



direction



Montessori is an Aid to Life

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Contact Us

Montessori Society AMI [UK]
26 Lyndhurst Gardens
London
NW3 5NW
020 7435 7874

Email: info@montessori-uk.org
Website: www.montessorisociety.org.uk
Editorial Team: Louise Livingston,
Elizabeth Hood, Isabel Raphael
Design Layout: Lucy Livingston

From the Editor

Summer beckons once again, and in the UK we all retreat for the summer break and some time to relax and read. Whether you are a parent or a teacher there is an abundance of interesting reading in this edition of *Direction*.

Parents of young children will enjoy reading Kristin McAlister-Young's reflections on the challenges of being a parent of children under three. Challenging enough for anyone but even more challenging if you have Montessori training and you know what you *should* be doing. Take heart from her realistic advice on the subject of being a Montessori parent. If all else fails, then we know that our children will turn out well as long as we keep telling them how well they are doing, so that they keep growing in self-esteem. Or is this true? Neuropsychologist Steve Hughes gives us some food for thought on the subject of praise. In celebration of the launch of the Aid to Life parent support initiative we publish another article from the new materials. This time we look at Communication in the early years and what parents can do to help their children to develop a rich, expressive language.

Observation is the key to the Montessori approach, so it is something that we must constantly strive to

perfect. In the first of a two-part article Louise Livingston talks about the things we have to bear in mind when preparing an environment that will allow us to make the kind of observations that will help us to truly 'follow the child.'

In 'Yesterday's Discoveries Today's Science' Lori Woellhaf investigates how the Montessori approach to education supports what today's neuroscientists refer to as the executive functions which are essential developmental goals in the early years. In a climate where Geography is fast becoming a subject that is submerged in the humanities, Gayle Wood asks 'Maria' about her approach to learning about the world.

Finally but perhaps most importantly Hadrien Roche reports on a seminar held recently in London to help us understand how we can get real data to demonstrate that Montessori really works. Until we can prove this to parents, governments and opinion formers it will always remain an alternative form of education. So please read this article and start to think how you can get behind this initiative.

Louise Livingston



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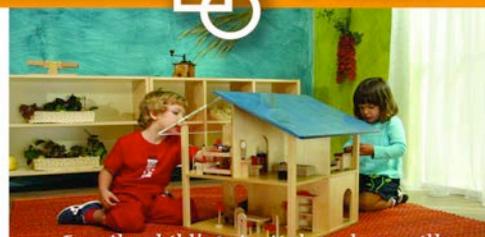
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Free the child's potential, and you will transform him into the world. (Maria Montessori)

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Montessori Society has a New Website

The Montessori Society's new, long-awaited website was launched at this year's AGM in May. The website [www.montessorisociety.org.uk], which is in beta at the moment, is designed to bring information about Montessori to parents and teachers. The website will tell you all that you need to know about Montessori and the new format allows for articles on a whole range of articles about Montessori to be accessed and shared. You will already find a number of informative articles there. The Montessori Society has one of the most comprehensive ranges of Montessori books anywhere in the world and you can now buy these on-line through the website and have them delivered to your door. Please visit the new website.

Schools Opening and Expanding

A new Montessori school and parent centre will open in Hove in Sussex in September 2011. The school, which is founded by AMI trained teachers Rob Gueterbock and Paul Pillai, will offer 50 places for children between 2 ½ and 7, Montessori parent-child groups from 6 weeks to 2 ½ and preparation for parenthood classes.

Sitaro Toto Montessori School in Borehamwood will extend its Children House from September 2011 and open up a school for the children to continue after the age of 6. The school, which is situated on the same site, will be called Greenacres Montessori Elementary, a perfect description of its idyllic setting. For further information contact shital@sitaratotomontessori.org.uk.

Society Seminar: The Risk of Not Taking Risks

Tim Gill, one of the UK's leading writers and thinkers on childhood, is the keynote speaker at the Society Seminar on July 9th. His work focuses on children's play and free time. He appears regularly on national TV and radio and has written for The Guardian and The Independent. The event will also include a panel discussion about taking risks, including Montessori professionals and parents who have taken significant risks with their children. To find out more and download an application form visit www.montessorisociety.org.uk.

Fundraising for the Corner of Hope Project

Vikki Taylor, lecturer at the Maria Montessori Institute, ran the Paris half marathon and raised over £1800 for the Corner of Hope Project. Construction on the permanent school building continues but meanwhile 190 children have been registered and are attending school in the existing tents and makeshift tin structures. In the true Montessori 'help me to help myself' approach, eight trainee teachers from within the camp are being trained at the St. Ann's Montessori Teacher Training College in Nkuru under the guidance of two mentor teachers. Local people are also being helped to gain the skills needed for building this school and other projects in the future and to make their own Montessori materials. Funds are needed for this worthwhile project to flourish, so if you feel like a run, think about doing it to raise money for this project as Vikki did. Thank you Vikki and well done!

Summer Course Dates Changed

In order to accommodate those people who are presently working in school but would like to take the AMI 3-6 training in its summer format, the Maria Montessori Institute has deferred the start date for the first summer to 18th July 2011. For more information about training for the AMI Diploma across 3 summers please contact the Maria Montessori Institute on 0207 435 3646 or email info@mariamontessori.org.

First Aid to Life Materials on Sale

You have been hearing for a while now about the Aid to Life initiative, an international project with a simple mission to bring Montessori ideas to new parents in a clear and easily implemented format. Four books, DVDs and information leaflets giving concrete suggestions for the formative period of a child's life, from birth to three are now available for purchase through the NAMTA website. The developmental areas covered are Independence, Communication, Movement and Self-discipline. These materials will be of huge value to parents and to those wanting to help parents understand how to help their child flourish. Visit www.montessori-namta.org/Aid-to-Life-initiative to get your copy.



Report from the Montessori Society AGM 2011

Highlights of the report given by the Chair of the Montessori Society, Emma Wong Singh.

I am pleased to report significant progress over the past year in continuing our mission to develop and broaden the base of understanding in our community and broader society for Montessori principles and their application. These developments, we will see, are brought about at a global level through the work of AMI and also at local level, by us, the Society.

We continue to do this through our current publications, the selling of our books, our events and a much more interactive website. Leaving the AMI AGM in Amsterdam a few weeks ago, a phrase that stuck with me was 'Connecting with the Community'. Let us try to translate this theme into what both AMI and the Society have worked with over the past year, so that we can all get a glimpse of the excellent work that is in progress.

We know that the government is faced with the twin challenges of doing more with less. As these challenges filter through to our society, we are witnessing a natural resurgence of the kinds of things that make us feel more human, perhaps things that make us feel that we belong. Having lessened our grasp on the material aspects of our world, the fundamental and basic elements that make up society increase. One of these is about community, forging ties that are based not on the material, but the real.

Connecting with our Past:

The purchase of the Maria Montessori House in Amsterdam was completed by AMI this past year. This was made possible by the Oppenheimer family, a huge supporter of Montessori over the years. Building work will start immediately and AMI envisages that the building will be an archive centre, making it possible to see and touch many of Montessori's artefacts.

'Psychogeometry' has finally been published due to the work of Professor Benedetto Scoppola, from the Department of Mathematics at the University of Rome. In 1934 Maria Montessori had two major books ready for publication. These were called 'Psicogeometrica' and 'Psicoaritmetica'. As she was based in Spain at the time, both titles were originally published in Spanish, acquiring something of a legendary status since translations into other languages were not available for many years. Professor Scoppola explains that 'Psychogeometrica' was a very rich book, poorly edited. Montessori's

main ideas are explained very clearly; the geometry material introduced between the ages of 4 and 6, then extending to the Elementary years, presented in what he described as a 'marvellous' way. This book is now available through the Montessori Society website.

Connecting with the Present:

Sitting around the table at the AMI Affiliates Meeting in Amsterdam a few weeks ago was, as always, an awesome experience. As the years pass more and more countries are represented as the rate of growth of AMI around the world is quite phenomenal. We are active participants in a growing movement that is in the process of capturing the hearts and minds of an increasing number of government departments and peoples across the globe. We may not feel big in the UK, but we are a significant part of a movement that is growing quite substantially across the world. We are part of a whole, the greater part giving us the energy and the enthusiasm to continue with our work in the UK. Australia, China and Thailand, for example, give us wonderful examples of how AMI Montessori is actually being sought by governments and politicians and those who influence education policy in their respective countries.

I can't mention the present time, without mentioning Dr. Steven Hughes. Many of you here have heard him talk about the importance of research, and the compilation of statistics to underpin and to communicate our work with children more effectively to those parties who are influencing change in the UK. His work, talking as a guest of the Maria Montessori Institute, will help to galvanize reaction and action to this project. We must lend support to this work and find ways to help the Montessori community to carry out what needs to be done.

Connecting to the Future:

We have the International Montessori Congress coming up in Portland, Oregon in the summer of 2013. There is also the Third International Assembly of the Educateurs Sans Frontiers which will take place in Dallas, Texas from July 28th to August 11 this summer. The theme is Montessori Education of Social Change - Empowering Communities, Enabling Children. There will be two weeks of reading, discussion and reflection with an international group of Montessorians and should not be missed if you are interested in how Montessori principles can be applied outside the classroom.

How can working alone help my child to socialise?

My daughter attends a Montessori Children's House and she does a lot of work on her own. I worry that she is not being given sufficient opportunity to develop her social skills. How will a Montessori Children's House help her to develop the ability to deal with social situations?

When children first arrive in a Children's House, although they enjoy mimicking the social behaviour that they see around them, they are not so focussed on being with others. At this early stage, they are very happy to work on their own. Offering role-playing opportunities known as 'grace and courtesy' and a mixed-age environment provides them with the tools and a model of acceptable social behaviour.

A Montessori environment never

forgets the power of the absorbent mind. During the first six years of life every child will effortlessly absorb the impressions he receives from his environment. He becomes aware of social norms and grasps a basic understanding of what is acceptable behaviour and what is not. However, as he grows he becomes increasingly interested in the social aspects of life and starts to want to establish a community. He relinquishes his observing role

and develops a desire for more active contact with others around him. At this later stage, the Children's House will offer games for the children, which means that they can work together in a way that responds to this period of sensitivity to social behaviour.

Social development is uniquely supported by a Montessori environment. The type of material, the layout, the freedom to move freely and to choose activities, all help to give the child a blueprint of how a society should function. The interdependence of the activities helps the child to foster a sense of responsibility for his actions and for others who share his world. Commonplace issues around sharing and interacting with others are dealt with positively and in a non-judgemental way, helping the child to find a way to respond or react to situations in an appropriate manner.

Is Neuroscience catching up with Montessori ?

I am a Montessori practitioner and I heard from some of my colleagues that the Royal Society is publishing a report on the developments of neuroscience and its impact on education. I am keen to promote Montessori as a serious partner in this field. How do I get involved in this process and find out more about their work?

At the beginning of March this year the Royal Society, the UK's national academy of science, invited comments from experienced teachers on how neuroscience evidence can be used to inform teaching methods, behaviour management

and teacher training. The invitation follows publication of the report, 'Neuroscience: implications for education and lifelong learning', the second series of reports by the Royal Society on developments in neuroscience and their

implications for society and policy.

As Montessori practitioners we need to become actively involved in this discussion; the future of Montessori lies in evidence-based findings from the field of neuroscience. Keeping up to date with the latest developments and discussion is the first step for all Montessori practitioners. Taking time out to respond to such requests helps to widen the number of Montessori voices represented, thereby encouraging feedback and the start of an informed and productive dialogue.

