

MARIA MONTESSORI: EDUCATION FOR PEACE

Maria Montessori's commitment to peace is longstanding, thorough, and an integral part of her larger philosophy of education and human flourishing. It is also well-documented: her writings on the subject from the 1930s have been extensively studied and are included in the collection *Education and Peace*, originally published to support her nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1949, 1950, and 1951.¹ While her most explicit statements about peace date from this relatively late phase in her career, throughout her life Montessori consistently advocated for peace through short articles, essays, petitions, and direct actions. Moreover, Montessori's dedication to fostering empathy in students and guiding them toward becoming balanced, respectful adults was fundamental to creating a more peaceful world. All in all, promoting global peace was the end goal of her educational mission. This essay highlights three key moments in which Montessori explicitly devoted herself to peace and pacifism, demonstrating their significance within her broader educational philosophy: her early work in restorative education, her unsuccessful development of the White Cross during World War I, and her writings on pacifism during the Spanish Civil War and the eve of the Second World War.

Scholarship on pacifism, conflict prevention, and disarmament has traditionally taken a top-down approach, privileging the study of large transnational organisations, governmental programmes, and large-scale interventions in conflict zones. Only in the past decade have studies begun to adopt a bottom-up perspective, focusing instead on the work of educators, artists, and social workers in fostering a culture of peace and de-escalation.² Maria Montessori is among those who, since the late 19th century, have worked to promote a vision of peace that begins in the classroom and extends into national and international discourse.

Montessori's notion of peace falls under the category of positive peace—understood not simply as the absence of war but as the active presence of justice, cooperation, and social structures that enable human flourishing—a concept first articulated by sociologist Johan Galtung.³ Montessori thus did not limit her conception of peace to rethinking conflict resolution or temporary measures but sought instead to eliminate the very roots of war through education, with the aim of raising balanced, socially conscious, and conflict-averse adults.

Maria Montessori's approach emerged from a deep commitment to social justice and grassroots activism. At the turn of the twentieth century, she volunteered in maternity wards, wrote against Italian colonial wars, and championed the rights of working women, advocating for equal pay, political representation, and the means for women and children to break free from poverty.

Montessori was therefore a lifelong pacifist, but unlike other forms of pacifism that focus on state-level actions to promote peace, she believed that a peaceful world began in the classroom through the

¹ Maria Montessori, *Educazione e pace* (Milano: Garzanti) 1949.

² For an example of this scholarship, see: Mona L. Siegel, *The Moral Disarmament of France: Education, Pacifism, and Patriotism, 1914–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 2011.

³ Johan Galtung, *Peace: Research, Education, Action* (Copenhagen: Ejlers, 1975) pp. 317–333. Originally delivered as lectures in 1971–72.

cultivation of peaceful individuals. A peaceful world was the ultimate goal, beginning with the child's sense of harmony in their immediate environment, which then extended outward to embrace the family, the nation, and ultimately the global community.⁴ First, while working with marginalised children in Rome's San Lorenzo district, Montessori recognised the transformative power of education through cultivating a child who was at peace with both self and environment. This grace—*grazia dei movimenti*—within daily life not only empowered the child but also subtly encouraged those around them to seek a similar harmony, sparking grassroots change and positioning the child as a catalyst for reform.

Second, during her work with children displaced by World War I, Montessori's concept of peace expanded again to embrace national healing. As she was elaborating her pedagogical approach, she saw in her methods a path for restoring both the physical and psychological wellbeing of war-affected youth. She therefore lobbied to create an organisation that would systematically implement her approach in warzone, the White Cross. This experience led her to develop a broader framework: one not just for recovery, but for proactively preventing war, underpinned by advocacy for state and international intervention in safeguarding children's rights. This progressive stance thus mirrored future global movements centred on child welfare and the promotion of children's rights. Across her life, each iteration of her thought brought the child closer to the centre of social transformation, culminating in a blueprint for nurturing responsible, peace-building global citizens.

