

# Dr. Maria Montessori, MD Pediatrician- Trailblazer & Champion for Children

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Throughout history, women rarely received the credit they deserved for all their accomplishments, the positive impact they had on others, or how they helped make the world a better place. The history books are just as negligent.

A few weeks ago, I came across a fascinating article about Dr. Maria Montessori, an Italian pediatrician and educator, by Tony Traficante from the Italian Sons and Daughters of America. The Montessori name is well known for the education system she created and the many highly regarded Montessori schools globally. But few know much about her life or accomplishments. The more I read about her, the more inspired I became to share her story, which includes excerpts from Wikipedia and Tony Traficante's article.

Maria Montessori was born on 31 August 1870 in Chiaravalle, Italy. Three years later, her family moved first to Florence and then in 1875 to Rome because of her father's work.

At age 13 and against fierce opposition, she enrolled in an all-boys technical school with hopes of becoming an engineer. She studied Italian, arithmetic, algebra, geometry, accounting, history, geography, and sciences. Then, she had a change of heart and began medical school at the Sapienza University of Rome.

In 1890, at age 20, she enrolled at the University of Rome in a degree course for natural sciences. Passing all her examinations in botany, zoology, experimental

physics, histology, anatomy, and general and organic chemistry, she earned her *diploma di licenza* in 1892. This degree, along with additional studies in Italian and Latin, qualified her for entrance into the medical program at the University in 1893.

Because of her gender, she encountered hostility and harassment. Also, she was required to perform her dissections of cadavers alone after hours because attending classes with men in the presence of a naked body was deemed inappropriate. Despite the obstacles, she won an academic prize in her first year and secured a position as a hospital assistant, gaining early clinical experience. In her last two years, she studied pediatrics and psychiatry.

Dr. Maria Montessori was the first woman to graduate as a Doctor of Medicine from the University of Rome in 1896. Her thesis was published in the journal *Policlinico* in 1897.

Her first appointment was as an Assistant Doctor at the psychiatric clinic of the University of Rome where she developed an interest in the educational problems of intellectually disabled children. She went on to serve as director of the State Orthophrenic School of Rome and a Chair in Hygiene at a women's college in Rome while continuing her studies of philosophy, psychology, and education.

In March 1898, she gave birth to a son, Mario Montessori, as a result of her love affair with Giuseppe Montesano, a fellow doctor and co-director with her at the Orthophrenic School of Rome.

In those days, if a woman married, she was expected to cease working professionally. So, she chose not to marry and kept her relationship secret with the agreement that neither would marry anyone else. However, his family pressured him to make a more socially advantageous connection and marry someone else. Feeling betrayed, Dr. Montessori left the hospital and was forced to leave her son in the care of a wet nurse living in the countryside. Thus, she missed the first years of her son's life. Fortunately, they were united in his teen years, and he greatly assisted in her research.

Having studied the work of [Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard](#) and [Edouard Séguin](#); Dr. Montessori found that children who were mentally disabled responded well to sensory-rich [environments](#) and learned best when engaged in purposeful activities. She used materials designed to appeal to the senses, created learning games and activities, and developed strategies for teachers to guide children in learning rather than lecture them from a book. Instead of being confined to desks, children circulated freely in the classroom, choosing the activities that interested them. Student interaction, peer teaching, [problem-solving](#), and socialization were encouraged, and students were challenged according to their ability levels.

Dr. Montessori scorned conventional classrooms, where children are fastened to their seats. She used materials and conditions conducive to learning as they aroused interest and attention in young children not previously thought possible. These materials were designed to encourage a child rather than force cooperative effort.

The Montessori method discourages the traditional measurements of achievement, such as tests and grades. Instead, [assessment](#) is based on student-developed portfolios and teachers' observational data.

In 1907, she opened the first [Casa dei Bambini](#) ("Children's House"), a preschool for children aged three to six. Montessori also believed that acknowledging all children as individuals and treating them as such would yield better learning and fulfilled potential in each particular child. Her successful methods led to the opening of other Montessori schools.

By 1912, Montessori schools had opened in Paris and many other Western European cities, and were planned for Argentina, Australia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Switzerland, Syria, the US, and New Zealand. Public programs in London, Johannesburg, Rome, and Stockholm had adopted her method in their school systems.

Montessori societies were founded in the United States (the Montessori American Committee) and the United Kingdom (the Montessori Society for the United Kingdom). In 1913 the first International Training Course was held in Rome, with a second in 1914.