How can I help my child to do things for himself?

I understand that the concept of independence is very important to my child's development and giving my child as many opportunities to do things for himself is a way to help him. I have found recently, however, that my three-year-old son is insisting that I do many things for him, from putting on his shoes, to feeding him. How do I help him to do more things by himself when he wants me to do everything for him?



opportunities for the child to participate in the activity is key even if it seems as if, at first, you are actually doing most of the task for him.

The language you use needs also to be considered and carefully chosen, encompassing the feeling of collaboration. ['Shall we out on your shoes? Which part would you like to do?'] Giving him a challenge ['Can you fasten your strap so it is completely straight?'], will help him to feel that he can do it, so in turn he will want to do more. Of course, you will need to be patient, to start with he will not be able to do things at the pace you might choose. Sometimes it is necessary to get somewhere within a certain timeframe and then you may have to give more help than usual in order to speed up the task, but make sure that you set aside some time every

day when your child can just do these things at a pace that fits with his natural rhythm and capacity. Little by little he will start to do it all by himself. Sparking that interest is key, and if he senses the faith that you have in his ability and also that you share in his interest, the unspoken message will always be a positive and reassuring one.

Comments, Questions?

Please send in your letters to:

Direction
Montessori Society AMI [UK]
26 Lyndhurst Gardens
London NW3 5NW

email:
info@montessori-uk.org

A key and often quoted Montessori phrase is 'help me to do it by myself'. Offering your child independent activity is the first step to helping him become the master of his own thoughts and actions. On a practical level, we need to think about how the adult can help the child become more independent; time, experience and thoughtful reflection are often the key factors that help to refine the art of what we do.

When you are going outside and shoes need to be put on, suggest to your child that you could do some 'teamwork'. 'I put on one shoe and you will put on the other', or as an alternative, 'I will help you put your feet in your shoes and you fasten the strap'. Providing

Getting Real Data

Anyone using the Montessori approach with children is convinced of its effectiveness, but anecdotes and stories are not enough to convince parents and governments to adopt Montessori education for our children. We need real data. Hadrien Roche reports on a workshop given by Dr Steven Hughes in London recently.

We all gathered at the Maria Montessori Institute in Hampstead on a Saturday morning, coming from all over Europe, some visiting their local Montessori haunt, others discovering the venerable building, and a few like myself coming back to their alma mater. There was quite a lot of socialising and hugs exchanged over tea and biscuits, in a very English way until we finally all got together for what we came for. Steve Hughes started talking and we all listened. For a less cumbersome reading, I'll put myself in his shoes and borrow his voice, which is in a sense easier and fitting since I was the only other male in the room. Oh, Montessori brothers, where were you?

The essence of the talk could be summarised in two parts: what is a good school and how can we prove to the world that our Montessori schools are good schools? As an introduction, it is important to realise that the Montessori community is faced with a typical 'locker room' syndrome: we're only talking with people from our team. We're convinced of the goodness of our actions and the righteousness of our path, and we confirm each other in it. Yet, self-assuredness and conviction only gets you so far, when you need to convince other people, not other Montessorians.

When trying to prove something, we can determine five levels of evidence, from the least powerful to the strongest.

The first level is opinion. Everybody has plenty of them, and when it comes to education they are usually very eager to share them with you. They can be about anything: 'I believe that the Earth is flat', or 'I'm quite sure that children can read before the age of 7 without being taught'. Opinions can be right or wrong, but they can't really be discussed. Not because they have to be respected, but because

there is nothing to discuss about it. Opinions simply are opinions.

The second level is anecdote. Again, combined with opinions, these first two levels make the massive bulk of every argument on a given internet forum or at any Christmas dinner. Anecdotes are opinions backed by a handful [sometimes just one] fact. And again, they can be right or wrong, and we can throw them at each other without much ability to prove anything with it except that we have a fascinating life and we can tell stories in an engaging way.

The third level is summary statistics. It is in essence a compilation of anecdotes, but it adds up to something much more forceful. When a teacher can say '94% of the children that came from my classroom have graduated from high-school whereas the average of the neighbourhood is 50%', it has a lot more weight than the heart-warming story of your nephew. This is already something done by some schools, and figures like this which were quoted on the East Dallas Community School website definitely look shiny.

The fourth level is a tested hypothesis. There we enter the realm of experimental science: a researcher gives himself something to prove and goes forth to do so. The Angeline Lillard study on Montessori in the schools of Milwaukee was such a case. She formulated the hypothesis that Montessori children would fare better than children of equivalent socio-economic background, with parents as involved and caring. She gathered data in a way consistent with her hypothesis so as not to skew the results, and came to the conclusion that she was right.

The fifth level, a replicated hypothesis, would be another scientist, preferably someone doubtful of the method, who would replicate the experience of

 **Self-assuredness and conviction only gets you so far when you need to convince other people** 

Dr Lillard and come to the same conclusions - or slightly different ones. But, that would be an experiment in a scientific and controlled fashion.

You start doing research at summary statistics, but you really enter science at the fourth level. Most Montessorians are not scientists, and formulated hypothesis might be difficult to prove for us, mere teachers. Yet, at the very minimum, we must shun opinions and anecdotes and turn to facts, numerous and organised to make our points. The main point being that we are good schools. But, what is a good school? What defines a school as good? What are the goals of schools?

From a neuropsychologist's point of view, a good school is one that fosters brain development and respects its rules. From a more traditional perspective, a good school would be one that helps children perform well. In a massive study in the US, Bob Pianta, Dean of the Curry school of education at the University of Virginia tracked which schools were able to fight back social determinism and to reduce the gap between children which is there from the start and stays there unless acted upon. Such schools would be defined as good schools in Dr Pianta's study. In both cases, traditional schooling seems to fail pretty miserably.

The traditional method of teaching [which can be tracked back about 2500 years at least] consists of a teacher who tells 'stuff' to students who listen to it and are subsequently tested to check how much of the aforementioned 'stuff' is still there, stuck to them and hasn't been washed away. From a neurological perspective, it makes no sense. This type of learning has a half life of one year, meaning that you lose half of it after one year, and then half of this remaining half next year and so on. The concept behind this method is that all students arrive at the beginning of the school year with the same skills and knowledge and that by the end of the school year we gave to each of them the same additional set of skills and knowledge with which they can move on to the next year. Any honest academic knows that, of course, it doesn't work. Children arrive with a wide array of capacities, and stay that way in the best of cases, or amplify the gap between their achievements in the worst.

To ensure co-operation and compliance, traditional schools use a mixture of carrots and sticks, namely grades [which

can be both], punishments and rewards. This has the result of making schools an extremely crushing environment for many children. An interesting test of this is to type 'school makes me...' into Google and to let this modern oracle tell you what the most common endings to this sentence are [hint : it's not 'happy'.]

So a good school would not work any of these ways. A good school would be so different in its workings that it is worth labelling it a 'school 2.0', a whole new version of the old concept of school. Such a school would act in compliance with what we know of the brain. First and foremost, the brain is fed by sensory inputs, and the biggest provider is the hands. It is through touching that children will learn first. A 'school 2.0' would provide exploration through movement, through the work of the hands, and a wide and diverse range of sensory inputs. It would focus on life goals, not just end of year test ones. We want 'school 2.0' to accompany children in the lifelong endeavour to become well developed human beings. What are the qualities we seek in others? In employees, colleagues, or even friends? We like them to be efficient, trustworthy, independent, self-motivated, caring and responsible...all these qualities can't be taught, but in a 'school 2.0' their growth would be fostered.

'School 2.0' would accept and embrace the diversity of the children that arrive in it and would not try to take them all to the same point at the end of the

At the very minimum we must shun opinions and anecdotes and turn to facts



year, both a futile and a fruitless task.

A school 2.0 would focus in nurturing the pre-frontal cortex, the zone of the brain that distinguishes us from the rest of the living creatures. It's the part which is responsible for decision making by providing cognitive flexibility, the capacity to control impulses and working memory. It requires the opportunity to make choices in the classroom, and to have to control your behaviours without outside rewards or punishments.

So, after reading all this, all Montessori teachers are probably nodding a lot, and patting themselves on the back for being at the forefront of pedagogical research. But the problem is double: how to prove that we are doing the right thing and how to deal with the great number of people who still strongly believe that 'school 1.0' goals [good test scores] are what matters.

For the second part, it is mostly a question of hope and time that the ongoing teaching debate will finally catch up with Science. That day might dawn sooner than expected here in England with initiatives like the one at the Royal Society, 'Neuroscience: implications for education and lifelong learning' which seems determined to take neuroscience into consideration when it comes to education reform. But in the meantime, it is important for us to prove that Montessori education is relevant on both fronts: that Montessori children fare well on standardised tests and that they achieve 'school 2.0' goals.

We don't have the capacity to conduct nationwide research projects able to convince the movers and shakers. We have neither the resources nor the skill. But that's okay because there is plenty that we can do and, by doing it well, we can create an amount of data that will help us reach the 'Powers that Be'. In the meantime, our research will concentrate on the people we need to convince immediately: the parents.

They are the ones who have to make the difficult decision of entrusting the most precious thing in their lives to a bunch of weird people who don't believe in gold stars, worship an old Italian woman and freak out when you put a mat on a painted line on the floor. The amazing things we pretend will happen to their child are only hearsay for them, and they are desperately in need of hard data and facts to help them make the difficult choice to go against the flow. The most obvious data we can gather is the answer to the questions they always ask: 'Are our children actually learning anything since you don't teach them?' 'What happens to them after they leave your school?'



« We want to be able to prove how children in our classrooms compare to children from traditional schools »»

We can put together a programme evaluation along these two lines. It can take different aspects, none of which are exclusive, and ideally would be combined. The first way to evaluate if your children fare well on standardised tests, is, well, to have them do standardised tests. But it's not about bringing multiple choice questions to the children about which cube is on top of the pink tower [the answer is b, the smallest one]. We want to be able to prove how children in our classrooms compare with how children from traditional schools do, and for that there is a vast battery of tests available. These tests are easy to administer, assess a wide range of skills and developmental abilities and most importantly, have been tried on a great number of children, giving an average of results, helping you know where your children are on the scale. Tests like the Bracken and the Vineland are invaluable in tracking down precise results, which we sometimes fail to see.

Steve showed an evaluation that was made at Cornerstone Montessori School in the US, that caters for socially disadvantaged children, using both these tests, proving that Montessori children are not geniuses way above the average, but are all on the good side of normal. Though this may seem a very unimpressive result, with nothing to write home about, it's in fact crucially important in two regards: children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods usually fare much lower than that, so this proves the impact of the school. By giving small but real results, it reinforces us: we stop selling pipe dreams of excellent children with dazzling intellects. Yes, I once had a 7 year old knowing all his multiplication facts all the way to 16^2 . but I can hardly pretend all

children do. A realistic, measured and consistent positive effect is a better argument than a few anecdotes of amazing children that sometimes make us sound like snake oil peddlers [even though our snake oil works.]

The second part, “what happens to our children’ is a bit more complex to answer, but not that much. We can start with the low hanging fruits, the information that is a phone call away. Keep track of your alumni and ask for their reports sheets, their grades, and file all that. A quick compilation after a few years will probably end up making a compelling answer to that most annoying and recurring question. But since we want a more elaborate answer, we need to collect more information, and another way to do it is through questionnaires.

The first people we can send questionnaires too are parents and former parents. We can also send them to teachers. Teachers’ questionnaires are especially valuable since they have a greater sense of normality than parents, seeing former students among tens of other children of the same age and background.

