

Family Connection

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The Montessori Method and Independence: An Aid to Life

By Heather White

Maria Montessori saw the goal of education not just as a training of the mind, but as an aid to life. She affirmed that it was the adult’s duty to guide children along the path to independence, towards which they have a natural tendency. In doing so, Montessori believed children would grow into capable, confident adults, thriving in life.

MARIA MONTESSORI ONCE SAID,
“Independence is not a static condition; it is a continuous conquest, and in order to reach not only freedom, but also strength, and the perfecting of one’s powers, it is necessary to follow this path of unremitting toil.”

In Montessori classrooms, independence is an organic, ongoing process. From an infant who learns to manipulate a toy on their own, to a toddler who learns to pour their own water and tie their own shoes, to an adolescent who learns to make money and manage finances, the process of independence gradually builds over time. In fact, Maria Montessori once said, “Independence is not a static condition; it is a continuous conquest, and in order to reach not only freedom, but also strength, and the perfecting of one’s powers, it is necessary to follow this path of unremitting toil.” Just as the child learns and grows, so too, does the level and type of independence they seek.

EARLY CHILDHOOD

During the first six years of life, “the child’s nature is to aim directly and energetically at functional independence.” Children from birth to six are fixated on how things work and want to discover things for themselves. They are mastering movement and physical capabilities as they learn to do things on their own. Some common ways that young children can demonstrate independence include:

- ❖ Care of self activities including brushing one’s hair, brushing one’s teeth, and getting dressed
- ❖ Care of environment activities including washing tables, washing dishes, sweeping, and dusting
- ❖ Preparing one’s own snack
- ❖ Pouring one’s own drink



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ELEMENTARY

Elementary-aged students move beyond wanting to know how things work to exploring the reasoning for why things work and if there is another way. Although the Elementary-aged child enjoys collaborative group projects, their focus is centered on becoming independent thinkers. Providing opportunities for Elementary students to think for themselves and with their peers will allow them to hone their planning and organizational skills, giving them a solid understanding of their own capabilities.

Through Cosmic Education, Elementary students are also better able to understand themselves as they develop a “vision of the universe” that allows them to recognize how all things and all people are interconnected and interdependent. This knowledge empowers Elementary-aged children to understand and accept their place in the world and to explore their “cosmic task,” their unique, meaningful purpose.

SECONDARY

According to Montessori, “Independence, in the case of the adolescents, has to be acquired on a different plane, for theirs is the economic independence in the field of society. Here, too, the principle of ‘Help me to do it alone!’ ought to be applied.”

Just as is in Early Childhood, the adolescent’s focus shifts back towards life skills and real-world applications, but now with an emphasis on discovering one’s social identity. Instead of fixating on academic growth, Secondary students should be provided opportunities to build meaningful relationships with their peers as they explore who they are socially and emotionally.

Maria Montessori believed that the overarching goal of education was to educate for independence. Although this preparation might look a bit different at each stage in a child’s life, Montessori believed so much in the value and importance of developing a solid foundation of independence that she once said, “If [the child] cannot acquire this independence he does not exist as an individual—for the characteristic of an individual is one who can function by himself.”



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The Bead Cabinet

BY CYNTHIA CONESA

THE BEAD CABINET is often the first item that draws one's attention when walking into a Montessori Elementary classroom. Beyond its visual appeal, the Bead Cabinet embodies foundational concepts of numeration, such as linear and skip counting, multiplication, squaring, and cubing; as such, it is one of Montessori's most ingeniously conceived and designed materials.

Description and Use

The Bead Cabinet consists of a short chain, a long chain, squares, and a cube for each quantity from one to ten. Best described with an example and images, let's look at the pieces for exploring the multiples of five.

→ **A short chain consisting of five five-bars linked together (25 beads in all).**

When the chain is folded, the square of five is made. This demonstrates to the child that five taken five times gives us the square of five. Put simply, $5 \times 5 = 25$. For this reason, the short chain is also called the squaring chain.

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→ **Small, numbered arrows.**

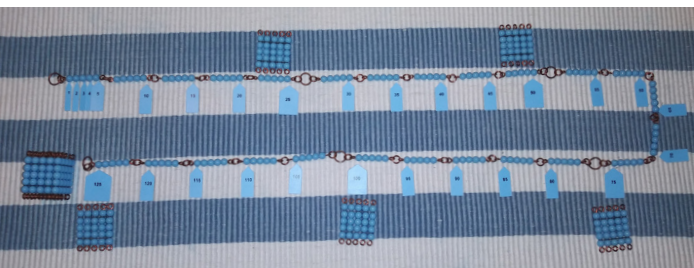
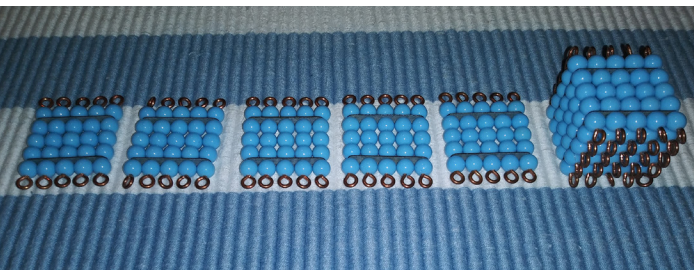
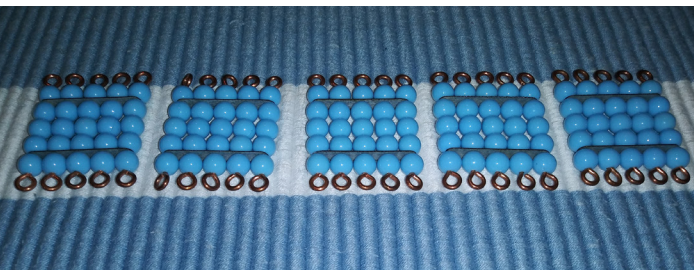
The child places these pointing to each bead on the first bar of the chain (1 to 5), and thereafter to the beads representing each multiple of five, up to the square (10, 15, 20, 25).

→ **Five five-squares.**

These consist of five five-bars wired together to make five individual squares of five.

→ **A long chain consisting of twenty-five five-bars linked together (125 beads in all).**

First, the chain is extended, and the child places arrows at each multiple of five, up to 125. Then, the child folds the chain such that each set of five five-bars makes a square, resulting in five five-squares lined up against each other.



The five five-squares are each superimposed upon the squares made with the chain. Then, the five five-squares are stacked, resulting in a cube—specifically, five fives (a five-square) taken five times, or $(5 \times 5) \times 5$. For this reason, the long chain is also called the cubing chain.

As suggested above, children interact with the Bead Cabinet differently depending on their age and developmental readiness. Initially, they may use the chains for counting to large numbers, with the arrows as the control of error. Next, they learn to skip count. Counting by fives, for example, the child starts with the number five rather than one—a new skill in itself. Skip counting is indirect preparation for multiplication in that the child learns to recognize and identify patterns—the multiples of five end with either five or zero. Finally, the child uses the material not only to learn the concepts of squaring and cubing, but as an introduction to algebra as they construct binomials using two different squares, visually representing the algebraic equation $a^2 + 2ab + b^2$. Larger configurations, up to the decanomial, can be constructed and represented algebraically.

It is common to hear parents exclaim during a parent education event, “Oh, so that’s why it’s called the square [or cube] of five!”



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