



A Better Way to Promote Montessori in the USA



A Great Opportunity

Recent research shows that parents in the United States are very interested in developmental education that builds a child's capability to become a fulfilled and productive adult who contributes to the world—at home, at work, and in their community.

Montessori is often seen as the gold standard for such education, presenting us with an opportunity to serve more children across the socio-economic spectrum and to move closer to achieving our mission of creating a better world through the development of capable individuals.

Three things stand in the way of success: 1) Our ability to communicate to prospective and current Montessori parents how the Montessori approach connects with what they value most in raising their children; 2) Elevating and empowering Montessori teachers as the ambassadors of a quality Montessori experience; and, 3) Training more teachers so we can create more programs, reach more children, and fulfill our mission.

The Great Challenge

We must do a better job of communicating our value.

While Montessori is held in high esteem, most parents can't explain what it is. They simply want it, especially in early childhood. Ironically, once they have it, they often feel shut out of the process of developing their child's potential, something they believe is best accomplished in a partnership between teacher, child, and parent. Montessori education frequently is the child's experience that the parent strains to observe while feeling held at a distance. This runs counter to at least American parents' desire to be in control of their child's upbringing and to experience their child's education with the child, the teachers, and the school. This parental feeling of exclusion diminishes the likelihood that Montessori schools will retain children across significant choice points—at kindergarten, middle, and high school entry moments. As these junctures approach, parental anxiety is high, the perceived relative importance of specifically developmental education lessens, and peer and societal pressure on academic achievement increases.

That's the bad news. The good news is that recent market research tells Montessori how to resolve the issue, and also that when we do, we can potentially capture and hold the attention, participation, and loyalty of parents from all walks of life throughout their children's educational years. This summary will help you apply the insights from our market research to create more effective communications with parents, communities, and other stakeholders.

Here is what you need to know to connect with parents and better serve the development of children:



Parents have faith in Montessori to develop a capable and fulfilled person.

Parents don't always know what Montessori is, but they believe it is ideal and want it for their children. They rely on Montessori to help them develop the moral, emotional, and behavioral abilities that they understand to be key to helping their children become capable individuals. However, parents' faith in Montessori is fragile in the face of personal and social pressures. Parents need your help in seeing the proof that Montessori is working miracles in their children.

You need to be as much with the parent as you are with the child.

Children don't choose their education, parents choose it for them. American parents have a strong sense of personal agency when it comes to education and see educators as partners in child development, not replacements. Montessori is intensely focused on the development of the individual child, but our developmental approach must also make space for the parent. Montessori parents place an extraordinary amount of trust in Montessori—more so than in any other educational approach. Though parents have great confidence in Montessori, particularly in our teachers, they still need the attention, explanation, encouragement, and confidence to stick with us.

Parents need reinforcement in the post-primary years that a nurturing education is the best preparation to thrive in a competitive and often uncaring world.

Montessori often loses children to other approaches to education because many parents see early childhood Montessori as a foundational inoculation of “goodness” that will help children survive the hard knocks of the “real world.” Navigating less than optimal education in elementary and secondary education is considered by many to be a rite of passage that creates perseverance, motivation, self-reliance, and know-how—even though the opposite is true.

Reassuring parents about academics is key to retaining Montessori students.

Beyond the availability of elementary and secondary Montessori programs, concerns about academic learning are major barriers to retention. There is a misconception among parents that Montessori focuses on socio-emotional development at the expense of academics and knowledge building. While this is simply not true, the reality is that Montessori doesn't speak enough about knowledge building and the exceptional ways in which we do it. We must make clear that academics and knowledge building are key qualities of Montessori pedagogy, and that the way we help children develop provides them with enduring intellectual capabilities that are best achieved through the framework of social and emotional learning.

Availability and continuity are the biggest barriers.

Scarcity, including proximity and affordability, prevent Montessori from being more widespread. Research indicates parents would choose it more often if they could get it. There aren't enough Montessori early childhood programs to meet parent demand—this is especially true among low-income and minority parents whose neighborhoods lack high-quality early childhood options. Programs that are available may have high tuition or require a long commute for parents. Scarcity in early childhood programs is further aggravated by even fewer options for elementary and secondary Montessori education. Parents who want to continue with Montessori past early childhood often have no choice but to seek other alternatives.

