

The Montessori Child: 1



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The Psychic Embryo and The Absorbent Mind

Lesson Objectives

1. To be able to define and understand the concept of the “psychic embryo”
2. To know and understand the concept of the Absorbent Mind
3. To understand the concept of the Natural Laws
4. To understand how the child develops the will, obedience and intelligence

Dr. Montessori believed in the “spiritual embryo” in which you could find a pattern of psychic development even before birth.” Through the period of development of the psychic embryo, there are two important features that the child has that enables him to develop, and the Montessori Method of education is engineered to capitalize on these to their fullest potential.

1. The absorbent Mind

2. The Sensitive Periods and this will lead to the development of a Normalized Child

The Absorbent Mind

The Absorbent Mind is the child’s ability to absorb information from the environment by means of a special pre-conscious state of mind . Montessori often compared the child’s mind from ages 0-6 as a sponge which absorbs everything in its environment. Dr. Montessori said:

“Impressions do not merely enter his mind, they form it, they incarnate themselves in him.”

“Unconscious activity prepares the mind, it is succeeded by a conscious process which slowly awakens and takes from the unconscious what it can offer.”

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A child begins life without any knowledge of their environment, then bit by bit they start to establish a memory, the power to understand, and the ability to reason....creating understanding from what has been absorbed. The child is not an empty vessel that we must fill but a person that can be nurtured to develop an understanding of self and the environment so that he can become the best version of himself.

We often describe the period between 0 and 3 as the unconscious absorbent mind and from 3 to 6 as the conscious absorbent mind.

The psychic growth of each child is guided by the absorbent mind. Montessori believed that it is important to start the development of mental functions early with a child:

“Before three, the functions are being created; after three, they develop.”

So here is how it works, the child has a special ability to soak up information, knowledge and much more from the environment, unconsciously from 0-3 and consciously from 3-6, this is called the absorbent mind.

The creative energy that enables the child to absorb information unconsciously is called the nebula.

The impressions that the child absorbs into his mind unconsciously is called the mneme.

There is a vital force at work, an unconscious will power that makes the child do the things he needs to do to develop. This vital force is called the horme and it works together with the Sensitive Periods.

Here are the 4 concepts at play during the development of the psychic embryo as the absorbent mind interacts with the environment:

1. The Natural Laws

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2. The Development of the Will

3. The Power to Obey and

4. The Development of Intelligence.

The Natural Laws

Montessori observed and recorded that there are several Natural Laws at work in a developing child:



1. The Law of Work

Children appeared pleased, peaceful, and rested after periods of concentration on work they had freely chosen to do. Destructive behavior in a child disappeared when they were busy at work.

Montessori said it this way:

“Man builds himself through working.”

Children use the environment to improve themselves. Adults use themselves to improve the environment. Children work for the sake of the process but adults work to achieve results.

2. Law of Independence

Montessori believed that:

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“Except when he has regressive tendencies, the child’s nature is to aim directly and energetically at functional independence. Development takes the form of a drive toward an ever greater independence.”

“Inner forces affect his choice, and if someone usurps the function of his guide, the child is prevented from developing either his will or his concentration.”

3. The Law of Attention

A child pays intense attention to particular objects in their environment. A child pays intense attention to particular objects in their environment.

Montessori said:

“The essential thing is for the task to arouse such an interest that it engages the child’s whole personality.”

If the child is engaged he will pay attention and concentrate. The child uses their new ability for concentration to consolidate and develop their personality.

At first the child instinctively is attracted to certain materials. Later on, what is “known” now excites expectation and interest in the novel “unknown”.

Montessori said:

“The child concentrates on those things that he already has in his mind that he has absorbed in the previous period, for whatever has been conquered has a tendency to remain in the mind, to be pondered.”

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The Development of the Will

After a child experiences a prolonged period of attention and concentration, the will is revealed.

The development of the will takes time and evolves through continuous activity in relationship with the environment. Decisions and actions are the bases for the will's development. A child needs to exercise the will and then he will have the strength to control his actions.

Traditional schooling limits the number of opportunities that a child has for choice and action. This directly inhibits the child's expression and ability to develop and control his will.

Montessori observed three stages in the development of the child's will:

1. Repetition of an Activity

Repetition gives the child a sense of achievement, a sense of power and independence. Interruption during this time is upsetting to the child. This is why the long period of 3 hours a day of choice work is needed in the 3 to 6 year class.

2. Spontaneously chooses Self-Discipline as a Way of Life

Self-knowledge and self-possession. The child is allowed to choose what he wants to do. She can move around the class room and see what others are working on. The ground rules are not to disturb others while working.

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Traditional schools prefer children to remain immobile.

3. Child Makes Creative use of His Abilities

Montessori believed that it is while in a state of Activity that the child makes creative use of his abilities, and accepts the responsibility of his own actions, while complying with the limits of reality.

The Power to Obey

Obedience is the most difficult aspect of the Montessori philosophy for people to understand.

Western thought considers will and obedience as two separate values/powers. But, depending on where you live and the culture you surround yourself with...your experience with “obedience” as a child may be totally different than that of other cultures.

For example a Yoruba or Ibo child of yester-years only needed to look at their mums face to know what she was thinking and Lord help you if you took the sweet from the stranger she was eyeing you with the secret message to politely refuse.

For many, many years, almost everyone believed that obedience was sought through a process of “breaking the child’s will.” The “power struggles” that parents/elders had with children always ended with the parents/elders would win and the child would lose. After all, the adult should know what is best, right?

Montessori believed that obedience and will were 2 parts of a whole.

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Montessori believed that:

“There is no lack of obedience in our world; quite the contrary...What unhappily is absent is the control of obedience.”

Control of obedience rests on 2 conditions:

1. Complete development of obedience through its several stages.
2. Reaching of the final stage in the development of the will.

Montessori said:

“At first it is dictated purely by the hormic impulse, then it rises to the level of consciousness, and thereafter it goes on developing, stage by stage, till it comes under the control of the conscious will.”

Dr. Montessori believed that a child’s sense of conscious “will” if worked with in the right way, would not manifest itself in destructive actions. This is what she said:

“Nature imposes on the child the task of growing up, and his will leads him to make progress and to develop his powers.”

The word obedience when used in context with the Montessori Philosophy refers to a natural characteristic of the human being. This characteristic must be developed into a self-controlled or intelligent obedience, in cooperation with the forces of life and nature on which the survival of human life and society depends.

George Dennison, a contemporary writer, believes that the child comes to recognize the “natural authority of adults”.

This a true and deep understanding of children. You do not need to enforce it with the cane or fear. They grow to know this if you allow them.

You can choose to continue to shout and control them forcefully or you can allow the child to grow to understand this

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You can allow the child Freedom within limits to grow and develop where they will learn to make decisions, the right decisions because they want to not because you want them to.

For me this speaks of the difference between the Leaders we have in power today who take decisions based on the fact that there is no longer anyone (adult) commanding them and forcing them to do what is right.

Montessori adults make good informed decisions because they have learnt to control themselves (they control their wills and obey)

The Development of Intelligence

The development of the intelligence is the key to understanding life itself, and this sets the mechanism essential for education in motion. Intelligence is defined by Montessori as:

“...the sum of those reflex and associative or reproductive activities which enable the mind to construct itself, putting it into relation with the environment.”

The child makes sensory perceptions and then needs to organize them into an orderly arrangement in his mind.

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Montessori said:

“To help the development of the intelligence is to help put the images on the consciousness in order.”

So the child absorbs information and it becomes intelligence when he can understand these different concepts and put them in order in his mind.

Education is happening when intelligence is created and a new man is being made.