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Children at Montessori schools are often allowed to choose their own learning activities, which usually have tactile sensory components.

# Parents find alternative school of thought

Montessori method teaches 'freedom within limits' and independence

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FOR THE POST

Looking back on her early schooling, Alice Giles remembers little of what she calls "real education." Until the age of 6, she said, learning came from her parents, while school was a place to run around, color and play.

"There was no learning or interest in education during the time or age when I was

the most sensitive to [gaining] knowledge," said Giles, now a mother of two school-aged daughters. "I wanted my children to have a different and better experience than what I had when I was in school."

It is exactly for this reason that many parents, like Giles, have decided to enroll their children into The International Montessori School in Prague (IMSP).

According to both the American Montessori Society



**Maria Montessori**, the creator of the method.

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## A BRIEF HISTORY OF MONTESSORI

► **1907** Maria Montessori opens the Casa dei Bambini, or Children's House, in a low-income district of Rome. Her unique philosophy sparks the interest of educators worldwide, and Montessori schools begin to pop up globally

► **1929** Montessori establishes the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) to support the swell of Montessori schools, teacher education programs and national organizations around the world, but interest in the United States begins to wane

► **1960** A distinctly American version of the Montessori method begins to take shape. The number of schools continues to grow across the country

► **1961** *Time* magazine features a story about the Montessori method, stirring up more interest in the young philosophy

Source: *The American Montessori Society*

States but argues that the Montessori method allows students to focus on their own needs rather than an arbitrary grading system.

"There is a difference between assessing and grading," she said. "I grew up going to Montessori schools, and when I switched to a traditional school that required homework in order to get good grades, it set the record straight for me that I was only working for the teacher's expectations and I was no longer motivated to do for myself."

Parents often worry that children will have a hard time adjusting to traditional schools when they are finished with Montessori school at age 12 because they are not used to learning within a "teacher as authority" setting.

"I just tell parents to come and observe a class, and they will see the desire and pride from self-accomplishment in each child and how they do socialize quite well even though the curriculum is more focused on the individual," she said. "All it takes is one visit for them to see that it works."

If there is one problem that both Boone and Charles agree upon with the Montessori method, it's

that it's not patented, which makes it possible for anyone to open a school using the Montessori name.

"[Maria] Montessori never wanted it to be patented because she wanted to see the program run successfully for herself before she would lend her name to it, but when she passed away, it became a free-for-all," Charles said. "It's because of this that anyone can just take parts of the five areas or just the theory and still call it Montessori. It's created a lot of confusion and concern to the public and parents alike."

While Montessori has become a part of the educational landscape in United States and in most of Western Europe, the jury is still out in the Czech Republic, Charles said.

"With the Czech Republic being free from communism only for the past 20 years, there's no real conclusive data yet about the popularity or growth of Montessori here," she said. "Our school continues to grow with both international and Czech students, so hopefully we are representative of not only a trend but a need."

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(AMS) and the Association Montessori International, the Montessori method of education, developed by Maria Montessori in 1907, is an individualized educational approach that allows children to learn at their own pace in a natural setting through "internal" discipline and curiosity, instead of external, task-based instruction as in traditional schools. Maria Montessori's method, based on her own study of children from birth to adulthood, starts with multi-age classrooms of three-year cycles of education, beginning from ages 0-3 and ending at 9-12. Students choose their own lessons, use only "natural" materials such as glass or wood and rely on older students as mentors while teachers serve only as "guides."

"Montessori is a lot more academic than traditional schools for these age groups," said Wendy Charles, head of IMSP, the only AMS-accredited Montessori school in the Czech Republic. "This offers a broad curriculum of doing work and learning with purpose at every developmental plane."

In a Montessori classroom, students are taught the

basics, like math, language, art, science and music, but in addition they are also learning practical life skills that teach independence and self-awareness.

"Instead of having a teacher hold a tissue up to a child's nose and say 'blow,' our students observe a teacher blowing their nose and do it themselves," said Charles of how the practical-life area works. "They become aware that this is happening to their bodies and learn that they can do this on their own and gain a sense of self-accomplishment through the process. This is why our teachers are called 'guides' because they aren't teaching a child. The children are teaching themselves."

Students in a Montessori school are not graded for their work, and they decide what they want to work on each day — a concept known as "freedom within limits." But that "freedom" has prompted critics to call Montessori's method unstructured and not sufficiently challenging for the students.

IMSP instructor Joanna Boone said she has heard these concerns from parents both in the Czech Republic and in her native United