Inner and Outer Harmony: Cultivating Peaceful Persons

Maria Montessori's earliest pedagogical work reflects her foundational belief that peace begins with the harmonious development of the individual from early childhood. Among the first female graduates of La Sapienza's medical school (Rome), a fervent feminist and advocate for the rights of the disadvantaged and marginalised, the young Montessori developed her vision in the working-class district of Rome's San Lorenzo. There, while caring for poor children ages 3 to 6 who were left unsupervised in a recently renovated building, she shaped a pedagogy rooted in the belief that education plays a vital role in repairing and redeeming a child's physical and psychological well-being. Restorative education, as she conceived it, aimed to heal and support the whole child—physically, intellectually, and morally—especially those marginalised by poverty, illness, or exclusion.⁵ Rather than viewing education as a militaristic attempt to discipline and mould the body and mind of the child, Montessori insisted that education was a civic right and a powerful engine for social transformation. Through mixed-age environments within very specific developmental ranges, structured activities, repetition, and care for the learning environment, children develop self-discipline, empathy, and responsibility. This process unlocked their potential and nurtured a sense of harmony within themselves.

Montessori's pedagogical approach thus showed that through education children would develop into peaceful individuals in harmony with themselves, which would in turn create harmonious relationships with their physical environment and with other people. Acting in harmony with the immediate environment was a twofold process for the Montessori child: her movements would be measured and composed, and she would act respectfully and morally (the meaning of the latter would evolve over time for Montessori), seeking the good of her community. This multifaceted approach involved moving

⁴ This point is at the core of Erica Moretti's book *The Best Weapon for Peace: Maria Montessori, Education, and Children's Rights* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press) 2021.

⁵ Maria Montessori, "Ancora sui minorenni delinquenti: L'amore," in *La vita*, August 6, 1906, p. 6.

gracefully, aligning with her physical surroundings, and behaving altruistically, feeling empathy for peers, teachers, and family. Moving gracefully and acting in harmony meant developing not just physical dexterity but also empathy and respect for others, with actions and gestures that were deliberate and composed. Montessori believed that the integration of motor development with intellectual growth was crucial, as movement and thought were inseparable. A child's ability to act with grace was not a result of discipline imposed from without but of an education that enabled them to understand the reasons behind their actions from within, fostering a harmonious and peaceful interaction with the world. Montessori believed that cultivating grace and self-control in the classroom and at home was manifestly good for children themselves, but that such a transformation would also inspire others, who would respond to the child's gracefulness in a corresponding fashion, catalysing broader social change. This idea marked the beginning of her reflections on peace, linking a child's immediate environment—that is the classroom and the Montessori materials—to the development of his motor, cognitive, and emotional development. Montessori's early writings, which culminated in *Il Metodo* (1909), argued that education should prevent the deterioration of a child's physical and psychological well-being, offering a path to restoration and growth not just for the child herself but for society as a whole.

According to Montessori, during the First Plane of Development,⁶ children who achieve normalisation—marked by concentration, self-discipline, and emotional balance—begin to form spontaneous social cohesion, a natural harmony that arises when individually centred children work and live together. This early emergence of cooperative social life becomes the crucial groundwork for the conscious social organisation that develops after age six, when children can reason morally and act intentionally within a community. Montessori believed that this developmental sequence, from individual normalisation to harmonious group life and eventually to deliberate, ethical social participation, lays the foundation for adults who are psychologically healthy and therefore capable of consciously choosing peace, cooperation, and the prevention of war and conflict.

Overall, Montessori viewed her pedagogy as a tool for healing, enabling children to thrive despite the challenging environments and societal barriers imposed by adults. Her approach sought not only to support children with developmental delays but also to build a physically and psychologically resilient citizenry. Schools, she argued, should be spaces for preparing responsible individuals, particularly focusing on marginalised children. In direct opposition to anthropologist Cesare Lombroso's theory of innate criminality, Montessori insisted that education had the power to reform rather than condemn and asked 'not to condemn the wicked but to redeem them through education and that solidarity that comes from a shared blame.'⁷ She urged educators and social workers to rethink the school system as a vehicle for radical societal transformation, where solidarity and shared responsibility could replace judgement and exclusion.

The White Cross: Healing the Wounds of War

Montessori's educational approach developed through her reflection on disadvantaged children: those with intellectual and developmental disabilities at the psychiatric clinic at the Santa Maria della Pietà Asylum, those who had experienced the Messina-Reggio earthquake, and the children of seasonal

⁶ The first Montessori plane of development, spanning birth to age six, is defined by the 'Absorbent Mind' and marked by extraordinary physical and psychological growth.

