

The Absorbent Mind and the Sensitive Periods

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Maria Montessori observed that young children learn in a unique way from prenatal life to about six years old. The absorbent mind is the image she created to describe, " ...this intense mental activity."¹

Since the neonate has to learn everything (he has no tools other than reflexes to survive), but has no

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language or conscious will to learn the way adults do, he must acquire his survival skills in some other way. Montessori said that the child learns by unconsciously taking in everything around him and actually constructs himself. Using his senses, he incarnates, or creates himself by absorbing his environment through his very act of living.² He does this easily and naturally, without thought or choice.

Montessori saw the absorbent mind in two phases. During the first phase, from birth to three years old, the young child unknowingly or unconsciously acquires his basic abilities. She called it the period of unconscious creation or the unconscious absorbent mind. The child's work during this period is to become independent from the adult for his basic human functions. He learns to speak, to walk, to gain control of his hands and to master his bodily functions. Once these basic skills are incorporated into his schema, by about three years old, he moves into the next phase of the absorbent mind, which Montessori called the period of conscious work or the conscious absorbent mind. During this period, the child's mathematical mind compels him to perfect in himself that which is now there. His fundamental task during this phase is freedom; freedom to move purposefully, freedom to choose and freedom to concentrate. His mantra is "Let Me Do It Myself!"³

Montessori understood that the baby must adapt to life outside the mother during the unique time right after birth, roughly the first nine months of life.⁴ She refers to the baby during this time as a spiritual embryo or psychic embryo.⁵

Whereas the physical baby developed in utero, the mental or psychic baby must complete his embryonic growth outside the womb. Montessori said that a man, "... is like an object turned out by hand."⁶ Once he is born, the baby's specific interaction with his surroundings casts his mental life and uniquely shapes him. It is now that he absorbs his mother tongue and comes to love his place of birth. Thus, this spiritual embryo needs a concentrated relationship with his parents and milieu to form his individual self. Montessori observed that adults often fail to do what is essential at this time, "...because of the habit we have of thinking the child has no mental life."⁷

A child's wise parents realize that he does indeed have a mental life and therefore will provide soft, low light, immediate and prolonged contact with the mother and

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a reassuring place for the baby so that the transition into the world is smooth and inviting rather than traumatic.⁸

Another of Montessori's contributions was the discovery of the sensitive periods. A child passes through special times in his life when he easily incorporates a particular ability into his schema if allowed to practice it exhaustively during this time. She referred to it as, "...a passing impulse or potency."⁹ Her prescient understanding of these critical periods is now confirmed by scientists and even the popular

culture, with Time magazine calling it “Windows of Opportunity”¹⁰

Regardless of what they are called, the sensitive periods are critical to the child’s self development. He unconsciously knows that the time to learn a specific skill is now. The child’s intensity reflects his need for that particular acquisition in order to live. However, once the period passes, he’ll have to learn the skill with much more difficulty at a subsequent time.¹¹ Adults often do not realize that a child has sensitive periods, perhaps because they do not remember them in themselves. But a thwarted sensitive period will manifest itself in a cranky child. Montessori viewed these “tantrums of the sensitive periods (as) external manifestations of an unsatisfied need.”¹²

The child ages birth to six years old will pass through three significant sensitive periods; those for order, movement and language. During the period of unconscious creation, the child acquires the above mentioned abilities. Then, in the period of conscious work, he concentrates on refining these newly acquired skills.¹³

Montessori referred to four specific types of order to which the child is sensitive. They are spatial order, social

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order, sensory and temporal order. All through the period of unconscious creation, the child seeks order so he can acclimate himself to his environment. The youngest child doesn’t even realize he is separate from his surroundings. Order in his world helps him make the distinction. Thus he uses an external order to build on his internal orientations.¹⁴

He is sensitive to a spatial order; that is, everything has a place. When his environment is arranged the same way day after day, he comes to rely on it and can get his bearings. Gradually, he absorbs the concept that if the table is there, for example, then I must be here. Personally, I have seen an infant return to his little bed for just a few moments at a time throughout the morning, not to sleep, but to pause, seemingly as a way of reorienting himself.

The child is also learning about the people around him. This social order allows him to discern who is who and to distinguish between himself and the mass of “them” out there. It is critical at this stage that the same people come in contact with the baby, over and over, so that he can accomplish this distinguishing work. Children in child care centers often suffer personal distress from

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confusion because of the industry’s high turn-over rate for caregivers.¹⁵

The child is sensitized to a sensory order, in other words, to the differences in things; that some are soft or hard, that objects have color, different colors, and shades of the same color. He needs to freely explore his prepared world so he can differentiate among these qualities. Infants often cry because of sensory deprivation.¹⁶

The young child needs ritual, or temporal order. If his life has a predictable rhythm and his routine is maintained, he begins to trust the environment. If his needs for food, sleep and bodily comfort are predictably met as they arise, he uses this satisfaction as the basis to feel secure and to explore his world.¹⁷ One child I observed spent most of the morning fussing and crying. The Guide told me it was this child’s first day at the Center. The unfamiliar place and routine obviously upset her.

