

# MONTESSORI MATTERS

MONTESSORI ACADEMY OF LONDON

EXPECT MORE FROM EDUCATION

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## Movement matters

*A message from Margaret Whitley*

*An age-old truth: Life requires movement!*

Winter in Canada is upon us and it is a crisp, chilly day out which makes some of us want to curl up and be sedentary. Instead we make the choice to embrace this weather and get out for a walk.

Not only have we moved, but we now feel a bit healthier and more alert, we have taken control of the situation and made a choice to do something against what has become a tendency. We are also being human and, while moving, we are stimulating our senses with the cold, the brightness, the sound and even the increased oxygen intake. This is what we have done for thousands of years.

According to *BrainRules.net*, "The human brain evolved under conditions of almost constant motion. From this, one might predict that the optimal environment for processing information would include motion. That is exactly what one finds. Indeed, the best business meeting would have everyone walking at about 1.8 miles per hour.

"Researchers studied two elderly populations that had led different

lifestyles: one sedentary and one active. Cognitive scores were profoundly influenced. Exercise positively affected executive function, spatial tasks, reaction times and quantitative skills."

Movement really does matter. Historically, it has allowed us to connect with each other, to get food, to build our shelters. So, although many of these things no longer require movement, we remain hardwired to move.

*Because Montessori emphasizes hands-on learning, children are able to master information more quickly and easily than when conventional educational methods are used.*

Movement also enmeshes learning. We can simply watch or listen to something but when we physically move to engage with the concept or, in the case of Montessori, with the material, the learning is much deeper, more lasting and ultimately more transferrable to other situations.

The *Montessori for Everyone* blog article "The Neurology of Montessori," discusses

Dr. Steven Hughes' work researching Montessori outcomes and the success of Montessori education in relation to movement.

In his work, the article notes, Hughes "focuses on the tactile methods of Montessori as they relate to brain development, asserting that the hands are a child's strongest link to the brain. When motor movements are repeated they become templates in the brain that serve as a starting point for new experiences."

The article continues, "Because Montessori emphasizes hands-on learning, children are able to master information more quickly and easily than when conventional educational methods are used. The repetition of activities, multisensory materials, and self-guided learning common to the Montessori classroom create the perfect 'recipe' for human brain development."

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# Movement inspires expression

*Montessori's emphasis on freedom of movement reaches far beyond exercise.*

When you hear "movement matters" you might immediately think of the physical benefits of exercise and increased gross and fine motor skills that children running, jumping and playing outdoors experience. Those benefits are indeed hugely valuable, but science is proving that the benefits of movement are more than just physical.

In an article from *Mind/Shift*, KQED's blog about education, Dr. Sian Beilock of the University of Chicago was quoted in support of Maria Montessori's long-held assertion that children learn better when they are allowed to move around.

"A very strong predictor of academic achievement was how early kids were moving, exploring their world. When kids can explore their surroundings, all of a sudden, things change," Dr. Beilock said.

"There is evidence that our ability to use our hands affects the structure and functioning of the brain."

So, movement really does make a difference. Even though they may not realize it now, the concept isn't lost on our students. "Movement matters tremendously in reinforcing education," says Montessori Alumnus Matt Frewen, who graduated in 2004.

Unlike his contemporaries in conventional elementary school classrooms, Matt recalls that he and his Montessori classmates were not only allowed to move around the classroom, but encouraged to move in order to learn better. In his case, that movement often accompanied a musical instrument: the drums.

"I remember being encouraged to express myself," Matt recalls. "There was an opportunity for me to learn and express myself through a musical instrument; and the chance to practise and perform regularly had a tremendous

impact on me."

As a professional drummer and music educator, movement figures prominently in his personal and professional life.

Currently residing in Seattle, Washington, Matt credits Montessori for his passion for self-expression, movement and music. "Music and the arts were treated with the same importance as any other subject or activity, and that creative skill has proven invaluable (to me)," Matt says.

"I really believe movement is another form of expression. Whether it be expressing your emotions through gestures, keeping pace and moving in sports and exercise, through the

Matt Frewen doing what he loves.



Scene from our musical performance, "The Little Mermaid" (2015)

artistic movements of a sculptor or painter, through the rhythms and movements of dance, or, for me, through the movement in music playing drums."