⁷ Maria Montessori, "La teoria Lombrosiana e l'educazione morale," in *Rivista d'Italia* 6, no. 2 (1903), p. 331.

migrants in the malaria-affected Agro Romano district. However, it was only during the First World War that Montessori began to systematise her ideas on how to support children affected by the traumas of war. It was, after all, the role of medicine to ‘utter the supreme cry for peace, and put an end to a war so dangerous, unjust and inhumane’ so as to restore health to all those who suffered from the conflict physically and psychically.⁸

It was a well-to-do New Yorker, Mary Rebecca Cromwell,⁹ who first introduced the Montessori method to children affected by World War I, recognising its potential to aid those traumatised by the war. In 1915, Cromwell opened five schools in Paris to support displaced children, primarily French and Belgian refugees who had fled the Front. These children, having endured long and perilous journeys, were grappling with emotional and psychological distress. Cromwell applied Montessori’s method, focusing on sensory activities designed to help the children heal from their trauma. As she described it, the children were ‘bewildered,’ many still ‘suffering from the shock of that frightful exodus.’¹⁰ Montessori materials, which stimulated the senses, played a vital role in their recovery.

In 1916, Montessori visited Cromwell’s schools to assess the effectiveness of the method with these war-affected children. She identified their condition as a ‘special form of mental disturbance,’ which she considered a psychological injury as serious as physical wounds.¹¹ Montessori viewed this ‘lesion’ as a ‘disease of degeneration,’ which weakened the nervous system, impacted the children’s development, and could lead to long-term consequences, potentially passed onto future generations.¹² She observed that the children ‘arrived at the school in a stupor, incapable of understanding anything, frightened by everyone.’¹³ Despite these challenges, the children displayed a strong desire for both individual and cooperative reconstruction, particularly through activities like building with blocks, which symbolised their ability to restore harmonious human interaction. Montessori argued that the psychological injuries these children experienced required special treatment, different from that required by other children. She focused on the mental rather than physical aspects of their trauma, emphasising the need for a tailored approach to address the profound psychological scars left by the war.¹⁴

Montessori believed that children affected by mental disturbances due to trauma would develop into unbalanced individuals, unable to foster peaceful dialogue or understanding with their peers. This fear prompted her to work tirelessly through the remainder of the war to create the White Cross, an organisation devoted to establishing Montessori education in war zones that would address these

⁸ Maria Montessori, *The Advanced Montessori Method* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1917) p. 52.

⁹ Mary Rebecca Cromwell was an early translator of Montessori’s works into French.

¹⁰ Mary R. Cromwell, “Il metodo Montessori in Francia durante la guerra,” in *La Coltura Popolare* 9, no. 1 (1919) pp. 50–51.

¹¹ Maria Montessori, *The White Cross*, in Association Montessori Internationale Archive, Amsterdam. This is a booklet of translated excerpts of Montessori’s lecture to the Women’s Board of San Diego, California, 1917 and may have been self-published.

¹² Montessori, *The White Cross*, p. 1.

¹³ Maria Montessori to Pope Benedict XV, August 27, 1918, Erigenda Croce Bianca in Archivio Apostolico Vaticano, Segreteria di Stato, Guerra 1914–1918, folder 469, f. 10v.

¹⁴ Maria Montessori, “La scuola e la guerra: La Croce Bianca,” in *La Coltura Popolare* 7, no. 9 (1917), p. 661.

'mental wounds' through education and by promoting the 'hygiene of the nervous system.'¹⁵ She proposed that workers be trained as both teachers and nurses specialising in nervous and mental diseases. The nurse-teacher's education would include 'first aid, knowledge of nervous diseases, dietetics for infants and children, isolation, special psychology, domestic science, agriculture, language, and a theoretical and practical course in the Montessori method as specially applied to those children.'¹⁶ Through this training, the Montessori teacher would help restore the child's mental capacities, help them overcome their state of anxiety, fear, and overall damage provoked by the stressor and slowly help them recover.

Montessori extended her vision beyond the recovery of children, emphasising the recruitment of teachers who had directly experienced the war, including widows of fallen soldiers who also faced the challenges of recovery. She saw this strategy as integral to the educator's own transformation, achieved through guided preparation for their role and ongoing engagement in the work. Montessori regarded this continual process of self-renewal as essential not only for the success of educational endeavours but also for fostering positive societal change.