In sum, the child during the unconscious creation stage uses the external order to begin building his own internal order. By about three years old, the child has acquired his most basic order and will refine it during the conscious work stage.

Spatial order is still critical. Whenever I placed a new material on the shelf in my early childhood room, I wondered how long it would take before that new material was noticed. Invariably, the next morning someone would immediately see it and ask for a lesson. Children have a scanning radar that searches for any anomaly in their ordered world.

The child wants to understand the complexities of relationships, creating himself socially. Master classes in

social order were conducted daily in my class anytime three four and one-half year-olds had snack together, with their highly evolved in-group language patterns and pecking order.

The child is now interested in refining his sensory input. He wants deeper exploration into sameness, differences and gradations of same and different in objects and the environment. Sensorial activities were always popular in my classroom. Some of the most concentrated, creative work I witnessed was in the sensorial extensions, particularly with the five and six year-olds who combined materials in elaborate patterns covering most of the floor surface, sometimes for days at a time.

The three year-old is at the height of his ritualistic order; he still needs routines and yet can begin to

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create his own order. This is the perfect time to model that activities have a beginning, a middle and an end. Choosing to do the same thing at the same time or in the same way is quite a comfort to this child. I saw the phenomenon extensively in my class. One boy I recall would paint a picture first thing every day for many weeks in a row. If the easel was in use, he would wait patiently because he seemed to orient himself by choosing to paint as his first activity every day.

The sensitive period for movement is most intense during the first year of life. Montessori reminds us that, "(n)o other mammal has to learn to walk."¹⁸ The baby, unable at birth to control any of his movements, doesn't even know he has hands and feet. But by about twelve months many babies take their first steps. Walking develops without it being taught. An infant's need to walk is so strong that he becomes upset if he is impeded. I have often seen a toddler in motion become frustrated when an adult came swooping down and picked him up. The boy's concentration was broken by a well-meaning but hurried adult. The child's rhythm is so much slower than our own. He walks to perfect his walking; whereas we walk with purposeful intent.¹⁹

During the period of conscious work, the child works to perfect and extend his movement. He is interested

in elaborations of the basic walk/run theme. It's time to jump, hop, skip and climb, to carry heavy things, to balance objects on a tray. I remember one girl who walked on the balance beam. At first she did it with one foot on and one foot off the beam, then haltingly with both feet on and arms fully extended, and eventually more smoothly with arms lower at her sides.

Once the child has mastered walking, his hands have become free to work.²⁰ He's entered a new phase of his life, that of Homo(man) Faber(working); one who uses his hands to affect his world.²¹ He now focuses on work to refine his hands. Montessori observed that mental development occurs through movement but only if, "...the action which occurs is connected with the mental activity going on."²² The child wants to use a scissors, to pick up tiny objects and to refine his eye/hand coordination so that his hand truly becomes an instrument of his mind.²³

The final sensitive period is that for language. No one teaches the child to talk. His language, "...develops naturally like a spontaneous creation."²⁴

Of all the auditory stimulation surrounding the baby, it is the human voice that he deeply hears and imitates.²⁵ By six months, he's uttering his first syllables, by one year his first intentional word. By one year, nine months he uses a few phrases, and by about two years old he "explodes" into language.²⁶ He talks and talks non-stop. By the time he is three years old he is speaking in sentences and paragraphs with proper syntax and grammar. He can fully express himself to get his needs met.

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During the period of the conscious absorbent mind he will expand his vocabulary immensely. He wants huge words and funny words and rhyming words and words in songs. Our Montessori environments, rich in vocabulary, meet his word hunger perfectly.

If we trust that the child comes into the world with his unique plan for life and that it is he who will unfold before us, then we know that these first six years are crucial for his self development. It is now that the

imprints are deepest. He begins his work of living life on earth by taking from, and adapting to his environment and thus creates the man he is to become.

End Notes

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3. Alice M. Renton, "The Absorbent Mind," Montessori Education Center of the Rockies Lecture, Boulder, 23 June, 1998.
4. Montessori 71.
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17. Ibid 66-67
18. Montessori, *Absorbent Mind* 86.

19. Montessori, *Secret of Childhood* 88-9.
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22. Montessori, *Absorbent Mind* 142.
23. Ibid 27.
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