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# Play = Work = Play

## Why children work in Montessori



BY THE TIME A 6-YEAR-OLD CHILD graduates after three years in Montessori, not only do they know how to find the answers to “ $56 \div 8$ ”, “ $2893 + 7065$ ” or “ $2381 \times 3$ ”, they also know that “beautiful” is an adjective, “quietly” is an adverb—and how to use them in a sentence. To parents, that may sound like students must go through a very tedious and rigid process in order to achieve such results, but that is far from the truth. In my Montessori class, I have had children chasing me to request more ‘challenges,’ whether it is doing arithmetic or writing sentences. I have also had children dragging me to the dressing frames to ask me to show them how to do the buttons, or to help them put the last blocks on their vertical ‘Brown Stairs’ tower because they can’t reach the top themselves. When, in the end, they manage to accomplish these challenges independently, they clap, skip and cheer. Their personal joy and sense of achievement are far greater than that of being given a sticker.

All these great results that a Montessori child achieves are gained through ‘work.’ Children work in Montessori classes, and work brings them serenity, joy and confidence.

In the adult world, work seems to be stereotyped as something negative: “I’ve got a lot of work to do—reports, meet-

ings and chores.” But take a moment to imagine you are doing something you love every day. How would that make you feel? Most likely, you would feel energized on waking up each morning and very satisfied at the end of your day. That is exactly what we want to achieve in a Montessori classroom.

Work and play are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, Dr. Maria Montessori once stated: “Play is the work of the child.” In Montessori, we strive to combine work and play to achieve optimal results. For example, instead of having children practice holding a pencil, we invite them to squeeze an eye-dropper, tongs, pegs or tweezers to strengthen their finger muscles first. And instead of having children sit at a table to memorize times tables, we invite them to lay out beads to find out what “5 times 8” is.

In Montessori, ‘work’ is interesting and fun. Each set of ‘work’ is designed and presented according to children’s interests and needs, based on Dr. Maria Montessori’s extensive experience with children and Montessori teachers’ observations. For instance, children learn to differentiate the functions of words using a task called “The Farm.” By selecting a brown cow instead of a black one, children learn that “brown” and “black” are

two “describing words” that help us to tell the difference between things.

In Montessori, ‘work’ is children’s free choice. We believe that each child should pursue what their inner voice guides them to do, and to progress at their own pace. That is why children are free to choose or leave their ‘work.’ And, of course, if a child is intrigued by their ‘work,’ they are free to do it as many times as they wish, just like any ‘play’ activity. And through repeated practice comes a perfection of skills and an understanding of ‘work.’

For example, I may invite a child to join me for a lesson on static addition using golden beads but, if the child declines, I respect his choice. Or, if he watches a presentation of ‘work,’ I give him a choice—either leave this ‘work’ until later or try to do it independently. Such freedom is no less than a child would enjoy in any other play-based Early Years class.

Some may worry that if the choice is left to the child that they might choose not to learn but, surprisingly, during my years as a Montessori teacher, it is often the children who come to me to request lessons on advanced ‘work,’ especially after they have watched their friends enjoying it.

Montessori ‘work’ has many similarities to ‘play.’ But one major reason why we call Montessori materials and activities ‘work’ rather than ‘play’ is because the materials and activities are purposeful, i.e. by the time students have finished a piece of ‘work,’ they will have achieved a certain outcome. Take the ‘Pink Tower,’ for example. By the time a child masters this ‘work,’ they are able to build a tower from the biggest cube to the smallest cube and, during the practice phase, they learn to distinguish between sizes of objects.

*Pupils aged 2–6 years at Saigon Star International School attend a Montessori class for one hour each day. ■*