During the war, Montessori reached out to several influential figures who advocated for ending the war, including Pope Benedict XV, but the White Cross was never constituted. While she was unsuccessful in instituting the White Cross, Montessori's efforts working with victims of war led her to realise that restoring children's physical and emotional well-being was not enough, and amplified her belief that education had an indispensable role in preventing war in the first place. Montessori wanted to intervene before neglect and lack of cognitive and emotional stimuli would stunt a child's growth. She warned that without the benefits of her restorative education, individuals would mature into adults burdened by unresolved trauma, inclined toward interpersonal conflict and prone to legitimising war as a diplomatic necessity. She then championed the creation of an educational system designed to help children grow into individuals who seek peace and foster understanding. By educating children in harmony with the 'laws of life,' their inner selves, and their surroundings, Montessori believed they would mature into mentally and physically healthy adults who would, in turn, choose consciously to avert war and conflict altogether.

The 1930s: Montessori's Public Lectures on Peace

Montessori's ambition of creating an organisation that would support those affected by war did not end in the aftermath of the first global conflict but continued as she witnessed the prelude to a second global conflict firsthand. During the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), Montessori proposed a new, albeit less detailed, plan to support civilians harmed by the conflict, expanding on her earlier idea for the White Cross.¹⁷ This new initiative aimed to aid not only children but also adults who had been marginalised or impoverished before the war. Found in a document seized by Italian fascist authorities, the plan envisioned assistance for those physically or mentally affected by the violence, including those who had relied on public charity or informal labour. Montessori also noted the long-term educational

¹⁵ Mary R. Cromwell, "Il metodo Montessori in Francia durante la guerra," p. 50.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Maria Montessori, "Progetto di un'organizzazione assistenziale per le persone civili divenute invalide o ammalate in seguito alla guerra di Spagna," May 15, 1937 in Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero dell'Interno, Divisione Polizia Politica: Cartella Personale Montessori.

consequences of the war on children, highlighting how those evacuated to countries like France and Russia by the Spanish Republican forces benefited from advanced pedagogical methods, which would later give them a significant advantage over peers who remained in Spain without access to such innovation. Montessori proposed that all minors under the age of eighteen should be categorised according to how severely they had been affected by the war—whether through physical injuries or psychological trauma such as anxiety or deeper mental disturbances—and placed in specialised schools designed to support their recovery and healing.

Alongside her efforts to create the organisation, Montessori also delivered her first public speeches on pacifism. Between 1932 and 1939, Montessori delivered a series of lectures on peace at educational conferences and peace congresses across Europe, using these platforms to publicly and forcefully share her ideas. During this time, she began to move beyond the classroom, developing strategies for promoting peace on both political and social levels. As she lectured, Montessori condemned society's neglect of children and called for the creation of institutions that would protect their rights within an educational system that often stifled their potential. She urged every nation to establish a Social Party of the Child—a political party in which children would actively participate and advocate for their own rights. For the first time, Montessori called for the creation of public institutions specifically dedicated to building a peaceful society.

Montessori's Social Party of the Child and the Ministry of the Child radically reimagined children's place in society and governance. She viewed the child as a 'forgotten citizen' deserving full rights and legal representation. The Social Party of the Child called for a revolution promoting children's rights beyond charity or education as traditionally understood. Rather, Montessori proposed the establishment of a Ministry of the Child in every government to oversee childhood as an independent and vital stage of life, protected by specific laws. She advocated for legislative bodies that included representatives for children and for children to be recognised as 'builders' of humanity.¹⁸ This vision included mandatory education in child development for future parents and educators, and even a symbolic Nation of Childhood—a global, non-territorial entity dedicated to defending the fundamental rights of life and existence for all children. Montessori challenged the dominant view of her time by arguing that children should not be merely protected from the adult world but actively involved in political and civic life. In doing so, she anticipated debates that would only emerge decades later—in the 1990s—when sociological experiments began promoting children's political participation. These initiatives, influenced by Montessori's vision, aim to advance children's rights and are central to current efforts to monitor and improve legislation affecting minors. Today, the need for a coherent, inclusive youth policy is more urgent than ever, and the growing recognition of children's specific needs has led many governments to establish departments focused on youth. These institutional shifts owe a significant debt to Montessori and her legacy.