When preparing the questionnaires there are a few important things to keep in mind: open ended questions are difficult to quantify even though they can be informative. The questions that can be answered through a Likert scale [range tidiness from 1 to 7 for example] should have language attached to it and not just numbers. It gets more standardised results and they can be used more easily: ‘80% of teachers think the children from our school were well-prepared for school’ is more convincing than ‘rated them 6 out of 7’. It shouldn’t be too long, and you should make things as easy as possible - offer incentives, pre stamped envelopes, make it simple.

The last important way to collect data is through classroom observation. Montessori courses provide a lot of tools for observing classrooms. A standard behavioural observation procedure could be by tracking specific behaviour in children every thirty seconds and ticking them on an observation sheet. This would allow us to assess how much our children are actively working compared to passively listening to us. We could also use this way to measure the amount of undesirable behaviours that are actually happening. Again, being able to prove that this ratio of appropriate/inappropriate behaviour is better than in traditional schools is more convincing than pretending that these behaviour patterns don't exist in ours. Such classroom observation allows us to compare ourselves with other schools.

For example, the Bob Pianta study showed that on average the ratio of listening to acting in traditional classrooms was 10 to 1 [1 hour of activity for 10 hours of listening].

So, equipped with summary statistics of alumni results, with the results of these parent and teacher questionnaires and with classroom observation reports, we will now hopefully be able to create a set of data, that can create a compelling argument in our favour.

And of course, all these are what we do at our own small local level. But if, after a first round, we were able to gather results and questionnaires and were able to put together a Standard Montessori Assessment kit, something on a much larger scale could become feasible. This would give us something that could give us weight and momentum.

In this day and age, it is very politically incorrect to make claims of superiority of any kind, and since Montessorians don't encourage competition, we are severe offenders when it comes to not being loud enough and trying not to antagonise traditional schools. But maybe this has to stop. Probably now is the time to be arrogant, to make our claims and to back them with facts.

Science aims for truth, and that's a pretty arrogant goal. But so was Maria Montessori's aim: to create a system of education that would discover and follow the universal rules of the child, that would be as undisputed as are the rules of gravity. So let's not be nice anymore, and let's be right: let's get real.

Hadrien Roche is a parent and an AMI teacher trained to work with children between 6 and 12 living and working in France.



Preparing an Environment for Spontaneous Activity

In the first of a two part article Louise Livingston, AMI Teacher Trainer, talks about the role of observation as the key to children's development. If we are to make useful observations, first we need to prepare an environment that allows us to observe children's spontaneous activity.



One of the first things that we learn on our course is that Maria Montessori developed her approach to working with children by offering them things to do and then observing their response. We know that as students we were sent out to observe children as an essential part of our training so that we would understand how to really be able to see what we can learn about children through their own actions.

Yet when we get into the environment with the children, we become focused on giving presentations: helping Stella to mop up the water that she has just poured all over the floor and stopping Peter from hitting someone over the head with the Red Rods. Too often we get to the end of the day and ask ourselves whether we have actually made any observations. Never mind, I was too busy, how could I? Tomorrow is another day, tomorrow I will do it! Then we get to tomorrow of course and it is just the same as the day before.

Perhaps another reason we don't observe enough is because actually we are not really sure exactly what we should be looking for and how to use our observations productively. But Montessori has told us to observe the children and we will know how to help them. 'Don't follow me' she said 'follow the child'. Montessori has told us that it is the children who must be our guides so we need to think about how we can make meaningful observations - the kind of observations that will help us to read what the children are trying to tell us through *their own actions* because this is the real key to 'following the child'. As Montessori said:

'To observe the child who begins to take an interest in work, whatsoever that may be: who washes his

hands, dusts, moves an inset - if only he works and shows that he desires and is interested in this work - to observe this and then follow the child in such a way that, if possible, this inner activity may develop without being in any way hindered by us, for then this activity will find its own pathway.' [1]

So we have 2 directives then - to observe what the child takes an interest in and to follow this interest. But if we want to observe the child's interests we need first of all to take a step back. We will only be able to see what the child truly takes an interest in, what we call the child's spontaneous activity, if we first of all prepare an environment that suits the developmental needs of the child, then introduce him to some activities that meet with his developmental needs and interests and finally give him freedom to be active with them for as long as he wishes.

Observation is the key to all of this in more than one way: we cannot prepare an environment without understanding the child we are preparing for - this comes through observation. We cannot offer activities that meet the child's needs and interests unless we have understood through observation what these are. We will not know what to do next unless we observe what the child is doing when he is active with what we have shown.

Here comes the most difficult part of our work in some ways. We need to allow the children freedom to try by themselves. We all know that most of the activities we offer to the children we could do easily, so our impulse is to step in and help when they are struggling. This impulse comes from a good place, helping others is a good thing to do, but when we offer help and remove the child's effort we remove the possibility of development. So we have to stand back, observe the child's efforts and master our impulses to offer help where it is not needed.

 **If we do not help the child to make free choices then we will only see the child acting as directed by us** 



As Montessori says:

'If we wish to observe the child, we must observe. If we see that he is working with great effort and difficulty, and if we see that it takes him a long time to do what we could do very easily; then we are observing. That is the observation.' [2]

When, having been left to work at the difficulty, he finally succeeds, that is the observation. Unless we observe then it is likely that we will never see the child develop as he might, freely driven by his inner teacher.

Observation in itself is not enough. If we are to follow the child in such a way that the child's *inner activity can find its own pathway* then we have to observe and respond to what these observations are telling us that the child needs. Before we can think about how we might observe and what kind of responses are helpful to the child's development we need first of all to make sure that the environment we are giving to the child allows for spontaneous activity. As Montessori says

'The children must be free to express themselves and thus reveal those needs and attitudes which would otherwise remain hidden or repressed in an environment that did not permit them to act spontaneously.' [3]

It is only the child's spontaneous activity that is driven from within him. If the environment does not allow him to choose freely then we will not see those things that his natural developmental urges are pushing him to do. If we as teachers do not help the child to make free choices, then we will only see the child acting as directed by us and this is not the true child. This is not the child Montessori talked about. This is the child that we see if we choose

what he does rather than helping him to choose for himself.

In an environment where the children are not really free to choose we might still see children who are active and engaged. Children are very biddable, they become used to us deciding what they do. This is the way that most of the world approaches the education of children, and this is what they will have experienced from their parents before they come to us. Making observations of children in these circumstances will not tell us anything about the child's real needs and interests. It will just tell us how children respond when adults tell them what to do and direct their education. They will still progress, of course. The materials we have to offer can be used to teach. But an authentic Montessori approach is based on how children can develop if they are free enough to get in touch and be led by their own inner developmental drives.

So first of all we need to look to ourselves and ask ourselves: Do I really have faith that if I let the child choose for himself he will choose something developmentally appropriate for him? Do I really have faith that this will work with every child? Or do I think it is OK for some children but there are some who will never be as Montessori described? Perhaps the children were different in Montessori's days. She didn't have to cope with what we have to cope with: Children who watch too much TV, play too many video games and have their whole social life organised for them. This is true of course. The environment our children live in is not helpful to their development in many ways. Yet in the *Advanced Montessori Method* [p69] she says:

'In many cases the movements of the children were quite aimless; they ran around the room without any apparent object. During these movements they made no attempt to respect the objects around them; indeed they stumbled against the table, upset the chairs and stepped upon the material; sometimes they began an occupation at one spot and then ran off in another direction; they took up the objects and cast them aside capriciously.'

Maybe they had not had the same influences as our children, but they sound pretty similar, don't they? And yet, at some point these wild and disorderly children found something that grasped their attention and Montessori goes on to say:

'That nebulous mass of whirling particles - the disorderly children - began to take definite form. The children began to find their own way; in many of the objects they had first despised as silly playthings, they began to discover a novel interest, and, as a result of this new interest, they began to act as independent individuals.' [4]

So the first thing we need is to have faith. We need to be able to imagine the child who is not yet there, imagine the child as he should be and imagine the child as he will be.

You must have faith in yourself too. We have been trained to understand the materials, we have been trained to understand the child's development and of course as Montessori is alleged to have once advised Margaret Humphrey, there are also days when 'all you can do is pray'!

So what needs to happen then for the child to start on this path towards normal development? Montessori says that it starts with a '*piece of work done by the hands with real things, work accompanied by mental concentration*'. [5]

What is more she says that this work must be *freely chosen*. So the first thing we need to do then is to think about how we will help each child to find that thing on which he will fix his attention - *a piece of work done by the hands with real things - freely chosen* - because that is the key to his development it seems.

How will we help each child to start to choose things for himself? How will we help him to make choices that support his own development rather than impulsive choices? It is a process that we must help the child to take on. First we have to think what kind of things will inform the child's choice.

The first thing is knowledge. Just think about us as adults. If we are asked to choose between two options and we don't know much about each option, we cannot make a true choice. We can make an impulsive choice but not the kind of choice which will guarantee a positive outcome for us. Suppose someone offers you an ice cream and one is cinnamon and gooseberry and the other is chocolate. You have had chocolate ice cream. So you know what you are getting into if you choose that but you have never had cinnamon and gooseberry. If you decide to choose cinnamon and gooseberry you are choosing it on a whim - taking a risk - being adventurous - but you are not choosing it because you know what you are getting into and what pleasures it will bring you - there is less guarantee of a positive outcome.

It is the same with children. A true choice depends on them having some idea of what they are getting into and what it might have to offer them. How will they find out what a particular activity might offer them? From our presentations - presentations are a key to helping the children to make real choices. If

they don't have presentations they don't know which choices to make, and they can only act on impulse.

The second thing that will inform the child's capacity to choose is the individual capacity of each child. Being able to make a real choice always depends on what we are capable of. I may want to fly an aeroplane and go snowboarding, but I cannot really choose to do this and be successful if I don't know how. It is not a realistic choice for me until I know how to do it. So the building up of the child's capacity opens up choice for him. The more he can do, the more choices are open to him.

The child's capacity is built through Practical Life. So in the early days lots and lots of Practical Life activities will help the child to be able to do things for himself and to feel confident to choose.

Given that the children need both knowledge and capacity, what are our directives when they first arrive? To present, present, present - because presentations bring knowledge. We will present practical life and lots and lots of oral language because if children are going to verbalise their needs and think about what they are doing, they need good spoken language. They need lots and lots of naming games, naming everything and everyone in the environment, games with verbs, prepositions, adverbs etc., groups to share news so they get confident expressing themselves and question games to help them think logically.

When the child first comes into the environment he cannot be given the option to choose. We cannot just say to a 2 ½ year old 'What do you want to do?' He won't know how to choose. When we are building up his knowledge and self confidence we are saying 'Let me show you pouring', 'Let me show you folding cloths', 'Now join my group', where you do language games or a grace and courtesy, 'Now let me show you how to

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to screw the tops on and off bottles’.

But once the child has started to build a little repertoire of things he knows something about, then we can start to offer choices, what we call suggested choices. Would you like to do the bottles or would you like to fold cloths? The child can then start to make a choice from this limited selection. He starts to get the feeling that not only can he make choices but also he is *allowed to do so*. Too many of our children come to us never having been allowed to make a choice in their lives, because their parents and carers have made all of their decisions.

Once he gets this idea he will start to make lots of choices. He will choose lots and lots of different things and do them for a short time – 5 minutes here, 3 minutes here – maybe 5, 6 or even more activities throughout the morning. He is choosing but these are not what we call real choices. They are still impulsive choices to some extent since at this stage his choices may be influenced by many outside influences. They may just be what looks attractive and appealing in appearance. They may be what he thinks the teacher wants him to do or they may simply be what another child is doing.

