

**Program:** “Maria Montessori, Pioneer in Children’s Education”

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**Introduced by:** Marty Meisenheimer, M.D.

**Attendance:** 87 devices logged in (sometimes multiple people viewing a single device)

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Maria Montessori was born in Ancona, Italy in 1870. Her father was a government minister. The family moved to Rome when she was 5 years old. When she started school in Rome, she found them to be dirty, cold, and uninspiring. Girls were being taught to be good wives and mothers, not for careers.

Maria discovered that she had a love of math. She was very passionate about it and insisted on going to a technical school for her higher education, which would be like an engineering school today. People tried to talk her out of it, but she persisted and was eventually admitted.

After technical school, she wanted to go to medical school. When she first applied she was rejected and was told she was missing some required course work. So she took the additional courses and reapplied and was accepted. She was the only woman in the University of Rome medical school. Once there she met with much harassment. One anatomy teacher said that “women have smaller brains than men”. She was not allowed into dissection classes with the men, so she had to go back at night and do it alone.

Maria became discouraged and thought of giving up, but one day she saw a young destitute child playing in the street with a piece of red paper which made her realize the innate curiosity in all people and inspired her to continue in medical school. She became the first woman in Italy to graduate from medical school.

She went on to become a practicing doctor and an author. She eventually joined the faculty of the psychiatry department at the University of Rome. She became interested in children with learning disabilities, who were called “idiots” at that time. She visited a

school for these children which she found to be appalling. There was no affection or stimulation and they were given no chance of reentering society. So Maria took a position as co-director of that school because she believed the children there were much more capable of learning than other people thought. After working there for some time, she had the children take the Italian State Exam (like the SAT exam) and people were amazed that many of them passed it, some of them with higher than average scores.

In 1901 she returned to the University of Rome to take courses in Psychology and Anthropology. She became a full professor 3 years later. She began to develop her radically different methods of education.

In 1906 she went into the slums of Rome, found an abandoned building, which she took over and made it into her first school, which she called "Casa de Bambini" (House of Children). Her principles were similar to the methods of Socrates. She believed that children were not empty vessels to be filled up with knowledge, but rather curious and creative beings who liked to be active and engrossed in their work. She provided them the opportunity to follow their own interests. She created a new environment, with child sized furniture, and allowed them to move around as they liked, even working on the floor if they wanted to. She studied each child to see what worked best for them, which allowed "bad" kids to become eager learners.

In 1909 she published a book about her school methods and soon after her school became known as the Montessori School. Her book began to make her famous and she started traveling around Europe and the United States. She met with people like Thomas Edison and Sigmund Freud. She began giving lectures and founding schools. By 1913 there were 100 Montessori Schools in the U.S. Gandhi invited her to India and was impressed with her methods and began to use them there.

In Italy, Mussolini was also impressed with her schools, but he wanted to use them to indoctrinate the students into Fascism. But Maria resisted and would not allow her schools to be used in this way. Then she left Italy and never returned. Mussolini had the Montessori name removed from 8000 schools in Italy.

Today there are approximately 14000 Montessori schools in Europe alone, and over 2 million students enrolled worldwide. Maria Montessori lived her final years in Amsterdam and died in 1952 at the age of 81. Her son, Mario carried on promoting her schools and methods. Ironically, although Maria started out with very poor children in the slums of Rome, today Montessori schools are more likely to be attended by the children of very affluent parents. Jeff Bezos, the richest man in the world today, attended a Montessori school, and has given a large contribution to help them reach out to more impoverished areas.