Montessori Today: Trauma, Restorative Education, and 'The Best Weapon for Peace'

The need for a restorative education—an education informed by and focused on healing trauma—is more important than ever. Recent scholarship highlights the importance for schools to adopt trauma-informed

¹⁸ Maria Montessori, *The 1946 London Lectures* (Amsterdam: Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company) p. 109.

and trauma-responsive practices.¹⁹ Studies consistently show that exposure to trauma can disrupt brain development and impair cognitive, social, and emotional functioning, which in turn affects a child's ability to learn, develop relationships, and adapt to the school environment.²⁰ Initially, adverse childhood experiences were understood as early exposure to challenges like abuse, neglect, domestic violence, parental separation, and household issues such as substance misuse or mental health disorders. However, this definition has expanded to include broader hardships such as homelessness, poverty, racism, and systemic inequities.²¹ These experiences are closely tied to childhood trauma, which can result from single or repeated severely distressing events, leading to long-term psychological and biological consequences. Given these impacts, schools play a crucial role in recognising and addressing trauma to create supportive and inclusive learning environments.

Maria Montessori developed an educational environment that therapeutically benefited children who had experienced adversity or trauma. Already in 1897, she began linking adversity and trauma to cognitive, social, and emotional development through her work with children suffering from mental health disorders at the University of Rome's psychiatric clinic. She described their struggles as 'moral and mental incapacity,' a concept that aligns with modern understandings of trauma's effects.²² By engaging daily in practical, sensorial, and academic activities, children could participate at their own pace, which positively influenced their neurological, social, emotional, and cognitive health. This all-encompassing approach not only enhanced learning and academic performance but also bolstered self-esteem and independence.²³

Granting children the autonomy to choose their activities and materials—a distinctive trait of the Montessori approach—allowed them to engage according to their pace and needs. The restorative approach used in the Montessori classroom, an approach that benefits all learners regarding of their backgrounds, is more urgent than ever for understanding how to address children's trauma. Children who have experienced trauma and remain unhealed, Montessori argued, would be less likely to grow up into fulfilled adults capable of seeking peace. Recent advances in neuropsychology demonstrate that students in Montessori environments exhibit more flexible and adaptive brain activity, especially in networks associated with error monitoring and creative problem-solving, compared to those in other educational approaches. These findings underscore the importance of continuing to study and implement the Montessori approach, particularly for children who experience growing up in hardship or adversity.²⁴

¹⁹ Mary Shelley Thomas, Shantel D. Crosby and Judi Vanderhaar, "Trauma-informed practices in schools across two decades: An interdisciplinary review of research," in *Review of Research in Education*, 43(1), (2019) pp. 422–452.

²⁰ P.A. Jennings, *The trauma-sensitive classroom: Building resilience with compassionate teaching*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2019.

²¹ V. J. Felitti, and others, "Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study," in *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14 (4), 1998, pp. 245–258.

²² Maria Montessori, *The California lectures of Maria Montessori, 1915: Collected speeches and writings* (R. Buckenmeyer, Ed.) (The Clio Montessori Series. Montessori-Pierson) 2008.

²³ Bernadette Phillips and others, *Trauma-Informed Practice in Montessori Classrooms. An Essential Guide for Students and Teachers*, Routledge 2024.

²⁴ Over the last fifteen years, there has been substantial growth in scholarship on this issue. Key contributions include: Adele Diamond, "The Evidence Base for Improving School Outcomes by

In the increasing frequency of both human-made and natural disasters, the imperative to address children's psychological distress and trauma has become ever more evident. In environments ranging from refugee camps to schools in underprivileged neighbourhoods, there is a notable surge in severe psychological issues among children, including depression, anxiety, psychosis, self-harm, and suicide attempts. These alarming trends necessitate a re-evaluation of our educational methodologies.

Montessori emphasised the importance of a restorative educational approach—one that fosters a connection between individuals and their environment, facilitating healing from trauma by helping them find their place within society and nature. Her message remains highly relevant as we continue to reflect on how education can contribute to a more peaceful society.

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