

By Shannon Helfrich

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The young child who arrives at the conscious phase of the absorbent mind is primed to be an active participant in exploring the physical world. This child has already created the foundations for functional human existence. This child can move and thus brings the world into proximity for exploration. This child can speak as a basis for human communication. The skills to begin to take care of oneself are in place well enough for this child to now be able to function without total dependence upon a supportive adult. This is an incredibly intelligent human being still limited by the trappings of a body not yet fully mastered. The task of self-construction, so well begun in the first three years of life, goes on using the same faculties and motivational powers that have aided self-construction to this point. It would be easy to think of this slightly older child as nothing more than a larger extension of the infant. Yet, this child begins to look upon and interact with the world in a quite different manner.

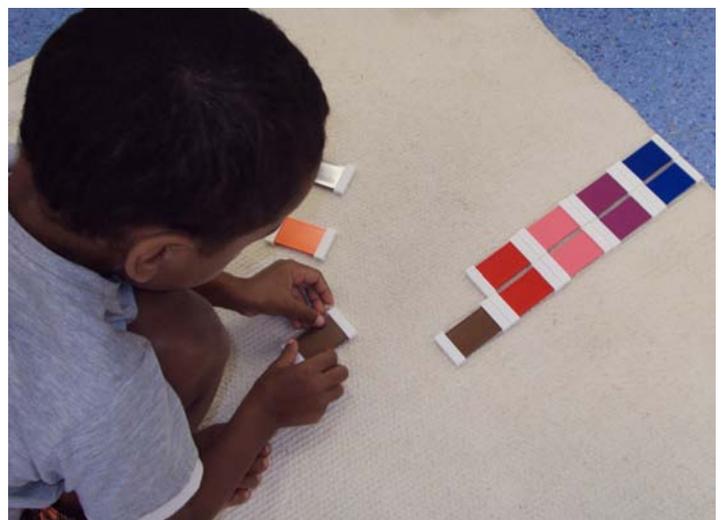
The marvellous absorbent mind, present since birth, continues to take in impressions of the surrounding world and the human environment. Now the child uses life experiences to create the elements of usable intelligence. The child's mind awakens to a conscious interaction with the world.

The child develops the ability to direct the attention to elements that fascinate or pique the interest. In many ways, this is a time of rediscovering information already absorbed, but not organised or made usable. For instance, the child has many experiences with colour, has seen many different colours, can distinguish one colour from another and may even have preferences for one colour over another. The child has gathered an incredible amount of information about colour. But we might ask, "Does the child know what he knows?" No, for the child must create a conscious memory link in order to make this knowledge accessible and usable. In the Montessori Children's House, we present the work with the colour tablets. The activity itself allows the child to revisit all their previous experiences, and to organise and refine the extent of the knowledge. The child can explore the phenomenon of colour, its applications, its variety and its richness. All of this is now done with the conscious mind; the child knows what is being explored and uses the power of language to create a link to memory. The child, who recognizes red when he sees a red ball, is quite different from the child who can close his eyes and see "red" with his mind. This requires the power of abstraction, a capacity developed from repeated interaction with the quality of "redness" as separate from the object, the shape and the size.

The power of the sensitive periods continues on into this conscious phase as well, helping the mind to organise and sort into usable form the information being taken in. Walking and using the hand to grip are in place by age 2.5 or 3 years, but the mastery of coordinated movement is still to come through practice. The hand is refined thus allowing the child to make more delicate manipulations and to apply intricate movements in everyday life activities.

The child who can move his body through space, now practices how to move with grace, how to move carrying a variety of objects and even arrives at the capacity to choose to not move his body. Truly this is mind over matter! The early work in Practical Life begun for some children in the Infant Community, now continues in the Children's House as the child is allowed to master common everyday applications of movement, all serving the capacity for functional independence. The child, who could slice a banana, now practices cutting vegetables and paring fruits. The simple task of washing a table now becomes a complex task with many more steps in the sequence and many more items to manage and use throughout the process. The value of these activities goes far beyond simply being able to polish a brass dish, scrub the table or dress oneself. These activities build a sense of sequence, they deepen the capacity for concentration, and they inherently challenge self-control and refined movement.

The child at three has intuited the complete structure of their native language and has built the basis for a usable vocabulary, but this vocabulary is still quite limited. Between the ages of 3-6 years, the child's vocabulary will grow from a few hundred words to upwards of



10-15,000 words. This does not happen haphazardly or randomly, but through exposure to a rich spoken language environment wherein the quest to answer "what's that?" can be satisfied.

As adults, we cannot underestimate the value to the child of specific, precise vocabulary related to every bit of knowledge the child can bring into the conscious realm of experience. When the child knows the name of something, s/he has a completely different relationship with it.

