the Orthophrenic School, she established her first Casa dei Bambini or 'Children's House', which opened on 6 January 1907. A small opening ceremony was organised, but few had any expectations for the project. Montessori felt differently, "I had a strange feeling which made me announce emphatically that here was the opening of an undertaking of which the whole world would one day speak." [3]

She put many different activities and other materials into the children's environment but kept only those that engaged them. What Montessori came to realise was that children who were placed in an environment where activities were designed to support their natural development had the power to educate themselves. She was later to refer to this as auto-education. In 1914 she wrote, "I did not invent a method of education, I simply gave some little children a chance to live".

The children in the Casa dei Bambini made extraordinary progress, and soon 5-year-olds were writing and reading. By the autumn of 1908 there were five Case dei Bambini operating, four in Rome and one in Milan. News of Montessori's new approach spread rapidly, and visitors arrived to see for themselves how she was achieving such results. Within a year the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland began transforming its kindergartens into Case dei Bambini, and the spread of the new educational approach began.

In the summer of 1909 Maria Montessori gave the first training course in her approach to around 100 students. Her notes from this period became her first book, published that same year in Italy, which appeared in translation in the United States in 1912 as *The Montessori Method*, reaching second place on the U.S. nonfiction bestseller list. Soon afterwards it was translated into 20 different languages. It has become a major influence in the field of education.

On 20 December 1912 Montessori's mother died at the age of 72. Maria was deeply affected by this event, and in the year following her mother's death she brought her 14-year-old son, Mario, to Rome to live with her.

A period of great expansion in the Montessori approach now followed. Montessori societies, training programmes and schools sprang to life all over the world, and from then on Montessori's life would be dedicated to spreading the educational approach she had developed by delivering courses and giving lectures in many countries. Before and during WWI she travelled three times to America, where there was much interest for her original approach to education. Her son Mario accompanied her during the last two journeys.

On returning from the USA after Mario's marriage to his first wife, Helen Christy, at the end of 1917, Montessori settled in Barcelona, Spain, where a *Seminari-Laboratori de Pedagogia*, an opportunity to experiment with her new

pedagogy, had been created for her. Her son and his new wife joined her, and her four grandchildren spent their formative years there: two boys, Mario Jr and Rolando, and two girls, Marilena and Renilde. Renilde, her youngest grandchild, was until 2000 the General Secretary and then President (until 2005) of the Association Montessori Internationale, the organisation set up by Maria Montessori in 1929 to continue her work.

Maria nursed an ambition to create a permanent centre for research and development into her approach to early-years education, but any possibility of this happening in her lifetime in Spain was thwarted by the rise of fascism in Europe. By 1933 all Montessori schools in Germany had been closed and an effigy of her was burned above a bonfire of her books in Berlin. In 1936, two years after Montessori refused to cooperate with Mussolini's plans to incorporate Italian Montessori schools into the fascist youth movement, all Montessori schools in Italy were closed. The outbreak of civil war in Spain forced Montessori to abandon her home in Barcelona, a British battleship took her to England in the summer of 1936. Mario and his children joined her and later that summer the refugees travelled to the Netherlands to stay in the family home of Ada Pierson, the daughter of a Dutch banker. Mario, by now estranged from his first wife, was later to marry Ada.



In 1939 Mario and Maria embarked on a journey to India to give a 3-month training course in Madras (Chennai) followed by a lecture tour; they were not to return for nearly 7 years. With the outbreak of war, as Italian citizens, Mario was interned, and Maria put under house arrest. Her 70th birthday request to the Indian government - that Mario should be released and restored to her - was granted, and together they trained over 1500 Indian teachers. Still under house arrest, the Montessoris spent two years in the rural hill station of Kodaikanal, and this experience guided Maria Montessori's thinking towards the nature of the relationships among all living things, a theme she was to develop until the end of her life and which became known as Cosmic Education, an approach for children aged 6 to 12. The years in India proved to be very important for Montessori, giving her the opportunity to enrich her philosophy and approach to education. She met Gandhi, Nehru and Tagore, and was generally very much taken by the spirituality of the Indians and their generosity and kindness towards her.

In 1946 they returned to the Netherlands and to the grandchildren who had spent the war years in the care of Ada Pierson, only to return to India for another two years. In 1949 she received the first of three nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize. One of her last major public engagements was in London in 1951 when she attended the 9th International Montessori Congress. On 6 May 1952, at the holiday home of the Pierson family in the Netherlands, she died in the company of her son, Mario, to whom she bequeathed the legacy of her work.

[1] Julia Maria, "Le Feminisme Italien: entrevue avec Mlle. Montessori", *L'Italie*, Rome, August 16, 1896. Quoted in Rita Kramer, *Maria Montessori: A Biography* (Chicago 1976), p. 52.

[2] Maria Montessori, *Pedagogical Anthropology* (New York 1913), p. 17. Quoted in Kramer, p. 98.

[3] E.M. Standing, *Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work* (New York 1984), p. 38.

Biography from the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) website:

<https://www.montessori-ami.org/resource-library/facts/biography-maria-montessori>

