



Puzzles are firm favourites for most children, and provide opportunities for joint work and conversation.

Autism and Montessori

A Montessori teacher shares her experiences of working with autistic children in a nursery.

By Chloe Marshall

The Montessori classroom provides an excellent environment for these children to develop the social and communicative skills they find so difficult to learn.

Autistic children tend to follow a rigid routine, becoming very distressed when this routine is disrupted. Montessorians know that it is good teaching practice to keep to a simple daily schedule. Prepare children well in advance for any changes in routine, such as school trips. Our cultural materials such as time lines of the school day, calendars and clocks all provide a concrete representation of time, and therefore an accessible reminder of the child's routine.

Large and noisy groups of children can be distressing, so the quiet and individual atmosphere of the Montessori classroom allows the autistic child to participate in more relaxed circumstances and on his own terms. Many activities provide daily opportunities for social interaction, as the photographs on these pages show. The teacher should be on hand to help the child's interaction.



Practical activities with a shared goal (here, cleaning the cars and bikes in the playground ready for use) encourage group participation, communication and self-esteem.

For example, she may need to provide the encouragement and the words that

the child needs to join in an activity, or verbal support in sorting out a conflict.

Another advantage of the Montessori school is the set of ground rules which all teachers and children are expected to adhere to. These rules are regularly discussed and practised through games of grace and courtesy, and they are very important for autistic children, who will take longer than most to learn social requirements.

The non-competitive atmosphere advocated by the Montessori system values and encourages all children, not just those with special educational needs such as autism.

Research also teaches us that children can learn to overcome some of their autistic tendencies. Montessorians have the skills to help them do so. 🇬🇧

Chloe Marshall is a tutor for Montessori Centre International.

Train to help parents

An intensive three-day National Autistic Society parent programme is open to professionals who have prior experience of working with people who are autistic.

The EarlyBird Centre was set up in 1997 to develop and evaluate an autism-specific model of early intervention using a parent programme.

The NAS EarlyBird Programme is a three month programme which combines group training sessions for parents with individual home visits, when video feedback is used to help parents apply what they learn whilst working with their child.

Parents have a weekly commitment – to a three hour training session or a home visit, and to ongoing work with their child at home – during the three month programme.

Contact: www.nas.org.uk/nas/earlybi.html

NAS EarlyBird Centre
3 Victoria Crescent West
Barnsley, South Yorkshire, S75 2AE

Tel: (01226) 779218; Fax: (01226) 771014

e-mail: earlybird@dial.pipex.com



Top: Grace and courtesy exercise. These children are practising greeting their teacher using eye-contact and a handshake.

Above: Music provides an alternative method of communication which many autistic children enjoy. Activities such as this one, with rhythm sticks, provide children with opportunities to lead the group by creating rhythms for the other children and teacher to copy, as well as requiring them to follow the rhythms of others. Music offers relaxing, non-competitive, group-bonding and esteem-boosting activities.

Left: Many sensorial exercises (here, the baric tablets) are best used by pairs or small groups of children, encouraging interaction, communication and negotiating skills.