In 1922, she was appointed government inspector of schools in Italy but left the country in 1934 because of the Fascist rule. Montessori's antifascist views forced her into exile from Italy during Mussolini's premiership. She then spent periods in Ceylon/Shri Lanka and Spain.

In 1936 Montessori and her family left Barcelona for England, and soon moved to [Laren](#), near Amsterdam. Here, Montessori and her son Mario continued to develop new materials, including the knobless cylinders, the grammar symbols, and botany nomenclature cards.

During her exile, she developed her work *Education for Peace* which expressed her idea that children are peacemakers and education is the only true means to eliminate war. She expressed that "Establishing lasting peace is the work of education; all politics can do is keep us out of war"!

With the rising military tensions in Europe, Montessori increasingly directed her attention to the theme of peace. In 1937, the 6th International Montessori Congress was held on the theme of "Education for Peace" and Montessori called for a "science of peace" and spoke about the role of education of the child as a key to the reform of society.

In 1938, Montessori was invited to India by the Theosophical Society to give a training course, and in 1939 she left the Netherlands with her collaborator and son, Mario. Interest in Montessori in India started in 1913. She planned to give a tour of lectures and then return to Europe.

When Italy entered WW2 on the side of Germany, Britain interned all Italians in the UK and its colonies as enemy aliens. The Montessoris remained in Madras and Kodaikanal until 1946, where they developed her educational method. The term “cosmic education” was introduced to describe an approach for children that emphasized the interdependence of all elements of the natural world. Children worked with plants and animals in their natural environments. Illustrations, charts, and models created lessons. Materials for botany, zoology, and geography were created. This work led to two books: *Education for a New World* and *To Educate the Human Potential*.



Maria Montessori with son Mario (left) and the theosophist George Arundale with his wife Rukmini Devi in India, 1939

In 1944, the Montessoris were granted freedom of movement. In 1945, Montessori attended the first “All India Montessori Conference” in Jaipur. In 1946, after the war, at age 76, she and her family returned to Amsterdam and spent the next six years traveling Europe and India conducting training courses.

While in London, she opened the Montessori Center, a training institute that continued as the St. Nicolas Training Center. In 1947, she returned to Italy to re-establish the *Opera Nazionale Montessori* and gave two more training courses. Later that year, she returned to India and taught courses in Adyar and Ahmedabad. This led to the English edition of the book, *The Absorbent Mind*. Dr. Montessori described child development from birth onwards and presented her concept of the Four Planes of Development.

In 1948, *Il Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica applicato all'educazione infantile nelle Case dei Bambini* was revised again and published in English as *The Discovery of the Child*. In 1949, she taught a course in [Karachi](#), Pakistan, and the Pakistan Montessori Association was founded. In 1949, Montessori attended the 8th International Montessori Congress in [Sanremo](#), Italy, where a model classroom was demonstrated. The *Scuola Assistenti All'Infanzia* (Montessori School for Assistants to Infancy) was also established. Plus, Dr. Montessori was nominated for the [Nobel Peace Prize](#). She was also awarded the French [Legion of Honor](#), Officer of the Dutch [Order of Orange Nassau](#), and an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Amsterdam. In 1950, she visited Scandinavia, represented Italy at the [UNESCO](#) conference in Florence, presented at the 29th international training course in [Perugia](#), gave a national course in Rome, published a fifth edition of *Il Metodo* with the new title *La Scoperta del Bambino* (*The Discovery of the Child*), and was again nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1951, she participated in the 9th *International Montessori Congress* in

London, gave a training course in [Innsbruck](#), and was nominated for the third time for the Nobel Peace Prize. *Editor's note: So WHY didn't she get it?*

Dr. Montessori was directly involved in the founding of the [UNESCO Institute for Education](#) in 1951. She was present at the first preliminary meeting of the UNESCO Governing Board in [Wiesbaden](#), Germany, on 19 June 1951 and delivered a speech. She used the address as an opportunity to redouble her advocacy for the rights of the child – whom she often referred to as the "forgotten citizen" or "neglected citizen" – by declaring:

*“Remember that people do not start at the age of twenty, ten, or six, but at birth. In your efforts at solving problems, do not forget that children and young people make up a vast population, a population without rights that is being crucified on school benches everywhere, which – for all that we talk about democracy, freedom, and human rights – is enslaved by a school order, by intellectual rules, which we impose on it. We define the rules, how they should be learned, and at what age. The child population is the only population without rights. The child is the neglected citizen. Think of this and fear the revenge of this populace, for it is his soul that we are suffocating. It is the lively powers of the mind that we are oppressing, powers that cannot be destroyed without killing the individual, powers that tend either towards violence or destruction or slip away into the realm of sickness, as Dr. Stern has so well elucidated.”*