Montessori achieves social justice by serving more children, not by talking about social justice with parents.

Montessori's drive for social justice will only be accomplished when we increase the number and size of programs available to all children. Equity means greater access to Montessori—and only Montessorians can create that access by attracting more teachers and creating more schools in more communities. Montessori's strategy for creating social justice through access is supported by Montessori parent perceptions and desires. While Montessori parents very much want a just and equitable world, they believe we create it by developing just and equitable individuals through Montessori education. Parents see their contribution to social justice as raising their child to be capable, connected, compassionate, and productive. Parents are clearly drawn to Montessori for its social value of taking a personalized approach to children's moral, social, and intellectual development, not the Montessori movement's own social agenda. This is especially true for African-American and Latino parents.

Teachers are the lynchpin to our success and need to be brought to the forefront.

Montessori needs more teachers—and it needs to empower teachers as its evangelists. Montessori leaders place a great deal of emphasis on pedagogy and classroom environment as a way of sending parents messages about program quality and fidelity. Existing and prospective Montessori parents, however, judge quality by their interaction and relationship with Montessori teachers. Teachers are the quality ambassadors for Montessori. Staff, school and classroom environments, and the pedagogy are seen as elements that help teachers be the best possible partners with parents in the development of every child. Positioning teachers at the forefront of Montessori will accomplish at least two things: 1) It will attract more teachers because they will understand that they are respected, supported, and empowered; 2) It will send parents clear messages that the quality of Montessori lies in the preparation of its teachers and will contribute to parental preference for programs with the most highly trained and skilled teachers.

A New Montessori Message Frame



The primary focus of Montessori educators is Montessori education. There is often little time to focus on marketing Montessori and communicating its value in a way that is more compelling to prospective and existing parents.

With that in mind, we have developed easy to use and research-based messages that will help all Montessori programs better explain their value in terms that parents and communities will understand and appreciate. By adopting the messages in our daily communications, we can build public understanding of our tremendous value and encourage more parents to seek out Montessori as their preferred education approach. Keep in mind that Montessori has parents at “hello.” There is no need to over-explain our approach or get into the technical aspects of how we support a child’s development. People are positively inclined to Montessori until we push them away. To take full advantage of the strong brand we have, we need to work harder to help parents hear and see the alignment between our values and theirs—their children’s ultimate outcomes and their own sense of success as a parent.

The message frame:

- Montessori works in every setting for the success of each child.
- We help parents develop children who are morally, emotionally, and behaviorally prepared for the real world.
- Our teachers support your child’s natural development, building the capability to become productive, fulfilled adults who contribute to the world.
- Teachers help children follow their interests and passions to develop strong skills in academics, leadership, self-discipline, responsibility, independence, and initiative.
- Our classrooms are hands-on, self-paced, collaborative, and joyful, creating a lifelong learner and doer.
- AMI Teacher Certification requires rigorous training that ensures your child’s distinct personality and independence will be nurtured into a capable and connected adult.
- An AMI Certified School is the mark of the highest quality Montessori, where the entire school supports the teacher in developing your child’s full potential.

This message frame can be easily put into a narrative to help you explain the value of Montessori to parents and community stakeholders:

Montessori works in every setting for the success of each child. Montessori teachers support your child’s natural development, building the capability to become a productive, fulfilled adult who contributes to the world. Montessori helps parents develop children who are morally, emotionally, and behaviorally prepared for the real world. Our teachers help children follow their interests and passions to develop strong skills in academics, leadership, self-discipline, responsibility, independence, and initiative. Your child’s education will be hands-on, self-paced, collaborative, and joyful—everything that’s needed to create a lifelong learner and doer. Look for AMI Montessori Teacher Certification and you’re ensured that your teacher has been rigorously trained to nurture your child into a capable and connected individual. The mark of a high-quality Montessori school is where the entire school supports the teacher in developing your child’s full potential.