

## What is the Prepared Environment?

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*Bright, inviting, warm, and beautiful.* These are a few descriptive words that typify the Montessori environment, fascinating both children and adults alike. One must ask, “How does a classroom become so inviting, beautiful and conducive to learning?” The answer emerges from one facet of the environment itself – the Montessori teacher, or guide.

A Montessori classroom is commonly referred to as a prepared environment. Here, a learning laboratory has been created in which the child is encouraged to explore, discover, and be creative. A prepared environment is one where a community of children learns social and academic skills while developing into independent beings. Maria Montessori realized the unique way in which children learn and understood the notion of a child’s absorbent mind. “Realizing the absorbent nature of the child’s mind, she has prepared for him a special environment; and then, placing the child within it, has given him freedom to live in it, absorbing what he finds there” (Standing, 1998, p. 265).

Characteristic of the prepared environment is its abundance of order, beauty, accessibility, and availability of real materials as opposed to toys. A Montessori classroom is filled with a vast array of sequential learning activities known as Montessori materials. They are displayed on open shelves, in order, without clutter, and each object has a purpose and special location. Children gain independence from the prepared environment as they move about choosing their own work and making their own decisions. Standing (1998) describes that the aim of the prepared environment is to “render the growing child independent of the adult. That is, it is a place where he can do things for himself – live his own life – without immediate help of adults... In doing so, [the child] becomes conscious of his own powers” (p. 267).

The structure and order of the prepared environment plays a significant role in children’s learning and development. Lillard (2007) states, “in addition to carefully thought-out objects facilitating the child’s independence and corresponding to the child’s...sense of order, the Montessori teacher organizes the classroom in a logical way” (p. 309). Furthermore, an Early Childhood classroom will have “areas for Practical Life, Sensorial Materials, Math, Geography, Language, and so on. Within that order, each object has its place on a shelf. Teachers rotate what is available, based on where children in the class are in the sequences of materials, and what interests them” (Lillard, 2007, p. 309).

The classroom, therefore, is not only spatially ordered but also ordered in terms of where items are located. Additionally, each activity has its own organization within itself. “Order means that the child is assured the possibility of a completed cycle of activity in using the materials. He will find all the pieces needed for the exercise he chooses... He will return the materials to the place – and the condition- in which he found them... the child becomes an integral partner in maintaining the order of the classroom” (Paula Polk Lillard in Lillard, 2007, p. 309-310).

One of the first duties the teacher has in her role as the ‘dynamic link’ is to meticulously prepare the environment. For example, all materials and apparatus should be in pristine condition, complete, and in their proper places. The Montessori teacher constantly assures that all items in the classroom are ready for use. Standing (1998) elaborates, “It is one of the main duties of the directress to maintain order in the environment; and be ever on the watch lest it be impaired in the smallest degree...everything must be always and absolutely in its right place” (p. 271). Likewise, the teacher herself should appear neat and orderly, for her presence in the environment impacts the core of the classroom. She must study her own actions and movement in order that a sense of calm and peace may permeate throughout the environment. Montessori believed, “care for one’s own person must form part of the environment in which the child lives; the teacher herself is the most vital part of this world” (Montessori, 1967, p. 271).

The notion of the prepared environment and its high degree of order directly correlates to the unique way in which children naturally learn and absorb information. The guide plays a vital role in the creation and maintenance of the specially prepared environment. The influence of the prepared environment in the Montessori setting is what allows for children to take pride in their discoveries and forms the foundation for a lifetime love of learning.