A real choice is when a child chooses something that meets with his developmental needs, one that is directed by his tendencies and sensitive periods, directed by his inner teachers and not by outside influences. A real choice is made when this inner teacher has been allowed to reach through all of the obstacles that the adult world puts in its path and make its presence felt. These real choices are our guides to the child’s true interests.

How do we know when the child is making a real choice? What must we look for when observing that will help us to know that this child has made a real choice? When a child makes a real choice he starts to give his attention to what he is doing – at first it may be only a small glimmer of focus – but one day that choice that he makes will result in him giving his whole attention to what he is doing.

‘At a certain moment a child becomes intensely interested in some task. This is shown by the expression on his face, his intense concentration, and his constancy in carrying out the same exercise of the senses, a fastening of some sort, or a washing of dishes, it is all the same.’ [6]

This is what Montessori called the polarisation of attention. She noted that *‘Each time that such a polarisation of attention took place, the child began to be completely transformed, to become calmer, more intelligent, and more expansive.’ [7]*



Interest is an essential pre-requisite to concentration

She went on to say *‘When a child first shows this deep interest in any one of the objects we present to him as something answering to his psychical needs, he goes on to show a like interest in all the objects, ...it leads to a progression which goes on steadily and develops on its own accord.’ [8]*

It is essential to help the child find that **very first thing** that really interests him because this is what will set him on the path of development. What we need to do is find that activity to which the child will give his attention and eventually concentrate.

What is concentration? We are not talking about a brief moment of focus on something – 5 minutes focussing on something is not concentration. What Montessori meant when she talked about concentration was that the child was so engrossed in what he was doing that he was unaware of anything else going on around him, like in the example of the child doing the Cylinder Blocks 42 times. She continued to do it even though Montessori got the children to sing next to her and even though she lifted her up and put her on a table. This is concentration, when the child is totally unaware of anything else going on and a developmental need is being met.

It is not as simple as ‘give the children presentations, let them choose for themselves what they do and hey presto concentration’. Providing the circumstances for concentration to develop requires a much more sophisticated thought process than this.

What might these circumstances be? As adults what makes it easy for us to concentrate? First of all we need to be interested in what we are doing. It is much easier for us to concentrate on something we find interesting than something that does not interest us at all. If we go to listen to a concert given by our favourite artist we do not have to make an effort to focus or concentrate. It is a natural by-product of our passion for the music, we don’t even

even think about making ourselves concentrate.

What else is essential for us if we want to concentrate? Time is essential. If we know we have a task to get on with that we really need to put our mind to and concentrate on, and we don't have very much time because we know that in ten minutes we will have to start cooking dinner, the chances are we don't get going on it at all. It does not seem worth getting started if there is not enough time. It is the same with children. They need time too. It is not worth getting involved in something if you know there is a group planned any minute now that everyone will have to go to. It is not worth getting into something if you know that you are only allowed to do this for a limited period of time because then you will need to let someone else have a turn.

Children need unlimited time but more important than this they need to *feel* that they have it. They need to feel it from the environment and they need to feel it from us. So the environment must allow them to take something and work for it as long as they want. We must give them the feeling that they have unlimited time by not scheduling fixed time compulsory groups and by protecting them from the disturbers as soon as we see the first stirrings of concentration. As Montessori said, we need to be the *'policeman who has to defend the honest citizens from the disturbers.'*

We also need peace and quiet to concentrate, so it is our job to make sure that the environment is the kind in which concentration is at least possible. It doesn't have to be silent. It is a Children's House after all, and there must be life going on, but there should be enough peace and tranquillity to allow concentration.

Is this everything that is required for concentration? An interest, unlimited time and peace and quiet? One more thing is also important. The challenge must be just right. If something is too easy for us we do not concentrate on it because we feel it does not really require our attention, and when something is too difficult we can feel overwhelmed and our concentration becomes thwarted because we don't seem to be getting anywhere. We need some degree of success to keep persevering and to keep focussed. We must think of this with the children also. We must make sure that we are offering them work that gives them exactly the right challenge. Not too little or they will be bored, and not too much or they will give up.

How can we do this? It comes from our observations of what they are capable of – we can give them presentations that match this – not things that they can do – but things that they can nearly do – so there is something for them to strive

for. When they come up against challenges that might otherwise thwart them we can give a little help to overcome the challenge. For example, when we notice that when they are doing the buckle frame they are becoming frustrated because they don't seem to be able to get the pin into the hole, we can show them the exact movements that they need to overcome it. They can re-engage because we have helped them to become conscious of what it is they have to do and how to do it. We call this the point of consciousness. We can offer the children these little helps to overcome their challenges and as they re-engage with renewed energy and the expectation of success they are more likely to concentrate.

When we observe that they have reached a particular personal goal, we can give them a new challenge or a challenge to do something even more perfectly. When a child is going to fold cloths we can show them how to make the edges meet exactly. We can also give them a pointer that will challenge them to do something for longer. When we can see that a child can scrub one chair, we can say 'I wonder if you can do two today or three or all of them?'

These challenges are not only with the Practical Life materials. We can challenge them to build the Pink Tower in each corner of the mat, to take two drawers of the Geometry cabinet today, to do three sums with the collective exercises and so on. We need to always be thinking about what will keep the child engaged in his own development.

When we have used our observation to help the child find something of real interest, used our observations to make sure the challenge is right and allowed endless time, then we will see the child give his attention to the work and from this comes repetition and concentration can develop.

We can all recognise when a child is concentrating. That is not difficult to see. More importantly we have to recognise the first glimmerings of concentration and then make sure that we follow the child and provide the right circumstances for these glimmerings to expand into concentration.

In the next edition of *Direction* Louise talks about how to make and respond to observations that provide keys to development.

1. Lecture VI from the First International Montessori Training Course, Rome 1913
2. Montessori, Maria Communications 2008 p17
3. Montessori, Maria Discovery of the Child 1988 p48
4. Montessori, Maria Advanced Montessori Method Vol 1 p69
5. Montessori, Maria The Absorbent Mind p186
6. Montessori, Maria Absorbent Mind 1988 p304
7. Advanced Montessori Method 1991 volume 1 p 54
8. Advanced Montessori Method volume 1 p70

Why Praise is not Good for our Children

*We live in a generation that advocates that it is important for us to nurture our child's self-esteem because this will help them to grow into confident, productive adults – but is this really true? Speaking at Regent's College in London last November the neuropsychologist **Steve Hughes** explains how over-praising our children is leading to a generation of adults who feel the world owes them something.*



More than at any other point in human history, parent behaviour is driven by concerns for the emotional status and well-being of children - and who can be against that? Except for the effect that this pre-occupation is having on our children. Of course, we are profoundly, deeply, comprehensively concerned about the self-esteem of our children. That's who we are as parents in the modern era and we ought to be producing remarkable children.

Yet teachers, college professors and other professionals involved in working with young people report that there's increasing rates of poor compliance in young people. Young people think the rules don't actually apply to them and there are more behavioural problems. Young people are ruder than they have been in previous generations and are reported to have 'a weird sense of entitlement.' They are also showing higher rates of depression and anxiety. Why has this been happening? Well we can't only blame parents. It's their responsibility to do something different and more sensible, but it's not their fault. It is actually the fault of a man named John Vasconcellos, who was a politician in the State of California. One of the longest serving

members of the California State Assembly; He sponsored the legislation that led to the development of the California Task Force that created a report called 'Toward a State of Esteem - the Final Report of the California Task Force to Promote Self-esteem, and Personal and Social Responsibility.' The conclusion drawn by this task force was that a 'lack of self-esteem is central to most personal and social ills plaguing our state and nation.' It was concluded further that low self-esteem will lead to teen pregnancy, to bullying, to academic failure, to drug and alcohol abuse, and so on

Consequentially, an epidemic of self-esteem swept the nation! Who can remember from their school days, the homework assignment that was 'Ten things I love about me?' 'Things that make me special.' I remember driving in my car, minding my own business, back in Minnesota where I am from, hearing a parenting specialist on the radio explaining how it was important that we never say 'No' to a child - or, if they heard 'No', they must hear five competitory 'yesses' to undo the harm that 'No' had done to them. We had to be very careful about correcting a child, had to teach our children how to use 'feeling' words and, not that that is wrong, but it was mixed up in this other sort of morass of things that told us that we, for example, must 'always approve of your child all of the time, and never correct or criticise them' because that is shaming, which is bad for their self-esteem.

So we had '101 Ways to Praise a Child': 'Wow, way to go, super, you're special, outstanding, excellent, great, good, neat, well done, remarkable, I knew you could do it, I'm proud of you, fantastic, super star, looking good, nice work, you're on top of it' We should always be there ready with a little bit of praise every time a kid even breathed. This was the philosophy that we were living.



That we must always present something positive to the child, we must never correct them, we must never redirect them, and we should always, always, all the time, be approving of them because, that's good for them.

We had books like 'I Can do Anything' whose back cover proclaims: 'This book sends the message that if we believe in ourselves, we can do anything. It is a message which, if we hear it early enough and often enough, can make all the difference.' It goes on to say, that 'if 80% of all achievement is attitude, then two of the most confident and happy words to pass on to our children are 'I can.'

This is the model: Praise, will produce Confidence, will produce Self-esteem, which will produce Good works. However we define 'good works': Academic achievement, good citizenship or good children, that's the model. Now if this is a good model, then we should keep doing what we've been doing. But if this model is not a good model, we need to think about doing something different. Many of you have a feeling that this might not be a good model, but you don't know what to do instead so you fall back on some of the things that perhaps were done for you and that our culture still asks you to do. This talk is about examining the foundations of the model and thinking about what we can do differently, because the outcomes that this model produces are not the ones that we're seeking.

But there are some questions that it is fairly reasonable to ask: 'Isn't confidence a part of self-esteem?' 'If I confer confidence on the child, will they feel better?' and 'Doesn't positive self-esteem lead to good things?' Indeed these are good questions. They are the kind of questions that are suitable for research. I'm going to now describe to you some of the findings in a review of the literature on self-esteem and good works. 'Does high self-esteem cause better performance, interpersonal success, happiness or healthier lifestyles?' This was published in a journal called 'Psychological Science in the Public Interest'. It's 43 pages long and includes 6 pages of references. It states that 'There is a modest correlation between self-esteem and school performance.' There is a *modest* correlation – however, 'High self-esteem is partly the *result* of good school performance.' There's a causality here, but it is not in the direction of 'good self-esteem leads to good performance.' In fact, 'Efforts to boost the self-esteem of pupils have not been shown to improve academic performance and may sometimes be counterproductive.' That's been established. This is not opinion, this is people doing controlled experiments showing that there is a relationship because people who do well in school feel good about themselves. But if you improve the sense of well-being in poor performing students, they don't perform better academically.

Occupational success may boost self-esteem but not the reverse. I would argue there is a very rational relationship between self-esteem and occupational performance. When you're having a crummy week or month or year on the job how are you feeling about yourself? When you're feeling mastery at the tasks that you do in your profession how do you feel about yourself? It's directional, but, frankly in the direction that seems very rational.

Laboratory studies have failed to find that self-esteem causes good task performance, with the important exception that high self-esteem does facilitate persistence after failure. But this is one of the few sorts of findings that reach some significance. What we will find is that most of the findings that are useful are marginal. There are no main effects by which we mean 'this-absolutely caused this to happen'.

