



## Q & A

### Won't learning in small groups slow down the bright child or encourage some children to be dependent on others for the answers in the elementary program?

Maria Montessori tailored her elementary program to fit the psychological characteristics of 6 to 12 year old children. She understood that the elementary years mark the child's true social awakening.

During the primary years (ages 3 to 6), the child works on developing an individual self, distinct from parents and siblings. Therefore, the primary directress tends to give children lessons separately, because they are doing the fundamental work of constructing themselves as individuals. In contrast, the elementary child is working on constructing him/herself as a social being, as a member of society. Elementary children are learning the delicate skills of cooperation and compromise, give and take. They are learning how to be honest yet tactful with one another, how to build friendships and handle conflicts. Developing these impersonal skills is no less important than making progress in academic work.

Dr. Montessori realized that an effective elementary program should accommodate children's needs and desires to work with each other as they learn. Therefore, she envisioned a classroom that acknowledges the social needs of the elementary child and encourages cooperative work. Lessons are given in small groups precisely because elementary children learn most readily and enjoyably that way.



modeled by the others.

Since cooperative learning is an integral part of the elementary Montessori classroom, the children become adept at working together without doing work for each other. They come to understand that true partners share tasks, each contributing his or her particular talents or strengths. For example, a group of children doing a research project may divide the tasks so that the strongest readers supply information to their partners, who may be especially adept at writing or illustrating. By working together, each child experiences success while improving the skills

Elementary children quickly learn that truly helping each other does not mean supplying ready answers. The teacher shows by example that true help is best given by gently steering, and an attitude that suggests, "You can do it by yourself!"