

Cosmic Education for Infants and Toddlers

By P. Donohue Shortridge

Maria Montessori wrote at length about the cosmic task of the child. She said in sum that the child's cosmic task is to come to understand his place in the universe and also to serve as a change agent for the adults in his midst. In *Education for a New World* she wrote, "Let us give the child a vision of the entire universe." Indeed, the Montessori elementary program inspires the 6-12 year old's interest in grappling with the world at large and his place in it by introducing all subject areas through the 5 great lessons. Thus both tasks are fulfilled: the child's quest to understand the wider world is met and the adult takes on the responsibility of service to this age child by preparing an environment appropriate for him, both at Montessori school and guiding him out into the wider world. The child will question, evaluate and judge the state of the world and will advocate for change as he moves into the third plane.

But what about the young child? What does it mean for the infant and toddler to come to understand his place in the universe, how does he do that when he is not yet three years old? And how is he an agent for change for us?

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Reading Montessori would suggest that because even the youngest child's mathematical mind seeks order, harmony and beauty in the world, it is incumbent upon us to give him the picture of the universe appropriate at his developmental level. For the infant and toddler that means sensorial, concrete experiences with his environment, both in nature and in his culture. Offering this child his world at his pace coincides with Montessori's insight that the young child as spiritual embryo must adapt to his time and place in order to survive. Fortunately, the young child is in a very intense sensitive period for absorption and adaptation to his surroundings. Thus it is so simple to fulfill his cosmic

task. But simple is not always the same as easy . . . or successful.

The child under three is having his first love affair. It is a love affair with the physical world: Reality. He is awakening to the whole universe before him, he beholds all. He revels in it with every breath he takes. He is literally grounding himself in where he is right now. And it is all experiential. He is grasping the interrelatedness of the world through sensory impressions.

The child is not a bystander in his life.

For our part, the child's mind is moved to the cosmic view by giving it to him from birth. We are to offer him direct experience, but here is the key. Not merely as a watcher only or a listener only from the stroller, car seat, crib and playpen, or in an inappropriately prepared Montessori environment, but with full body experience – total immersion. The child is not a bystander in his life. From birth, he needs to discover with his hands and legs as well as his eyes and ears. He needs to do it with the totality of his being. As we know for children of this age, intelligence grows through movement – so set them free in the natural world!

Let him get wet, get muddy, get hot, get cold, learn how to navigate the undulations of the hillocks. Let him explore at his own pace. Take him outside on a cold night to see the stars, reveling in the full moon together; savoring the rainy days out of doors, jumping in puddles and capturing the droplets on his tongue.

He imprints all these direct experiences at the cellular level. His sensate impressions of the natural world will inform how he later, at the reasoning level, comes to know them, to understand their interrelatedness and ultimately to revere them as the world to which he belongs.

Our task then is to serve as link to the natural and cultural world for this child. Let him partake in the cultural life of his family, honoring him as a full member by using his name with respect and offering him the dignity deserving of a member of the family and community. Let him observe you greeting and interacting with people in his community and invite him to do so as well. In this way, adults give him the keys to understand the reality of the universe at his level; that the world exists and it is accessible, knowable.

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Keep thinking of ways to offer him age-appropriate encounters with concrete reality without judgment. e.g. Just because you don't like to get wet, doesn't mean you shouldn't go out in the rain. Just because you don't like crawly things, doesn't mean you get to share your aversion with a toddler who has just picked one up. Just because you have gone on the same neighborhood walk every day for a year with children doesn't mean you get to not go because you are bored with it. Everything is new everyday to the infant and toddler.

It is more essential than ever that our youngest children adapt to their cultural and natural world. The sensorial foundations laid at this stage, while they do prepare him for the next intellectual plane, more critically, must now also withstand an ever-increasing onslaught of the din of the popular culture. Our culture assaults us with messages that the natural world is dirty, scary and messy, such that as the child grows in the next planes of development, the consequences mount for the individual who did not absorb the world through his body as an infant and toddler: obesity, poor muscle tone, poor judgment in decision making, lack of persistence in adversity and insensitivity to the beauty and wonder all around.

And although there are many nature and cultural activities that you can incorporate into your prepared environment, e.g. a putting on and taking off of clothes activity, sand and water, having objects from

nature brought inside, having natural materials for them to handle and having animals in the prepared environment, nevertheless, the children in our culture, generally speaking, suffer from deprivation of nature, the real thing, authentic nature, wild places. So give it to them. Take them out in the natural world every day if possible.

And here's a tip. Invite the parents along. I accompanied and observed a toddler going on a walk in nature with his mother. I observed the boy open up his heart to the natural world the deeper he ventured into it; he began to sing to himself, and became emboldened the longer he partook of its offerings. He moved from at first, just throwing rocks into the water, to then touching the water with a stick and finally to wading into the water himself. Early on in his adventure, he was hesitant to tackle a downward incline of a hill, later he trundled up and down it with triumphant glee. Such joy of discovery this child experienced: Reality on his level.

And his mother was able also to relax into it as well. She came to trust that he is competent, such that finally, the toddler successfully climbed a steep embankment and although his mother was within inches of her son, she resisted the urge "to help" resulting in the boy succeeding on his own!

Everything is new to the infant and toddler every day.

We can model that this is normal. We not only serve as a link to the natural world for the child, we can do it for the parent as well, such that it becomes an every day part of life that children interact with nature, they fall down, they get wet, they get muddy, they pick things up and get dirty. But they gain the world in return.

This, then is how we honor the infant and toddler's cosmic task.

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fostering the authentic life of children and their families in the American culture