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Most of the effects are subtle. People high in self-esteem claim to be more likable and attractive, to have better relationships, and to make better impressions on others than people with low self-esteem...my positive self-appraisal, guides me to think that people will like me - actually better than they do. Because in fact, objective measures disconfirm these beliefs. So in some sense my high, positive self-appraisal distorts my perceptions because others won't agree.

High self-esteem does reduce the risk of bulimia in females but self-esteem has not been shown to predict the quality or duration of relationships and indeed, high self-esteem makes people more willing to speak up in groups and to criticise the group's approach. So confidence might cause us to criticise others!

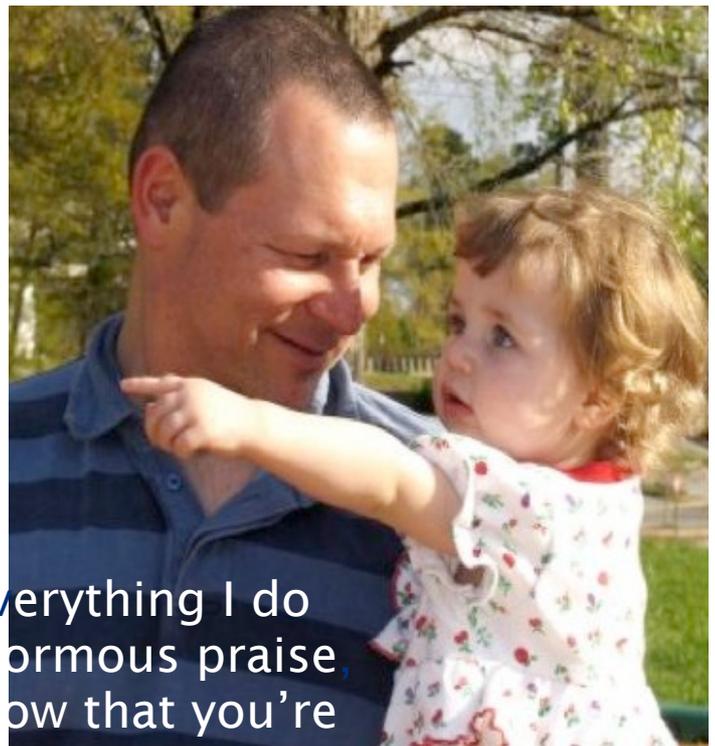
But leadership does not stem directly from self-esteem although self-esteem may have indirect effects. That is the whole story. They are mild, they are perhaps associated, they are perhaps indirect – but there is no main effect for self-esteem, on these good things happening.

There can be some negative effects however: relative to people with low self-esteem, those with high self-esteem show stronger in-group favouritism, which may increase prejudice and discrimination. We are the right people. We are the good people, and the people who are not us? They are not quite as much people, as we are people.

High self-esteem does not prevent children from smoking, drinking, taking drugs, or engaging in early sex. It doesn't. If anything, high self-esteem seems to foster experimentation, which may actually increase early sexual activity or drinking. In general, effects of self-esteem are negligible on these components and indeed, think back to Junior High [early secondary school]. There were those who developed early, there were those who were doing their adult-like parties drinking, having sex, etc. They felt very mature, they felt grown-up compared to those of us who spent most of our time in a book. But the point is that, they weren't doing that because they felt bad about themselves. I think they felt good about themselves while they were doing it. They probably felt very grown-up.

So there is no evidence that boosting self-esteem by therapeutic interventions or school programmes causes any main effects. Findings do not support continued widespread efforts to boost self-esteem in the hope that it will by itself foster improved outcomes. Well, what-do-you-know, life is actually a little more complicated than if we just praise the children they will turn out. But still our culture gives us that message and we are stuck in this position where if we are not sure what to do, well we do something that will help support the self-esteem of the children. If we are not sure what to do, if all else fails praise - praise the child.

There are some things that praise is good for and there are some situations where we are inclined to praise that have absolutely negative effects. It behooves us as parents and as people who care about children to know a little bit about the rather complex relationship between praise and performance or outcome. In the article 'The Effects of Praise on Children's Intrinsic Motivation - a Review and Synthesis' we can read that praise can boost self-efficacy; praise can enhance feelings of competence and autonomy; can create positive feelings; can strengthen the association between response and positive outcomes; it can provide incentive for task engagement. So there are things that praise can do and there are some things that praise interferes with. For example: if the task is easy, and you praise the child for their performance on an easy task, it leads them to infer that they must not be very bright, because you are praising them for something that they know themselves, isn't very hard. 'Why are you praising me for this? Do you think I'm dumb? Because if you are praising me for this, I got to say, I must be dumb because this isn't hard.' It over-justifies performance; it can create pressure, it can highlight self-consciousness. There are the kiddies, minding their own business, doing something they enjoy and you kind of roll in



« If everything I do elicits enormous praise, then I know that you're lying to me »

there and start calling attention to their work. Did that ever happen to you when you were young? Did it make you feel uncomfortable? Something else that seems to happen too is that praise changes the locus of causality. 'Here I was digging, doing this project when somebody else started stealing it from me by praising me for doing it. But I'm doing this for me, not for you - and if you keep this up, if you keep interfering with me - this was my thing, now you've made it your thing, I'm going to back out of here.' That's what this is telling us. It causes the child to think 'I'm not doing it for you - I was doing it for me. Great, now I'm doing it for you. Maybe I'll do something else.'

Children aren't foolish, when we're overpraising they think 'I know you are just saying this to try to boost my self-esteem, how can I trust your feedback? Because if everything I do elicits enormous praise, then I know that you're lying to me, all the time with this stuff, so I'll never know when I can trust positive feedback. I'm a kid, but I'm not a fool, and I know you're lying to me.' So this, I feel is one of the most insidious consequences of praise because it inoculates a child against being able to receive positive feedback later in life. What would that be like? Maybe some of you know what that would be like - maybe some of you were overpraised in childhood and actually distrust positive feedback.

So what do we know about gifted children? Gifted children who are praised for 'being smart' lack confidence and underperform later in life. They discount the importance of effort, lack initiative and

give up easily when confronted by challenging tasks because they don't want to disturb your perception of them as being super-bright and perhaps even their own perception of being super-bright. They crumble, as soon as the going gets hard. Is that what you're doing for your nice young, bright person?

Performance on academic tasks decreases when children are praised for innate ability. Children come to see other children who are praised in a classroom as 'needing extra help'. When they see someone being praised, they say 'ah - Julie is not very smart, cos she gets a lot of praise for being so smart; she must need a lot of bumping up and boosting.' Children aren't fools, they perceive these things so when your feedback to a child, in the form of overpraising, is un-genuine, you actually think you are getting away with something; but you're really, really not. When you overpraise a child, you think you're getting away with something, that you're going to con them into a positive self-appraisal. But your children are not fools, and all they grow to do is to distrust what you say to them.

This model: Praise leads to Confidence, leads to Self-esteem, leads to Good Works is a failed strategy to promote child well-being. We are in real trouble because we don't have an effective strategy available to us. Because we are products of this, this has been the zeitgeist for about 25 years, and so almost anybody who has a child has been exposed to this model, has had pressure on them around this model, and now as a parent, whether or not you suspect that model, you don't have a back-up plan that is real. So you are nervous, you don't know what to do, you parent in response to your children's emotional state, and you're lost. This is a lie. This doesn't work. This is actually bad for children. So what are we going to do now? Again, we have no authentic strategy available to us because we've lost some of that in at least a generation of overpraise, neurotic over-concern for self-esteem, that has led to some really destructive patterns of parenting all in the interest of doing well for children, all of which is actually destructive for children.

What all this has brought us is an epidemic of Narcissism. Young people are entering college now with that sense of entitlement, the feeling that the rules don't apply to them, or that they should be able to get that 'A', just because they are them! Because somebody told them that they were special. They have an inflated sense of self-worth based on no evidence. So think about what indiscriminate praise over years, perhaps decades, can do to a person. It will create, if they believe you, if they love you, an inflated sense of self-worth based on no evidence. How will that person respond when someone criticises them? They will lash out, which is what Narcissists do because they have no

foundation. This is the sort of thing that is usually reserved for third-world dictators.

These is something about the effect of books like 'I Can do Anything!' that appear to be leading to some similar outcomes, a sort of 'victory of assertion over evidence' and the consequences in the workforce and academia are well-known. 'The growing expectations placed on schools and parents to boost pupils' self-esteem, is breeding a generation of narcissists', an expert has warned. Again, everyone thinks they deserve special treatment in college, they don't think the rules apply to them, a parent will come in and bail out the child because something improper has been done and they've got 'B' and my child doesn't deserve 'B's. And the child is right there saying 'Yeah, my mum says I don't deserve 'B's', because that is what they have been told.

In, 'Generation Me - Why Today's Young Americans are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled - and more Miserable than ever Before.' Jean Twenge writes about a narcissism self-report survey taken by over 16,000 college students when they began college between 1982 and 2006. They had to tick true or false to statements such as 'If I ruled the world, it would be a better place.' 'I think I am a special person.' and 'I can live my life any way I want to.'

If you saw your young adult that you're raising now, endorse true, true, true to these and many other somewhat hackle raising items, you might say, 'You know, this wasn't exactly what I had in mind. When I did all that overpraising, telling you how important and special you are, what I meant was that you would go out there and do good works, not feel like the world owed you something.'

Scores on this survey have been going up over time. They've been going up as patterns of parenting have been oriented around overwhelming concern for the self-esteem of children and overuse of praise. They've been going up, so what we have is more narcissistic young people.

You might say what's wrong with Narcissism? Isn't a positive sense of self-worth beneficial in some regard? Well, here's what Narcissism is about. Narcissists lack empathy. Is this how you want your child to be? Narcissists react aggressively to criticism. They have no authentic foundation, all they have is assertion. When somebody starts messing with that elevated sense of self-worth based on no evidence, they lash out. Is this what you want your child to be like? Narcissists favour self-promotion over helping others. Narcissists are at greater risk for infidelity. They lack emotional warmth. They exhibit more dishonesty and over-controlling and violent behaviours than others. Is this what you want your child to be like?

Features

A Journey in Parenting a Child under Three

*Being a parent is not always easy. Most of us have not had any training to be parents and, as Montessori trained parent **Kristin McAlister-Young** writes, even when we have it can still be very challenging until we come to terms with the idea that the most important thing for our children is really ‘being there’ as they start on this journey.*

In the middle of the living room floor my littlest one teeters on the edge of her bottom with one leg poised on the ground for balance and the other outstretched toward her head, wrestling the errant foot into a sock. Unseen I watch from the entry way as she grunts and finally throws the sock down in despair. She looks around and cries a little. ‘Mamma!’ she yells and I duck back behind the door. She is one and a half years old and every impulse in me propels me towards her, rescuing her from this huge frustration. How strange that these little failures are so universally unbearable to us as parents.

Against my motherly impulse, I wait and watch a moment. She looks around again and snuffles. Then she grabs the sock from the floor and very precisely inserts her thumbs into the opening, stretching it wide. In almost exaggerated movements she stretches out her arms and the little foot comes up to meet them. This time she angles her ankle just slightly and catches the big toe in the sock opening. From there the little toes wiggle themselves into the sock and she drops her foot and looks around. ‘I-did-dit! sock!’ she states with great pride and self-confidence evident on her beaming little face. I walk in then and the moment is over, but I chastise myself for the momentary impulse to save her from that initial disappointment which resulted in such triumph. She slips easily into her shoes, an old trick by now, and struts towards the door, the edge of the sock just barely covering her ankle and the fabric of the heel bulging out of the top of the shoe straps. Not perfect, no, but to her a moment of priceless success nonetheless.

