



## Self-Regulation and the Development of the Intellect

One of the central goals of a Montessori education is the development of self-regulation. Dr. Maria Montessori famously said, *“The teacher... must have a kind of faith that the child will reveal himself through work.”* This idea reflects a fundamental difference between Montessori and traditional education: Montessori sees education as a process of guiding the child toward their own potential rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all curriculum. It emphasizes nurturing the **whole child**, addressing not just academic growth but also emotional, social, and physical development.

In this context, self-regulation is viewed as a critical skill for both intellectual and emotional growth. Just as children are taught to self-regulate their physical nourishment, they must also learn to regulate their intellectual nourishment. Both are essential to healthy development. From infancy, children begin developing their own understanding of hunger and fullness, making choices about when and how much to eat. Similarly, intellectual development requires a structured environment in which children can make choices, explore freely, and satisfy their own curiosity and needs.

### The Parallel Between Physical and Intellectual Nourishment

Just as nutritionists stress the importance of offering a variety of healthy foods and avoiding the creation of a food hierarchy (e.g., “you must eat your vegetables before dessert”), Montessori education follows the same principle for intellectual nourishment. In a traditional educational model, children may be told what to learn, when to learn it, and how to engage with material, often leaving little room for the child’s personal interest or choice. In contrast, a Montessori classroom offers a variety of intellectually stimulating activities, providing children with the freedom to explore areas they are naturally drawn to. This approach fosters intrinsic motivation, where children develop the habit of choosing work based on their interests rather than external rewards or imposed directives.

For example, just as children are encouraged to discover and self-regulate their eating habits, they are also encouraged to explore various academic materials at their own pace. It is important to recognize that **every interest a child expresses has intrinsic value** in their development. No two children have identical interests, abilities, or learning needs, so it is vital to give each child the opportunity to follow their own curiosities. True learning happens when children are actively engaged in work that they have chosen themselves. When an adult imposes tasks or controls the child's schedule, this can result in frustration or disengagement—ultimately hindering the child's intellectual growth.

### **Trusting the Child's Developmental Path**

The process of learning to self-regulate—whether for eating habits or intellectual pursuits—requires a great deal of trust from the adult. Parents and educators understand how crucial it is for children to develop healthy eating habits, yet we cannot force them to eat certain foods. Instead, we offer healthy foods in a variety of ways, patiently guiding the child until they discover what works best for them. Maybe a child prefers parsnips over carrots or enjoys vegetable soup more than stir-fried vegetables. With time and consistency, children find their own path to healthy eating.

This same principle applies to intellectual development. One child may naturally gravitate toward rote memorization of letters, while another might prefer to express their understanding of letters through drawing or painting. In Montessori, we follow each child's unique interests, allowing their passions to guide them toward learning in all areas of the classroom. We do not force a child to focus on one particular area; instead, we trust in the child's own inner drive to choose work that is both appealing and developmentally appropriate for them.

### **Creating an Environment for Freedom and Self-Regulation**

In Montessori education, our role as educators and parents is not to make choices for the child but to create an environment that allows them the freedom to make their own choices while also providing the tools they need to thrive. The goal is not only to nurture intellectual growth but to foster the **skills of self-regulation** that will serve children in all aspects of their lives. This is true whether they are managing their emotional responses, controlling impulses, or making thoughtful decisions about their intellectual pursuits.

We achieve this by setting up an environment that supports **freedom of choice**. By offering a wide variety of learning materials, we encourage children to follow their natural curiosity and engage with work that is meaningful to them. At the same time, we trust that the child's inner drive will lead them to develop a well-rounded, self-directed approach to learning. Over time, this freedom and trust help children develop the internal discipline needed to regulate both their intellectual and emotional lives.

### **The End Goal: Developing Lifelong Self-Knowledge**

Ultimately, the aim of Montessori education is to raise children who are not only academically capable but also self-aware and self-regulating. The goal is for children to become adults who are able to take responsibility for their own learning and emotional well-being, just as they learn to care for their physical health. By fostering an environment of trust, freedom, and individualized learning, Montessori education provides the foundation for children to become confident, independent thinkers who are capable of managing their own growth throughout life.