

Emile, expounded a theory of natural education in which children were liberated from oppressive social conventions. Though recognizing the contributions of her predecessors, Montessori would remedy their deficiencies by turning to the actual observation of children, in clinical fashion, for her ideas on educational method. Developed by a physician in the first half of the 20th century, the educational method stemmed from close observation of children in relatively free environments. Like Montessori, Froebel had developed the idea that early childhood education should take place in a specially created environment, the kindergarten, or the "child's garden." According to Froebel, an adherent of idealist philosophy, children were endowed with inner spiritual powers that unfolded in an educational environment that encouraged learning through self-activity and the use of specially designed materials, such as (what he termed) "gifts and occupations." The Swiss educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1774–1827) had developed a theory of coeducation that urged that schools be reformed into homelike places where children felt emotionally secure and in which they learned by using their senses in specially designed object lessons. Within a structure created by the materials and teacher oversight, children are free to make constructive choices among activities that they have been taught, to explore personal interests (with the caveat that they also engage broadly), and to decide whether to work alone or with peers in the multi-age classrooms. Pestalozzi's emphasis on using objects as the basis for learning, while on the right track, was too formal, routine, and mechanical. Froebel's kindergarten was so steeped in philosophical idealism that it was not grounded in modern science and psychology. Pestalozzi's emphasis on learning through sensation and through work with 11 objects was an antecedent of Montessori's emphasis on sensory training. Montessori education aligns with principles and practices that a century of research has shown are more optimal for child development than the principles and practices that undergird conventional schooling (Lillard, 2017).