

- ▢ Home
- ▢ Reading notes
- ▢ Good Poems
- ▢ Media Diary
- ▢ Photos
- ▢ Live Blogs
- ▢ Links

Maria Montessori on work and play

"If there was one thing Maria Montessori hated, it was play. She also disapproved of toys, fairy tales and fantasy. This came as a surprise to me. I had the impression – from the hippyish reputation of modern Montessori schools – that the essence of the Montessori method was 'learning through play'. Indeed, this is the way her philosophy is often summarised, including by her admirers. When you read her own words, however, you realise that the foundation of Montessori's methods was a belief in work: effortful, concentrated, purposeful work. In her view, the work of children was more focused than the work of adults. Many adults were lazy, working only because they were paid to and doing as little as possible. But in her schools, she wrote, 'we observe something strange: left to themselves, the children work ceaselessly ... and after long and continuous activity, the children's capacity for work does not appear to diminish but to improve.' The fierce concentration Montessori observed in children had much in common with what the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called 'flow': the state of being completely absorbed in an activity for its own sake. More recently, some psychologists studying children on the ADHD and autistic spectrums have used the word 'hyperfocus'. For Montessori, this phenomenon was something that all children were capable of, as creatures of God."

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