That was a good moment in parenting a one year old. It would not be true to say that there aren’t a million of those moments, but it would be equally dishonest to say that I always know when to hold

back and when to rescue, when help is needed and when that same help robs the child of a moment of independence and joy in their newfound abilities. I want to start this article with an acknowledgment that no one gets it right all of the time, least of all me. In fact, I have to admit that I feel a bit hypocritical writing this today since we have just had a particularly challenging day. Still, what I hope to do in this article is to share our family’s journey in raising our daughters in the Montessori lifestyle and to share with you my own transformation as a parent. My oldest is only three [tomorrow!], but those three years have taken me from the doubtful first time mum, to someone who at least glimpses what the true Montessori life is like. Notice I say glimpses, not fully understands or practices without fail, but I am on the path so I offer this article to others on that same challenging road or those who are about to embark on it.

Like most parents, I started out wanting ‘the answer’ to exactly what I should do in those first few years. I had just finished the Montessori 3-6 programme and was adamant that my daughter should be raised in strict adherence to every Montessori

 I started out wanting ‘the answer’ to exactly what I should do in those first few years 



principle. I think I drove myself a bit crazy, but I guess we all do with our first. I read, but did not fully absorb, the books available on parenting the child from 0-3, most notably Dr. Montanaro's *Understanding the Human Being*. I re-read every Montessori book I could get my hands on. Instead of finding inspiration from Dr. Montessori's words as I once did, now faced with my own little one, they scared me.

'It is not enough to content ourselves with his physical needs: we must open the way for his spiritual development. We must then from the very first day, respect the impulses of his spirit and know how to support them.' [1]

Right, I thought, so clearly I have to have it sorted out from the moment of birth, but how do we do that exactly? Oh and we mustn't forget that:

'The child is sensitive to the grown-up to such a degree that his own personality may vanish and the grown-up live and work inside him instead...' [2]

Great, so I must support the child enough to 'open the way for spiritual development' without causing the fragile personality to 'vanish' along the way. That's a bit scary!

'The child incarnates himself in the environment which he finds around him, and constructs a man adapted to live in those surroundings.' [3]

Ah, a hint at how to reach this little one. The prepared environment is the bridge between our worlds, but even then there's a lot of room for error because *'What the child has absorbed, remains, a final ingredient of his personality.'* [4]

Okay, so what if the environment is not perfect?

'When something in the environment hinders its inner working, the existence of a sensitive period shows itself by violent reactions, a despair that we believe to be causeless and therefore set down to 'naughtiness' and temper. Naughtiness is the expression of an inner disturbance and unsatisfied need, a state of tension; the child's soul is crying out for what it needs, seeking to defend itself... The first 'naughtiness' of the baby is the first sickness of the soul.' [5]

Oh and by the way,

'If the baby has not been able to work in accordance with the guidance of its sensitive period, it has lost its chance of a natural conquest and has lost it forever.' [6]

You can see why I entered this whole process with a bit of trepidation! Every parent is nervous about making a mistake, but at least many are blissfully ignorant of the impact of each moment of the first

direction >> 21



few years. As Montessorians, we are not so lucky. My fear was understandable. On one hand the Montessori literature told me I could elevate man to a new spiritual level if I raised this little one correctly, but from my vantage point that was pretty unlikely and if I failed... well... better not to think about what happened to the little soul then. On the other hand I was assaulted every day with exactly the prescriptions I desired promising fail-proof plans to raise the perfect child: 'Watch Baby Einstein and your child will be a genius', 'Get your child started on our educational computer programs: 9 months to university!', 'Fisher-Price electronic learning books- your child will love reading before he is 3 years old!', 'Enter your child in the Challenge school - we promise they'll be 3 grades above grade level by 6 years old.'

It is admittedly scary to embrace this seemingly simple Montessori lifestyle and turn your back on all of those promises of the perfect child. I am embarrassed to admit that even I, who was raised in the Montessori philosophy, trained in it, and now try to practice it at home, still doubted on occasion whether my children were missing out on opportunities because they did not have flashy toys or 'educational' videos. Faced with such dire consequences of my own failure as a parent, I searched the Montessori literature for a prescription to tell me exactly what to do. I think if there were a diagram as to what the Montessori house should have and where everything should be, I would have replicated it faithfully. What should the bedroom look like? When do we wean? What activities should the playroom be filled with? What do we do with the toilet training? What can they need in terms of self-care and food preparation? And when? At what age? How do we set it all up? Not finding anything remotely specific enough, I pieced it together myself and in the beginning I think that rather than truly practice the Montessori lifestyle, I hid behind my own devised formula of what a Montessori house should look like.

I immediately implemented all of the concrete suggestions I had found in *Understanding the Human Being* and improvised the rest. I lived symbiotically with them for the first six weeks, breast feeding on demand and wearing them in a sling so they could be present yet still a part of me in their first experiences in the home. We spoke to them and sang to them. We made sure to make eye contact and to really have true conversations with them. We paused in our speech to allow them to respond with their eye movements and twitches of their lips. After the natural rhythm of the symbiotic period, we gradually became more regular in our daily patterns, imposing a gentle routine to the day in the attempt to satisfy their need for order.

When they were not in the sling and as they got older, they were often on a mattress on the living room floor, free to clearly see the world of the home and free to move and struggle to make those first attempts at raising their heads and scooting on their tummies. We used no bouncy seats or cradles. We resisted every element of, as Dr. Montanaro says, *'the vast conspiracy against the development of the infant.'* Even with the second one who was only 17 months younger than the first, we did not use a playpen to 'keep her safe'. She played on that same mattress and her sister naturally learned to be careful and to respect her space.

We left the girls without diapers, using tiny training pants when it was cold, but otherwise simply replacing flat diapers below them as they got soiled. In this way they retained their connection and understanding of their bodily functions and, equally important, were not restricted in their movements. Within weeks both my husband and I could recognize the particular squirm and cry of the babies when they needed to eliminate. We would then carry them to a basin close by [and later to the bathroom] where they would pee or poop as they needed.



Their toys were very simple: a mirror was placed on the wall in the living room and by their beds. A soft ball was dangled above their heads and they loved hitting it with their hands. Later we added a bell to it. They also played with rings and rattles carefully chosen to give them a variety of textures: the smooth cool of metal, the soft comfort of wood, the different sensations of fabric bean-bags. Despite the myriad of gifts we received, we did not pass most of them on to them, sheltering them from the harsh colours of most toys and the crazy patterns which mesmerize them, yet leave them too stimulated to really explore the objects. At the end of the day the house was tidied up and we made sure they woke to find it pretty much the same as the day before, thus helping them in their quest to understand the rhythms, people, and things in their environment.

As they got older, we faithfully prepared shelves with only a few things on each shelf. Each item was carefully chosen to allow the growing child to use his newfound skills to, for example, open and close simple boxes and later bottles, latches and locks. They poured, washed, chopped, stirred and generally participated in some way in every family activity. We set up washing tables and pouring tables and I think they have every child-sized cooking implement ever invented. Once they were walking or able to walk pushing a wagon, we took long walks around the city, long in time, though we seldom made it past the corner, so fascinated were they with every plant, dog, or chained up bicycle. We made a conscious effort to raise them surrounded by the beauty of music and of languages, even employing a Mandarin-speaking baby-sitter for a few hours a week to immerse them in a second language. We were also fortunate to find an AMI Montessori school, which is Bilingual Mandarin/English so the girls will really be bilingual.

In the bathroom, they have stools to reach the counter and the toilet and they have child size brushes, combs, soap and toothpaste so that they can be self-sufficient in caring for themselves. Occasionally my older daughter goes off to school with clips on the top of her head and pants under dresses, but she does so with great pride in her ability to 'do it herself'- and she goes to a Montessori school, so they understand!

In our kitchen, a small cupboard was set up with their cups and plates and a drawer with their utensils. When we empty the dishwasher, the little one carries the utensils to the drawer and the older one sorts them into the appropriate dividers. Both participate in setting the table and preparing food and we made a conscious effort to make sure they understand where their food comes from. Now that we have a garden they plant our vegetables, but even when we were living in New York City we joined a community farm so they could see their

food being grown. Likewise, we didn't just make apple pie, we went and picked the apples so they understood the process. Literally every moment of their lives were planned out and orchestrated.

Now, at nearly three and one and a half, neither are 'baby geniuses' and I know they are not 'grades above their peers', but they are both great broccoli peelers, tofu-cutters, bread makers, pourers, and peanut butter and jelly sandwich makers. More importantly, they are beginning to show that inner confidence that comes with repeated challenges met and surpassed. When they do begin the academic subjects society puts so much emphasis on, they will do so because they love the experience as much as they love washing cloths now and they will approach it with the confidence that they will succeed in this challenge as well.

Actually, I have come to realize that while I seemed to have 'done it right' by religiously following every piece of advice, I actually hindered our ability to truly live the Montessori life. I imposed curricula which had to be thought out, planned, and meticulously maintained. I went absolutely crazy scheming and planning to make the environment perfectly prepared to elicit the unfolding of their innate tendencies and their emerging sensitive periods. As a good Montessori-trained directress I set about preparing the perfect environment, and yet I missed the most important element of it all: preparation of myself as their mother and thus as their connection to the world. You can follow every plan Dr. Montanaro and Dr. Montessori lay out. You can read every Montessori at home or Montessori toddler activity book, but if you do not prepare yourself, it is meaningless. I hope through my training and my beliefs that I had already prepared myself to a degree, so not all was lost, but I am sorry for the first few years during which I spent so much time trying to 'get it right', time which ultimately took away from being truly there.

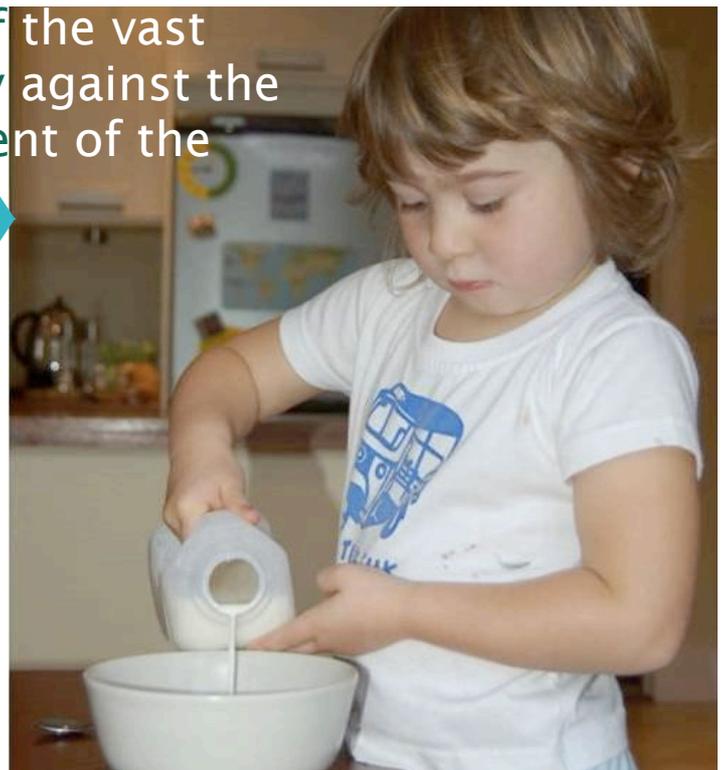
So to parents beginning this process, I'd humbly offer this advice, do not waste your time worrying over whether you have set it all up exactly right. Go back to the essence of what you are doing. Go back to the trust in the child's innate tendencies, his love of life, his joy in the unfolding of his self and the development of his will. Once you trust that, turn inward to yourself and remember that you are not there to carry the child on his path, but only to help him discover it, to be the bridge to the world and to clear the obstacles from his path. You are his first and most important aid to life. Your primary role is to be there, to observe, and to interfere only when necessary. Yes, part of your role is to prepare the environment so that he can successfully experience

independence, can grow within the safe confines of external discipline until he is able to internalize it himself and can experience true freedom, but it is a mistake to dwell on the preparation of the environment to the detriment of truly being there in the moment. Put simply, if you are thinking of the category cards on fish that you must make for him that night, you may miss the minnows in the creek under your feet. No preparation can replace what you as a parent bring to this little child in your excitement about the world, your respect for him and your patience in giving him the time he needs to accomplish something, be it putting socks on or saying his first phrases. No preparation of the environment can replace a parent who is truly there, and truly mindful of the child and no one can observe your child from your unique position.

