



The Montessori Child 2

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The Sensitive Periods

Lesson Objectives:

- To be able to define and understand the concept of “sensitive periods”
- To identify the conditions necessary for sensitive periods
- To know and understand the goals of a child as they develop and learn
- To know the 11 Sensitive periods as identified by M. Montessori.

Lesson 1: The Sensitive Periods: Definition and Context



The term Sensitive Periods was first used by a scientist Hugo de Vries. He was a Dutch biologist, and he based this on his studies on insects. He knew that insects are guided by instinct, to complete certain tasks at certain times. He called these times “Sensitive Periods.” Dr. Montessori spent many years observing children. She realized that children were guided by an “inner” need to complete certain tasks at certain times. Dr. Montessori called these blocks of time in a child’s life, “**Sensitive Periods.**”

The Montessori Child 2

So Sensitive Periods can be defined as “ specific periods of time when a child is absorbed with one characteristic of his environment to the exclusion of all else.” Maria explains these periods as

“an intense interest for repeating certain actions at length, for no obvious reason, until.... (Because of repetition) a fresh function suddenly appears with explosive force.”

The child does this because he loves his environment...not an emotional love, but an intellectual and spiritual desire. As a result the child has great joy! Dr. Montessori said,

“When one of these psychic passions is exhausted, another is enkindled. Childhood thus passes from conquest to conquest in a constant rhythm that constitutes its joy and happiness.”

What this means is that during the period of ages 0 to 6 especially children have specific individual times when they are drawn to a certain aspect of the environment and they want and need to learn how to do that activity, to the exclusion of all else. The child will repeat this activity over and over again until she has learnt how to do it well to her satisfaction.

Learning during the sensitive period is faster and much more effective and satisfying for the child. If a child is prohibited these sensitive periods, the natural consequences are shown with the disturbing effect on psychic development and maturity. The child would then spend a much longer time to learn the skill later on and can have some not to complementary consequences. Like a child who does not learn to potty train when the urge to learn this skill naturally has manifested itself.

As soon as a sensitive period appears, the child must **be assisted**, prepare the environment for the child and provide what is needed so that the appropriate skill can be learned..



Conditions Necessary for Sensitive Periods

The Montessori Child 2

The child needs the environment and the observant adult to bring everything together to meet the needs of each sensitive period.

The child depends upon the environment and the adult to achieve his goals. The child, the teacher and the environment are the 3 pillars of the Montessori method. The work hand in hand and integrate and interrelate to bring joyful learning to the child. It is only through this interaction that the child comes to an understanding of his self and the limits of his universe.

Dr. Montessori said that,

“A child's work is to create the person she is to become.”

Children also require freedom.

Freedom is a very important principle used in the Montessori setting. We observe the child and follow the child. The child does not follow the adult. Your classes should be child led and child friendly. Coming into the classroom with a lesson plan is one thing. Insisting on delivering the lesson that your children are mostly not ready for or have gone beyond in their individual learning processes will either bore or frustrate the children. If on the other hand a child is given the key to his own personality, and is governed by his own laws of development, the child is then in a position to grow and develop naturally to his fullest abilities with joy.

Maria believed that education should start at birth. Dr. Montessori said,

“Education is not something which the teacher does. It is a natural process which develops spontaneously.”

Western education thought has been influenced by **Descartes'** view of man as two separate parts... **intellectual** and **physical**. Montessori on the other hand believed that the full psychic powers cannot be achieved without physical activity. If movement is curtailed the child's well-being will be threatened. Montessori believed that the child possesses an intense motivation towards his own self-construction.



The Montessori Child 2

The Goal of the Child

The unique and ultimate goal in a child's life is the full development of himself. He achieves this through an understanding of his environment. The child's emotional and physical health depends on his constant attempt to become himself. Dr. Montessori said,

“Above all it is to be noted that the child has a passionate love for order and work, and possesses intellectual qualities superior by far to what might have been expected.”

A child shows the need for order in 3 ways:

- Positive joy in seeing things in their proper places
- Demonstrates tantrums when they are not in their proper places
- Child wants to do it all by himself if he can. Dr. Montessori said,
“Never help a child with a task at which he feels he can succeed.”

So we must understand that children want to learn, their need is to understand their environment and to become the best adult they can who can interact and add value to their society. No child wants to be a burden and let others serve them. The child naturally wants to do things for themselves. So please show them and let them learn from their mistakes, they need repetition to get it right anyway and they are thankful for the opportunity to practice. They need to practice, and do it over and over again. The child is interested in the process the adult is interested in the end result. If the child cannot freely practice and is stopped from interacting and learning what he wants and needs, it may frustrate, stress the child and lead to unhealthy mental states. These unhealthy mental states may be the difference between the problem solvers and those who are unable to think and resolve simple problems around them.

11 Montessori Identified Sensitive Periods from birth to 6 years of age! When Maria Montessori talks about children being “inner directed” she is referring to a child in a sensitive period where they have an inner compulsion to learn a specific skill. If, as a teacher, you observe a child, you will be able to pick up on their sensitive periods.

Maria identified 11 Sensitive Periods that children go through from birth through 6 years of age. The breakdown in chronological time is just an approximation.

The Montessori Child 2

Children have their own “time clocks” and we must be will to observe them and then to assist them when the time is right!

1. Birth – 1 - **Movement** All the new movements of a new life with crawling, walking, touching, etc.

2. Birth – 6 - **Language** Learning vocabulary and comprehension

3. 1 – 4 - **Small Objects** Where the child becomes absorbed by objects and details often over-looked by the adult

4. 2 – 4 - **Order** Desire for repetition and consistency

5. 2 – 6 - **Music** Where child is interested in melody, pitch, rhythm

6. 2 – 6 - **Grace and Courtesy** Where the child imitates polite and acceptable behavior and integrates them into his personality.

7. 2 – 6 - **Sensory Impressions** Where children learn through their five senses and make sensorial discrimination's.

8. 3 – 4 - **Writing Interest** Where the child becomes interested in writing before reading They attempt to use writing instruments and paper to write letters and numbers.

9. 3 – 5 - **Reading Interest** Where the child becomes interested in the symbolic sounds each letter makes and how to form words.

10. 4 – 6 - **Spatial Relationships** This is where a child becomes interested in their place in space. They study relationships between familiar places. They study the relationship between objects such as a puzzle.

11. 4 – 6 - **Mathematics** This is where the child is able to absorb the concepts of quantity and operations using concrete materials.

...(This is an expanded version many schools of thought mention 5 or 6 mainly)