

## Montessori schools give students like Prince George free reign

It's the educational approach favored by future kings - along with pop stars, tech geniuses and Hollywood's A-list.

The hundred-year-old Montessori method of individualized study is enjoying a renaissance, especially now that Prince George has started at Westacre Montessori School.

The posh preschooler joins an impressive class of all-star Montessori alumni that includes Beyonce, Taylor Swift, George Clooney, Dakota Fanning, Google founders Larry Page and Sergei Brin, Amazon creator Jeff Bezos, Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales, chef Julia Child and rapper Sean "Diddy" Combs.

### SEE IT: PRINCE GEORGE ATTENDS HIS FIRST DAY OF PRESCHOOL

Oh yes, and George's father Prince William and his uncle Prince Harry were also Montessori kids.

But what is the Montessori method, and how does it churn out so many movers and shakers?

The unique philosophy developed by Italian physician and teacher Maria Montessori in 1907 flips the script on education as many Americans experienced it.

\*The classroom revolves around the student, not the teacher with children encouraged to study at their own pace.



Royal baby photo album

\*Kids of different ages are grouped together instead of being divided into grades: infant to age 3, ages 3 to 6, ages 6 to 9, etc. This collaborative environment is supposed to encourage younger children to learn from older kids, and more advanced students to mentor their peers.

\*The daily schedule is broken into three-hour uninterrupted "work periods" for the self-directed students to select what they want to do and to be able to fully immerse themselves in it.

\*Classrooms follow an open floor plan where children are free to move to different work stations and pick a project.

"Montessori classrooms are very beautiful," says Anne Hoaldrige-Dopkins, head of the Williamsburg Montessori School. "They are very organized. There are not overwhelming bins of Legos and things for them to dump out. Everything has a specific purpose: like wooden blocks that they can arrange from lightest to darkest, roughest to smoothest."

And each learning material (not toy) is designed so that once the child masters it, she moves on to an accompanying object or game that builds upon what she just learned. A child can learn to count to 10 by fitting together 10 beads to make one bar. She can then learn multiples of 10 by lining 10 of those bars up to illustrate 10 multiplied by 10. And then adding all of those beads together teaches her to count to 100.

\*There are no grades and no tests. The teacher observes each student and charts his or her progress in a personalized portfolio. The child is assessed by his accomplishments, how he is

progressing with the classroom tools, and his behavior. Kids are responsible for washing their own snack time dishes, for example, which include real silverware and glasses to teach them to handle objects carefully.

**Taylor Swift, Beyonce and Sean Combs were Montessori kids.**

“Montessori is indeed growing,” says American Montessori Society spokeswoman Marcy Krever, who reports an annual growth of about 6% in her group’s membership. There isn’t a national registry of Montessori schools *per se*, but the American Montessori Society, a nonprofit professional membership organization for educators practicing this method, estimates there are 5,000 Montessori schools in the United States. Private, independent Montessori schools can be expensive - NYC tuition can run \$30,000 a year, but the elite programs are becoming more accessible to kids in every class.

The National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector reports a growth in free public and charter Montessori schools. There are now 507 across the U.S., including the Montessori Charter School in the South Bronx’s Mott Haven neighborhood - one of the poorest in the country.



HO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

**Prince George attends the Westacre Montessori School nursery in Norfolk, England.**

“I think now the [public school] education system is in a state of crisis,” Krever says. “Parents are just not happy, and they are proactively looking for other options for their children.”

The overall philosophy behind the Montessori method is that children are naturally curious and eager to teach themselves - and they will do so if they are given the freedom to explore their interests. With kids encouraged to think outside the box - and to follow their curiosity - it’s no wonder that Montessori alumni include so many artists, creative thinkers and innovators.



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**Many Montessori parents favor the program's hands-on approach.**

“It was part of that training of not following rules and orders, and being self-motivated, questioning what’s going on in the world, doing things a little bit differently,” Page said. “The Sims” videogame creator Will Wright has also credited Montessori for his success. “‘Sim City’ comes right out of Montessori,” he said. “Montessori taught me the joy of discovery. It’s all about learning on your terms, rather than a teacher explaining stuff to you.” This was exactly what Bedford-Stuyvesant mom Sandra Stevenson wanted for her son. “The public school, common core program teaches to the ‘average,’ and Montessori calls for a kid to be reached at whatever level he is at,” says Stevenson, 47, a photo editor. Google co-founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page credit their Montessori education.

“And the core curriculum teaches how to take tests. It doesn’t really allow for the child to understand how to do research, how to find out something for yourself,” she adds.

Stevenson sent her son to Brooklyn Heights Montessori when he was 2, where he thrived, and he mostly continued with the program until eighth grade.

His middle school projects included researching screen-printing, where he dug up the history of the technique and even mentored with a screen-print artist who took him to a studio where the screens were made. Her son also did a project on ebonics with a language professor now working at Stony Brook University.

“He really enjoyed it,” she says. “He never came home complaining about homework. He would say, ‘I have work to do on my project.’” NANCY PALMIERI/AP.

He’s since been accepted into the elite Saint Ann’s High School in Brooklyn Heights and would love to attend Brown University or Oberlin College.

The method - like all lesson plans - has its critics. There is no research that definitively proves Montessori education is better than public or private education. But Stevenson believes the Montessori approach was perfect for her child. “We dismiss our kids sometimes ... but they’re the ones who are in the classes, and they know more about what they need than we do at times,” she said.