I am often reminded of my experience with a little girl named Cathy, who had worked many times tracing the shapes of the geometry cabinet. One day, she learned the names of the irregular figures including the quatrefoil. Every day, while climbing the play structure, Cathy had seen a series of quatrefoils, but never noticed anything significant about these shapes until this day. Having a name for something allowed her to see and delight in being able to name what was so familiar to her. Nothing could compare to the delight she took in telling everyone about the quatrefoils she had discovered. As the sensitive periods begin to fade part way through this conscious phase of the absorbent mind, the child begins to take all that he has learned and discovers how this knowledge is used in the real world. The child who has always been sensitive to routines, sequence and the nature of order, now knows how to create order - he sorts, he matches, he grades! This notion of a programmed pattern and the ability to find the pattern prepares the child for the tasks of writing, reading and for the understanding of numbers and mathematical operations. The child who can perceive the differences in the shapes of the geometry cabinet now applies that skill to seeing the differences in letter shapes and number forms.

Patterns and sequences become critical when the child begins to put letters together to make a word or a series of words together to create a meaningful communication. The child accepting the concept that "five" is more than "four" but less than "six" is assisted by this sense of sequence and the powers of spatial discrimination. Learning that you begin addition with the units is just no different than knowing that you must apply the polish first and let it dry before buffing the brass dish to a shine!

It is in this context that the true genius of Dr Maria Montessori is seen. She mastered the art of indirect preparation, i.e., the ability to prepare the mind of the child before the child would need the specific skill or mental capacity. She did this by taking advantage of seemingly unrelated and disconnected activities, but activities that naturally drew the interest and repetition on the part of the child. We can take as an example something that we can all relate to - the art of writing, which many of you are applying as I speak. In order to move a pencil, the hand of the child must be skilled (or prepared!) in three ways:

- The hand must be able to hold the writing instrument comfortably and confidently between thumb, forefinger and middle finger (in what we often call the three-fingered grip or pencil grip)
- The hand must be able to apply pressure when moving the instrument, but not so much pressure that it goes through the paper - this requires a lightness of touch
- The hand must be able to move in a prescribed pattern (follow a shape) to define a space

One could wait until the child manifested a desire to write in order to address these elements of coordinated movement, but that frustrates the child as s/he is not able to move the pencil with any degree of success. Instead, the child's hand can be readied through other avenues. Pieces of material with small knobs allow the child to refine and master the three-fingered grip.

Materials that call for the hand to trace around the contour of a

shape with control, allow the child to coordinate between the shape the eye sees and the direction of movement carried out by the hand to create that shape.

Materials that present a sandpaper surface inspire the child to move the hand with a light, delicate touch. Whether it is the work with cylinder blocks, the pieces of the geometry cabinet or the touch tablets, the child is indirectly preparing the hand to be ready to write then the critical moment of desire presents itself.

Work with the metal insets helps the child to refine the mastery of the writing hand, not through any rote practice of writing letters or words, but through beautiful, artistic drawings. When the hand is fully ready, the child applies the totality of this coordination to the writing of words with chalk or pencil. What an excitement at this moment, for the child to discover that he really can do this!

All four areas of activities found within the Montessori Children's House are designed to support this natural, developmental work of the child. All activities are aimed at supporting the process of self-construction.

The activities of the Practical Life area, the Sensorial area and the early Language area set the foundation as the child develops the powers of the intelligence. At this point, the process of self-construction consists of building the power of memory, the capacity for conscious thought and the power of abstraction. These are powerful intellectual qualities, but the child has to put these skills into the context of everyday life, for education is just that - an aide to life!

The mastery of writing, reading and the basics of arithmetic are nothing more than applications and refinements of the powers already constructed. It is in this way that the child creates him or herself. It is in this way that the child is supported in optimising the potential that nature granted at birth. The potential to grow and develop is inherent within the child.

The richness, the depth and the usability of the construction is a reflection on the support of the adults in preparing an environment rich in opportunities. The child must be left free to carry out this work without obstacles either from the adults or the environment. The child must be free to make his own mistakes and to adapt his behaviors to what is most supportive in living and doing. It is not the task of the adult to construct the child. It is the task of the child to construct himself, creating the man or woman he/she is one day to be!

This is a critical period of time when the child discovers that the world is a marvellous, interesting place to know. The child learns all the skills through which he will connect with other humans, thus "assuring that the unending and gigantic cosmic task of man will continue." This is our future! This is our hope! This is Dr Montessori's vision - one that we share and support as we interact with the children of the world.

Dr Montessori stated the following in a lecture given in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1938:

"We must take man himself; take him with patience and confidence, across all the planes of education. We must put everything before him: the school, culture, religion, the world itself...It is not merely words, but a labor of education. This is a preparation for peace..."

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