That is the true Montessori life, being there, being mindful of the child's needs and abilities, and constantly striving to be an aid to life. That is the great work of the parent, and it is actually a lot harder than simply preparing the environment [harder, but more enjoyable too!]. To truly *be there in the moment* is one of the most difficult challenges a parent can face. It is more than simply being in the same room. Though not Montessorians, Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn describe what it entails to parent mindfully and I think it is a wonderful description of the type of 'being there' I am talking about:

'Mindfulness is defined as moment to moment non-judgmental awareness. Practicing mindfulness as a parent simply means intentionally

« We resisted every element of the vast conspiracy against the development of the infant »



as a parent simply means intentionally remembering to be fully present with whatever comes up so that you are not always on automatic pilot or acting mechanically. When you are picking up the baby, you are there with picking up the baby... Your mind is not off someplace else, or if it is, you are aware of that too, and so can bring it back. It is simple, but it is not so easy, because our minds are so readily carried off somewhere...The non-judgmental part is crucial...By intentionally suspending judgment and cultivating discernment, we create the potential to connect with them... love them, and honor the mystery of their being.' [8]

Even when we accept how important it is to be present, our mind wanders from the child and we find ourselves thinking about dinner or tomorrow's schedule rather than concentrating on the tiny miracles unfolding in front of us. I said in the beginning of this article that I had glimpsed what it was really all about, and that is all it is - a glimpse. I still have very difficult days, but now I am aware enough to stop and realize that it was a difficult day because I was literally running from my children trying to get my own things done and was never truly there for them even for a moment that day. Most of the time I realize it after the day is done, but occasionally I realize in time to step back and reevaluate what I am doing. I then make a conscious effort to reengage and often the difficult day becomes suddenly magical.

The discipline required to truly be there is intense and not unlike the discipline required for lengthy prayer or meditation. Still, the rewards are incredible, both to the child and to the parent. When I am truly mindful of my little ones, the worries about what we are doing disappear because somehow that non-judgmental awareness of their presence and actions awakens something in me and there is a resonance between that spark in myself and the energies alive within them. I think it is what Dr. Montessori called true 'love' when she wrote of the teacher.

'When the children show her their true natures, she understands... what love really is. And this revelation transforms her also... It is a level of love which is no longer personal or material. To serve the child is to feel one is serving the spirit of man...' [9].

Through the practice of mindful parenting, I once more find incredible inspiration in the words of Dr. Montessori. Today our home looks very similar to before. The environment is still

a prepared one. It is still relatively orderly. I try to put things back on shelves at the end of the night and their activities are carefully chosen and displayed in a way that is easy for them to see and to put back. Our life still follows a pretty reliable rhythm and we still make an effort to make sure things are child sized and accessible. However, there is a great difference in the atmosphere of our home. No longer [well not as much anyway] do I watch them work while I think of the next thing I should be preparing. No longer do I spend my evenings planning every activity or every material I should have on hand, 'just in case'. Sometimes the little cloths just sit in the dirty buckets overnight and they wake up to a not so perfect house. But in that case, one of them sets about washing the cloths, and if the pouring table [a big bench filled with spice bottles and water jugs] is not perfectly ready to go, they delight in cleaning it up and filling the jugs themselves.

The end result of all of this is that in the morning I am refreshed and present. When they notice a squirrel outside, we open the door and follow it to wherever it leads and whatever activities it inspires. Whether they are working peacefully or arguing, finding success or frustration, I am right there with them and that *being there* gives me the insight to respond appropriately- to hold back or to rescue. I still make mistakes, but I am generally conscious of them afterwards and I do not worry as much about it because I know that I was present and mindful and I made the best decision I could have at the time. When I am in doubt about what we are trying to do here, I remember the face of my little girl putting on her socks and know that the look of triumph came not just from a prepared environment, but most importantly from the fact that in that moment I was truly *there*- there enough to observe and to simply wait. That is the true essence of the Montessori life. Be there, but really *be there*, and the rest will follow.

Kristin McAlister-Young trained as an AMI Montessori Directress at the Maria Montessori Institute in London.

« I missed the most important element of it all: preparation of myself as their mother »

1. Montessori, Maria [1997] Basic Ideas of Montessori's Educational Theory p79
2. Montessori, Maria [1998] The Secret of Childhood p99
3. Montessori, Maria [1989] The Formation of Man p66
4. Montessori, Maria [1988] The Absorbent Mind p60
5. Montessori, Maria [1998] The Secret of Childhood p39
6. Montessori, Maria [1998] The Secret of Childhood p39
7. Bauer, Ingrid. [2001] Diaper Free! The Gentle Wisdom of Natural Infant Hygiene. USA: Ingrid Bauer
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Features

Happy Talk - Helping your Child to Speak for Himself

We are pleased to be able to publish another article from the Aid to Life initiative which has been established to help to provide simple straight-forward information that will help all parents to support the natural development of their child.

When my first child was a baby I decided to learn French. By the time she was five she had gone from gurgling to being able to say anything she wanted and I was still struggling to get beyond 'Would you like a cup of coffee?' It is quite amazing that young children, with little understanding of the things going on around them, nevertheless seem to learn all the basics of a new language with total ease and without anyone teaching them. No one tells them what order to put the words in or how to pronounce particular sounds. They simply soak up the words that surround them and speak.

At this time in their lives, children have a special sensitivity to the sound of the human voice and they will seek it out above any other sound in their environment. It is this sensitivity that urges the small baby to focus on the lips of people that speak to them so that they can imitate what they see and hear and eventually make these sounds for themselves. It is this sensitivity that means that they can learn a new language in the time that most adults could only learn how to ask for a cup of

First: Create an environment rich in spoken language

Long before they can speak children are absorbing the words you speak; absorbing complex words as easily as they do simple words. Try to use precise and accurate words to describe the details of his environment to your child. So instead of just saying spoon we can say teaspoon, desert spoon, tablespoon or soup spoon. You can give precise names for everything in your child's world: Instead of just using the word jacket we can refer to its collar, sleeve, waistband and cuff. Why not say rose, tulip or rhododendron? Your child will learn these words just as easily as he will learn the word flower.

Children learn new words by hearing these words used many times in similar contexts so when your child points at something that he wants because he doesn't have the word for it you can say 'Would you like orange juice?' and as you give it to him say 'Here is your orange juice' and later 'Have you finished drinking your orange juice now?' This repeated use of words in context helps him to learn them more quickly.

 In what seems like no time at all, your words will become his words 

coffee in another language! But this 'sensitive period' does not last forever and the language that your child speaks will be as rich or as meagre as the language that he has been exposed to during the first six years of his life.

What can you do to make sure that your child makes the most of this unique window of opportunity when learning how to communicate and express himself?



In what seems like no time at all your words will become his words so make sure that all the words he hears are ones that you would like him to use and don't assume that just because he can't speak he doesn't understand or won't be able to pick up what you are saying.

Current research tells us that, children who are read to regularly develop larger vocabularies and learn to read more easily. You can start to read to your child from the very beginning of his life. It doesn't matter if you don't think he understands all of the words because this is how he learns new words.

Then: Connect your child to the language around him

Help your child to find that human voice that he is seeking by minimising the other sounds that seem to pervade our world such as the radio and television. The human voice should be the sound he hears the most. Don't be fooled into thinking that he will learn just as easily from watching DVDs. Research tells us that the human voice that he seeks must come from a human being not an electronic babysitter.

When your child makes sounds and babbles he is trying to communicate with you. When you respond as if he were speaking to you, you are helping him to learn to have a conversation. This will encourage his efforts to communicate and gives him the message that what he has to say is important. Babies who receive no response when they babble give up trying to communicate and babies who have dummies in their mouths find it very difficult to babble at all!

Describe the things you are doing together as you go about your daily routines. Avoid using 'baby talk' or a special baby language when you do this. Your child has the same capacity to absorb real words as he does made-up words so why confuse him with words that don't really exist?

You should resist the urge to correct the words that your child gets wrong. So, if your child says 'pasghetti' you don't need to tell him 'We don't say it like that, we say spaghetti.' You simply need to repeat it another sentence like 'Yes we are having spaghetti tonight.' He will correct himself naturally as he hears the right form being used in everyday conversation. Constant correction of his attempts to speak and communicate will dampen his enthusiasm and may crush his confidence.



◀◀ Help your child to find that human voice that he is seeking ▶▶

Finally: Make time for him to practice

Finally, it is important to take time to listen to your child even if you don't understand what he is saying. Try not to interrupt or suggest words. Instead allow him time to finish before you try to interpret what he is saying with phrases like 'Are you telling me you want an apple or an orange?' This shows him that you are interested in what he has to say and encourages him to keep trying to communicate with you.

'Talk to him and he will talk to you'.

Find out more about other principles of child development at AidtoLife.org. The article can also be found at www.jump-magazine.co.uk

Yesterday's Discoveries Today's Science

Does the Montessori environment support the development of Executive Function?

Forget IQ. Forget 'My Sally was reading by her 3rd birthday.' Forget 'My Albert learned to count to 20 before he was toilet trained.' The latest study in neuropsychology shows that more important is whether Sally can resist grabbing Albert's toy away from him; whether Albert is able to persevere in the face of a challenge; whether, when Sally and Albert are faced with an obstacle, they are able to think out of the box to arrive at a novel solution. Inhibitory control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility are governed by the pre-frontal cortex and together they form what neuropsychologists call Executive Function.

Several studies have now demonstrated that Executive Function skills are a better indicator of school readiness than IQ or entry-level reading or mathematics. Sadly, highly developed Executive Function skills are exactly what many children are turning up to school without. The picture is sobering: *'Kindergarten teachers report that over half their children lack effective Executive Function skills, and that poor Executive Function is their single most difficult challenge in teaching.'* [1]

It gets worse. Even more disturbing is that studies show evidence of a decline and that thirty years ago, 5 year olds had much better Executive Function skills. It is truly saddening that while we may now have more resources and knowledge, we are possibly doing less good for our children.

Inhibitory Control

Inhibitory control is staying on task. It *'refers to the ability to resist a strong inclination to do one thing, and instead do what is most appropriate or needed. It makes it possible for us to resist acting on our first impulse, so we do not do something we'd regret.'* [2] It involves the ability to stay focused on what is important and continue to pay attention to it despite distraction.