### **Dr. Maria Montessori was a trailblazer and champion for children globally!**

10 December 1951 was the third anniversary of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#). In observance of this, UNESCO held a celebration. Dr. Montessori was one of the guests who would also deliver a speech to commemorate and memorialize the momentous occasion. As with her speech six months previously – in front of the UNESCO Board of Governors in Wiesbaden – Montessori once again highlighted the lack of any "[Declaration of the Rights of the Child](#)," stating in part, "in truth, the [Universal] [Declaration of Human Rights](#) appears to be exclusively dedicated to adult society."

On 6 May 1952, at the age of 81, Maria Montessori died of a [cerebral hemorrhage](#) in [Noordwijk aan Zee](#), the Netherlands. However, her outstanding contributions and trailblazing legacy will benefit each new generation globally.

The name Montessori is not legally protected. Hence, there are many Montessori organizations.

Dr. Montessori's methods are outlined in such books as *Il Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica* (1909; [The Montessori Method](#), 1912), *The Advanced Montessori Method* (1917–18), *The Secret of Childhood* (1936), *Education for a New World* (1946), *To Educate the Human Potential* (1948), and *La Mente Assorbente* (1949; *The Absorbent Mind*, 1949).

Dr. Montessori was an extraordinary person: a physician, humanitarian, highly respected educator, and an activist for women's and children's rights and peace.

I hope Dr. Montessori's story inspires others as much as it did me.

Below are excerpts from Tony Trafficante's article.

## How Maria Montessori Defied Mussolini and Changed the World

Men were no match for Maria Montessori.  
Excerpts from Tony Trafficante, ISDA Contributing Editor



(<http://orderisda.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Young-Maria.jpg>)

When Dr. Montessori graduated from medical school in 1896, she became one of Italy's first female physicians and blazed the trail for other Italian women to pursue the same. Her early medical practice focused on psychiatry, working mostly with special needs children. Extremely disturbed by the learning difficulties suffered by these special children, Maria set out to vastly improve the curriculum.

On January 6, 1907, Dr. Montessori established the first of her Montessori schools, in a ghetto of Rome. It was called "**La Casa Dei Bambini**," the Children's Home. Maria's experiences, i.e., working with special needs children, became the foundation of the Montessori educational system. She later expanded the curricula to include all educational levels of students. As the success of the Montessori system spread worldwide, Maria gave up her medical practice to devote all her time to academic endeavors.

As the Montessori educational method grew in popularity, it attracted the attention of one Benito Mussolini. He became so enthused with the Montessori system that he agreed to serve as Honorary President of the Montessori Society of Italy. With Mussolini's approval, Maria opened a teacher's training college and a wide range of Montessori institutions throughout Italy.

As the years went by, Dr. Montessori's ideological viewpoints, particularly as a pacifist, clashed with the Mussolini administration; and their relationship began to sour. Maria's situation became worse in 1931 when she flat out refused to order her teachers to take the fascist loyalty oath. Furious, Mussolini closed the Montessori schools in Italy, forcing Maria to flee Italy in 1934 to escape political surveillance and harassment.



Maria Montessori lived through turbulent times. She was teaching in India when Italy and Great Britain became embroiled in war, and in 1940, Britain ordered the internment of all Italian nationals in the United Kingdom and its colonies. Although Maria was not confined, she was restricted to the Theosophical Society compound as a teacher. Not able to return to Italy, Maria lived in exile, in India, for the remainder of WWII.

Dr. Montessori was an extraordinary person: a physician, humanitarian, a highly respected educator, and an activist for women's rights and peace. She, also, was the only Italian woman to appear on an Italian banknote. Even though Maria could have returned to Italy, she chose to spend her final days living with friends in Amsterdam. She died on May 6, 1952, at the age of 81.

There are hundreds of Montessori schools in the United States that are privately owned. Some former alumni of the Montessori schools include Larry Page and Sergey Brin (founders of Google), Jeff Bezos (founder of Amazon), George Clooney, Helen Hunt, Peter Drucker (a management guru), Jackie Kennedy Onassis, Julia Child, and Princes William and Harry of England.)

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<http://orderisda.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Maria-on-the-Italian-Lira.jpg>



<http://orderisda.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/maria-montessori-casa.jpg>  
31 August 1870 – 6 May 1952

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