

# Trinity Montessori focuses on freedom

Method enables children to learn at their own rate

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

PITTSFORD — "Freedom" is a word seldom used in connection with a school.

Yet Sister Clare Francis Mogenhan, SSI, peppers her comments about Trinity Montessori School with that very word.

"This a form of education that gives the children the freedom to learn," said Sister Mogenhan, who has directed the school at the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse, 4095 East Ave., for the past three years.

"This freedom allows the teachers to take each child and to make sure each child grows intellectually, emotionally and mentally," she continued. "I think that this atmosphere and the environment gives the children greater freedom to grow."

This year Trinity Montessori School marks 25 years of providing an atmosphere of "freedom" in Rochester. A project launched by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester in 1967, the school currently serves 119 children — ranging in age from 18-month- to 7-year-olds — and educates up through first grade.

The school is associated with the American Montessori movement, based on the education method developed by Italy's Dr. Maria Montessori at the beginning of the 20th century. The Montessori movement took root in the United States in the 1950s and 60s.

The "Montessori method" emphasizes presenting the child with an environment that encour-

ages learning at his or her own speed and relies on sensory stimulation. This approach, Sister Mogenhan noted, "Teaches the child how to learn and creates a strong desire to learn."

Sister Mogenhan explained, for example, that when the school's children learn about geometric shapes, they hold colorful models of those shapes. When they learn about numbers, the students hold the same number of objects as the particular number they are studying.

The method is used to introduce the children to various academic subjects as well, including social studies — sometimes through talks by the parents of the children attending the school — geography, letters, language arts, science, art and music.

The children are separated into age groups — toddlers, 3- to 5-year-olds, and 5- to 7-year-olds — with the older group attending full week, all-day sessions. The younger groups attend half-day sessions two, three or five days a week.

In addition to teaching children how to learn, the method helps students gain self confidence, Sister Mogenhan said.

"You are equipping them with an inner strength and an inner desire so when they are older, they are able to help themselves," she observed.

This was one of the program's aspects that appealed to Paula Vullo, who sent three children through the Montessori program.

"The Montessori method basically lets the children develop at their own pace in their own way," declared Vullo, a parishioner at Penfield's St. Joseph's Church, 43 Gebhardt Road.

"The children learn to learn themselves," Vullo continued. "They learn to learn on their own."



Jessica Syracuse (right) and Jill Severin play with colorful models of geometric shapes at Trinity Montessori School, located at the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse.

Fann Severin found in the Trinity Montessori School a way to prepare her 5-year-old daughter for school.

"My child wasn't ready for the public-school system, yet I couldn't find a pre-school that offers academics," noted Severin, a parishioner at Henrietta's Good Shepherd Church, 3318 E. Henrietta Road.

At the Montessori school, Severin said, the children are not pushed, labeled or forced to compete with other students — unlike some of the other schools her other children have attended.

"I think what's neat is that when they want to go into a (subject) area and do well in it, they have the satisfaction of saying, 'I chose this area,'" Severin said.

Vullo noted that her son, Martin, a three-year veteran at Trinity Montessori, learns differently than other children. Vullo speculated that if Martin were in a public school where the teacher had many students and couldn't provide the one-on-one attention that Montessori teachers do, he wouldn't "feel that he was accomplishing anything because he

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doesn't do it the way the other students do it."

But at Montessori, Vullo said, Martin is allowed to do things his own way, and thus when he does go to another school, he will have had the experience and confidence he gained at Montessori to support him.

Both parents expressed regret, in fact, that the school does not go beyond first grade — as some Montessori schools do.

Sister Mogenhan noted that ex-

tending the school to more grades is indeed one of Trinity Montessori's goals. She said volunteers — many of them parents of current and former Montessori students — are looking at ways to raise money for the school to expand its facilities and to add new grades.

The fact that the school is essentially self supporting also makes it expensive, Sister Mogenhan acknowledged.

Tuition for the two-day-a-week toddler program is \$800 a year. The all-day, 5-to-7-year-old program costs \$2,470. Sister Mogenhan is hoping that contributions help to underwrite some of the cost, and thus keep tuition from rising.

After working in the education field for 30 years, Sister Mogenhan has become a late, but fervent, advocate of the Montessori method.

"I wish I would have gotten acquainted with this 30 years ago when it started in the United States," she said. "I'm just sorry I'm not starting out as a teacher now."

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