Adele Diamond, an expert and current researcher on Executive Function, described it as the ability *'to ignore all the reasons why you should not stay on task. Maybe it's easy, too easy, and you're bored, maybe you're afraid of initial failure, maybe there is this interesting tangent that you would like to*

pursue, or maybe your friends are inviting you to more fun activities. But you stay on task, you finish, you do your sums.' [3]

Inhibitory control also has a social dimension, in being able to resist acting impulsively and inappropriately in social situations; that is, being able to resist grabbing another child's toy, or saying something socially inappropriate, or retaliating when hurt.

Perhaps because inhibitory control has been found to be critical in enabling students to resist the temptation to answer automatically, and instead take the time needed to develop a better answer, it has also been found to have a significantly greater impact on final grades [even at college level] than IQ. [4]

A person looking into a Montessori environment sees a harmonious, actively functioning community – one child walking around floor mats carefully; one child waiting until a friend has finished and put the puzzle back on the shelf before taking it himself; one child who, even though tired after painting 10 paintings, before going to have a rest in the book corner, cleans the easel thoroughly, sponging and drying it, and getting clean cloths to make sure it is ready for another to use. The Montessori environment makes this possible, aiding the development of inhibitory control at every moment because it is set up as a functioning community. Children inhibit inappropriate actions, control their movements not because they are made to do so by a teacher, but because of a growing consciousness of how their actions impact on a community that they love and care for.

Working Memory

This describes our ability to retain and relate previous learning to the present. It is described as *'critical to our ability to see connections between seemingly unconnected things'*. [5] It involves being able to hold ideas in mind and being able to play with them. A key part of working memory is understanding cause and effect.

Working memory is central to developing creativity since the creative process depends on being able to discern connections. Embellishing depends on building on and using skills so firmly imbedded in working memory that they are automatic.

A person looking into a Montessori classroom might see one child looking intently at several coloured tablets, ranging with very subtle differences from dark green to light green. The child peers at one particular shade, then leaving it on her mat, walks around the Children's House searching for an object that matches that shade exactly. Montessori designed many such sensorial 'memory games' that

appeal to the children not only because of the opportunity for purposeful movement that they encourage, but for the challenge they offer, of holding a sensory impression in one's head over both distance and time.

One child was delighted with the discovery that none of the green shaded tints of the colour tablets matched any of the leaves that she could find in the garden – amazed to realise that there was such a wide range of green that existed in the world! One child said after grading the yellow tablets – 'It's like the morning, it gets lighter and lighter'. It is this, the children's abstracting of the experience with the colour tablets and applying it to their exploration of the world, that reveals the impact of Montessori materials on working memory. Working memory describes the capacity to discover connections. The design of the materials that make abstract concepts so concrete and striking, enables children to achieve the deep understanding that facilitates recognizing relationships between things that seem unrelated.

As studies into working memory have revealed, there is a strong link between this ability and the development of creativity. Montessori practitioners have always found that the children's beautiful creative explorations result from a profound knowledge of a concept, a knowledge built up through countless sensorial experiences. It is this great knowledge that enables the children to confidently manipulate something abstractly in their minds, and arrive at new and innovative inventions.

For example, over their years in the Children's House, children get to know the geometric shape of a square through the layering of one sensorial experience after another. With their fingers, they feel the 4 sides and corners of the square from the geometric cabinet and they discover as they work with the matching cards how a quadrilateral only becomes a square when it has all equal sides and equal angles. They become involved in building increasingly large patterns of a square to beholding that of a decanomial squared. They discover they can construct equivalent binomial squares. They find out what particular triangles make a square [not equilateral ones!]. They find out that when they square a number it actually forms a geometrical square.

This all happens in the Children's House, over the years from 2 ½- 6, and it is a layering of experience that continues in the elementary. As we might imagine, by the time these children come to square root, they are experts at the square – in their working memory is the rich store of all these experiences. The strength this lends to the Executive Functions reveals itself in their creative exploration with something so seemingly mundane as square root!

Cognitive Flexibility

Cognitive Flexibility describes our ability to take another road to a goal. It may involve finding other ways to understand the problem, thinking of other ways of reacting to a situation; basically when something isn't working, to come up with other solutions.

A person looking into a Montessori classroom sees a child trying to get a tray holding 2 jugs from a shelf to a nearby table, without the jugs falling off – walking very slowly, struggling as the jugs slip and slide. The observer sees what looks like the adult sitting on her hands – sitting on her hands as this child's brow furrows, her tongue comes out in determination. There is an 'Aha! moment, and the child replaces the tray and jugs on the shelf, and takes each jug one by one to the table, then returns for the tray. Big smile. An experience of problem solving, of 'I can find a solution on my own.'

It is an experience that is replicated daily, in many different ways, in many different areas. It is present not just in academic learning, in language, mathematics, science, or culture, but in social life and the interactions of a living community. If our visitor were to linger in the classroom, she might see 2 children working together, arguing about who is to be the one to carry the leaf tray from the cabinet to the floor mat. When they approach the teacher to tell her of their dilemma, she encourages them to collaborate to find a solution on their own. A few minutes later the leaf tray is on its way to the mat, carried by both children together, holding opposite sides of the tray, carrying it together with big smiles.

It is these beautiful moments, and the development of character that arises from them, that give the Montessori adult the strength to sit on his or her hands in the face of a child persevering to solve a problem. More important than the developing of the skill in any activity is the development of problem solving that comes from an environment where one is given the space and time to solve problems independently. As an elementary child once put it, 'Don't tell me the trick'. This right to solve problems independently, and to thus develop one's Executive Function of Cognitive Flexibility, is one that Montessori teachers zealously protect.

Lori Woellhaf

1. Adele Diamond [2010] Executive Function and the Tools of the Mind, AMI Communications, p15
2. Ibid p13
3. Ibid p13
4. Ibid p13
5. Ibid p15

Dear Maria...

Why don't our children study geography anymore?



An Ofsted study has found serious weaknesses in the teaching of geography in the UK. Many primary teachers lacked specialist geographical knowledge and classes often descended into a focus on superficial stereotypes. In one in ten primary schools the subject had practically 'disappeared'. In secondary schools classes were often merged with history to form generic 'humanities' lessons that focused on vague skills instead of geographical understanding. The report said 'uninspiring teaching' at the start of secondary school led to a reduction in the number of teenagers opting to take a GCSE in the subject. In 2009 there were 137 secondary schools which failed to enter a single pupil for GCSE geography. [1] What is the approach to geography in the Montessori environment?

and come from the teacher's or government's idea of what they think the child should know.

In the Children's House, however, we aim to observe these children who are between three and six years of age and follow their individual interests. The Montessori approach aims to facilitate the child's own exploration and so offers keys with which they can unlock their own doors of exploration of choice. Montessori wrote:

'To give the whole of modern culture has become an impossibility and so a need arises for a special method, whereby all factors of culture may be introduced to the six-year-old; not in a syllabus to be imposed on him, or with exactitude of detail, but in the broadcasting of the maximum number of seeds of interest. These will be held lightly in the mind, but will be capable of later germination'. [2]

So the role of the adult in the classroom is not to impart information, but to present the geography activities to the child in such a way as to provoke

curiosity. The child is then offered opportunity for hands-on experience and related language activities. We remember that children of this age are creative explorers and are naturally inquisitive about the world around them. The classroom itself is prepared in such a way so as to stimulate interest in the world, always in a logical manner so that the surroundings do the work of making connections; a book on Africa may be displayed next to the Puzzle Map of Africa, for example, so the child not only sees the chorography of Africa, but is also led to the cultures and animals of Africa. As well as setting up displays consisting of only a few items that are changed regularly, the child's interest can be sparked in more subtle ways, such as by hanging pictures of places, people or flags from around the world on the walls or by making artefacts from around the world accessible. Children could polish a wooden tiger from India or be offered mango at the Snack Table.

The Ofsted report comments that the adults who work with children of this age often lack specialist geographical knowledge. While this has become inevitable due to budget

In the Montessori environment it is recognised that an appreciation of the physical world provides the foundations for learning about human culture - music, dance, art, religion, inventions and ceremonies for example. Not only does this help children understand their role in their own culture, but it helps them understand other cultures around the world. This is essentially geography: the science that deals with the study of the earth and its lands, features, inhabitants and phenomena. Everything is inter-linked. So rather than denote geography as a separate subject the Montessori approach offers the children an exploration of the World, linking it to the Worlds of Plants, Animals, Music, Science and Art. This differs to the approach taken traditionally in which geography is offered as a subject divided into different themes, which present the child with fragments of information that sit in unrelated pockets. These themes are often adult-led

cuts and priority given to other subjects, it also implies that younger children do not yet need this focus on the world. Maria Montessori, on the other hand, did not underestimate young children and developed a series of stimulating activities to educate them about the physical world around them. As usual, she begins with the concrete representation that the child can manipulate before moving on to more abstract understanding of the concepts involved. At age three and a half the child is introduced to the Land and Water Globe - the most fundamental depiction of the physical world showing that the land is made up entirely of land and water - and later to the Continents Globe where he sees that the land can be divided. The eight Land and Water Form models offer hands-on experience of the physical forms of our world. In the child's own time he pours water into them and examines varying shapes such as islands, lakes, capes and gulfs.

The geography activities offer a picture of the whole, which inspires the children to investigate the parts. From the globes they proceed to look at

maps and they find out about the countries and their capitals and land and water forms all around the world: from the Lakes of Great Britain to the Deserts of Asia. They learn about the different peoples of the world, how they live, what they eat and how they get around. All detail is given within the framework of the whole, just like putting together the pieces of a jigsaw. From these concrete experiences the children launch into spontaneous exploration, making papier maché globes and maps of their own.

The language element of these activities is hugely satisfying to the three to six year old child who has a hunger for words. Not limited to simple words like lake and island, the vocabulary offered extends to isthmus, strait, peninsula and gulf. When names of continents are given the adult aims to make relevant connections for the child: 'This is Africa. Do you remember that we sing a song about elephants? Well, there are two types of elephant in Africa!' There are Classified Cards that allow children who can read to spend as much time as they like looking at names of geographical forms or of

countries. Children can also write their own short definitions: 'This ocean lies at the top of the world. Great masses of ice cover most of this ocean during most of the year. [Antarctic Ocean]'.

Montessori wrote that

'When the child is in the sensitive period and has a hunger for names (which is also a hunger for knowledge) you may give him names in biology, botany, geography, physics, zoology or any other science. Give them to him in orderly fashion as accompaniments of the objects or parts of the objects of his environment. He is able to master them as easily as he mastered in the earlier period his physical movements.' [3]

Furthermore, the fact that children come from a range of backgrounds is viewed as a wonderful opportunity for learning about the human element of the subject. Festivals across all religions are celebrated and when possible a relative comes to the classroom to demonstrate the dance, food or music of that festival. Racial intolerance is born out of fear and ignorance, but the Montessori children learn so much about other cultures that they do not fear new ones when they come across them. It is important to remember that geography is not simply the study of rocks and rivers, but is also an opportunity to help people understand to love and cherish our environment so that we better understand how to look after the world that we depend on for our survival.

Gayle Wood



1. Paton, G. [2011] Geography lessons not good enough 'in half of schools', The Telegraph
2. Montessori, Maria [1989] To Educate the Human Potential p4
3. Montessori, Maria [1989] What You Should Know About Your Child p41

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Montessori Society AMI [UK]

26 Lyndhurst Gardens

London

NW3 5NW

020 7435 7874

Email: info@montessori-uk.org

Website: www.montessorisociety.org.uk