The physical freedom encouraged in traditional Montessori classrooms, and the music and physical education lessons in our programming reach much farther than merely letting the children 'burn off energy.' It encourages them to create, collaborate and engage with their surroundings — ultimately creating a richer learning experience. •



# Space and movement make a difference

One of the pillars of the Montessori Method is the prepared environment - its careful design, based on the developmental needs of the child is paramount. That design considers movement and activity in all of the spaces.

Montessori educators spend time extensively observing how children use and function within the environment. They look for different types of spaces for the children to work, such as on a table, floor, inside, outside. They look for the type of movement required within the space: Is it just wide open and therefore does not allow for the further development of coordination while they move within and throughout the space? Does the space allow for quiet tucked away work to happen or work to happen with a large group of students? Does the space allow for movement to engage with the natural environment-plants, animals, gardens, outdoor space? All of this is done through the perspective of the student.

There are generally six aspects, or principles, to the Prepared Environment:

- Freedom
- Structure and Order
- Beauty
- Nature and Reality
- Social Environment
- Intellectual Environment — Research indicates the other five have to happen first for this sixth aspect to be the most effective.

To learn more about each of these aspects, and why the prepared environment is so important to the success a child's experiences with Montessori education visit this link:

[montessoritraining.blogspot.ca/2009/03/principles-of-montessori-prepared.html](http://montessoritraining.blogspot.ca/2009/03/principles-of-montessori-prepared.html)

Every part of our Montessori environments is purposeful and carefully thought through. It is why, over the last number of years, Montessori Academy has gradually tackled the expensive refurbishing of our outdoor environments. Your support of this aspect of Montessori education has been, and continues to be, critical. And we thank you for it!

Every level in the school benefits from these improvements. We began with our Oxford Naturalized Learning Environment several years ago. Last spring we addressed our Westmount outdoor learning environment. Our hope is to modify and/or upgrade and refurbish our Elementary Courtyard; to add to our treehouse, which was generously donated and built by

**The child can only develop fully by means of experience in his environment.**

—Maria Montessori, *"The Secret of Childhood,"* 1966.



*Improvements to our Westmount location took shape in 2015 and have enhanced the learning experience for our students.*

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*Movement matters—continued from page 1.*

But movement at Montessori Academy of London (and generally in Montessori) comes in all forms:

- **General purposeful movement at the choice of the child** – to get some material, move to another more suitable spot to work, to go to the bathroom, to collaborate with others, to travel to another classroom for specialties.
- **Activities that require more directed movement regularly** – outdoor time, sports, physical education, music, French, art, and just about everything else in the classroom.
- **Practical Life** – activities for all levels of child that help them to develop self-help skills for independence and opportunities to positively engage in adult life.

Notice how none of these examples cite technology. While technology can be a motivator for movement – for example the recent “Fitbit” health tracker trend; it often replaces

other elements of movement. A child passively watching a program on a tablet, has much less benefit than any kind of physical movement. Even quietly doing a puzzle or watching out the car window has more brain activity than watching an educational video. Imagine in “ancient” history how many times people moved to turn on the TV or turn up the volume; or went to the local shop to buy goods or actually moved around a kitchen to prepare food!

Despite the cries for better physical health and its many benefits, we need to be mindful that we are all valuing movement and particularly for our children and the process of learning.

So in the words of Aristotle, “life requires movement.” You can explain over and over again how to swim, but you actually can’t learn to swim until you do it. Movement matters, more than we can imagine! •

*Space and movement—continued from page 3.*

one of our own parents; and to improve our natural environment at 718 Waterloo Street Toddler and Casa location.

With all of these modifications and upgrades, we have considered the type of activity and movement, the age of students, opportunity for learning outside, and learning more about our natural world.

Movement takes a high priority in the design and creation of our Montessori

classroom spaces, both inside and outside. This has been a part of the

Montessori approach since Dr. Montessori observed how children interact and respond to their environments.

We aspire as a school to be a model of this very unrecognized priority in conventional education and hope to see much more consideration of this in all programs in years to come. •

**The first aim of the prepared environment is, as far as it is possible, to render the growing child independent of the adult.**

—*Maria Montessori, "The Secret of Childhood," 1966.*



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