



The Montessori

OBSERVER

Attention

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Child working with practical life activity at the Powder Mill Children's House
(Beltsville, Maryland)

Montessori Conferences in New York and Atlanta

The Society has scheduled its next "Creating the New Education" conferences for the weekends of May 2-3, 1992 (New York) and May 16-17, 1992 (Atlanta, GA). These locations were determined from interest expressed by persons who attended the last Society conference held in Columbia, South Carolina on October 5-6, 1991.

Participating in these May, 1992 conferences will be students and graduates of the Society's Montessori teacher education program, as well as school owners, parents and other persons interested in more effective Montessori teaching with children. Registration is due in advance so that participants can study the special materials which are provided at that time to help them prepare for a successful conference experience.

After conducting over 30 such conferences since 1986, Lee Havis states that "our experience has shown that this type of focussed discussion is very effective to uncover and resolve some of the most deeply entrenched obstacles which otherwise deter good Montessori teaching with children. Specific content and topics come from the immediate interests and needs of those attending -- so that there is

a direct, practical application of the conference experience to their own situations. Long-term value of new skills and awareness come from our constant reference to the three basic Montessori principles which eventually leads us to the emergence of the 'normalized' child."

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Reflections...

by Lee Havis (Silver Spring, Maryland)

Since December, 1990, Lee Havis has been directing the operation of Powder Mill Children's House (Beltsville, MD). Sponsored by the International Montessori Trust, the Children's House has been serving as an important learning experience and study of the "normalization" process with children aged 2-6. Havis reflects here on one of his recent practical learning experiences.

Running in the Room

In our large open classroom, we have seen that "unnormalized" children sometimes run

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Centering One's Being

"One who would become a teacher according to our system must examine himself...this inner preparation will give him the balance and poise which he will need."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Secret of Childhood*, p. 153

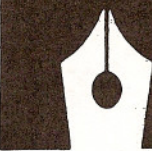
Controlling the detrimental influences of one's own "personality" is essentially a question of "centering" one's being -- to create an inner calm and balance which effectively detaches oneself from the surrounding emotional distress, drama and tension of some "moment of peril" with children. The ordinary "uncentered" adult tends to react defensively to misbehavior in children -- to unconsciously camouflage some deeply-entrenched prejudice or limiting belief associated with one's own "personality". A "power struggle" condition arises with such persons, revealing one's personality presence as a constant obstacle to the complete emergence of the "normalized" child.

Dr. Patricia Webbink, psychologist in Washington, D.C., offers an approach of "centering" to her clients to help them become more self aware, peaceful and able to overcome obstacles. Dr. Webbink states simply that "the goal of psychotherapy is to be centered". In her practice, she incorporates music, guided imagery and relaxation techniques to help her clients resolve various deep-seated personality deficiencies arising from negative environmental experiences during early childhood. By "centering one's being", such inner obstacles as "self-hatred" and "resentment" can be discovered and effectively resolved as they arise in various misbehavior situations with children.

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Dr. Patricia Webbink, Psychologist



Attention

by Lee Havis

"...in the child's formation, the fixing of his attention is basic to all that comes afterwards...once his attention has been focused, he becomes his own master and can exert control over his world."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Absorbent Mind*, p. 217

Montessori teaching must obtain the child's attention as an initial step towards its "normalization"; i.e., the child being in a state of complete harmony with its environment. Distracted by a multitude of external stimuli, the ordinary child cannot "normalize" itself without first concentrating intensely on just one single object of interest. The Montessori teacher must therefore offer the unfocused child various opportunities for fixing its attention.

Fixing the Attention

"...the difficulty of fixing the attention of the children is the stumbling block of education."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Spontaneous Act. in Ed.*, p. 154

In traditional education, the teacher attempts to fix the child's attention on her own teaching activity; i.e., pre-determined lesson plans, projects and other adult-directed activities. Bombarded by this constant adult instruction, children have no substantial opportunity to attend to their own self-directed interests. In contrast, Montessori teaching helps children fix their attention on activities which respond to internal impulses which are guided by a "teacher within" the child itself.

Internal Impulses

"...in our experiment the attention of the child was not artificially maintained by a teacher; it was an object which fixed the attention, as if it corresponded to some internal impulse..."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Spontaneous Act. in Ed.*, p. 155

Montessori teachers assist the child's own self-teaching activity by offering a specific external stimulus which seems most likely at the moment to capture the child's interest. Objects in the environment must therefore precisely respond to the child's internal impulses for self-development. To this end, the Montessori teacher carefully observes the child's external behavior for signs of specific, tangible interest.

Interest

"The things which are useful to our inner life are those which arouse interest. Our internal world is created upon a selection from the external world, acquired for and in harmony with our internal activities."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Spontaneous Act. in Ed.*, p. 160

Montessori teaching is a constant "observation" to discern what particular object or activity may deeply interest the child at each moment in time. The teacher notices what children spontaneously look at and touch in the environment. Since children show their interest in such a wide range of sensory activities, the physical environment must provide a rich assortment of diverse stimuli.

Stimuli

"...stimuli will appeal in vain to the senses, if the internal cooperation of attention is lacking."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Spontaneous Act. in Ed.*, p. 232

The Montessori environment contains a selection of well-ordered materials to stimulate the child's inborn instincts for intellectual development, order and independence. These materials are specifically designed with their own "control of error" to allow for a maximum of self-teaching and independent learning. The Montessori teacher must still work however to arouse the children's interest by varying the intensity of the stimulus according to the needs of each individual child.

Intensity of Stimulus

"...to fix the attention, a certain extension and a certain intensity of the stimulus are necessary."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Spontaneous Act. in Ed.*, p. 74

Montessori teachers vary the intensity of the stimulus in the environment by a selective expression of their "personality"; i.e., just enough enthusiasm for the child to become deeply interested, but not so much as to create a distracting dependency on the adult presence. When the child's mind wanders into the realm of fantasy, a relatively high degree of stimulation from the environment is usually necessary to offer a real choice for reality. The environment may also be varied in such intensity by reducing or increasing the amount and type of educative materials.

Educative Material

"...an excessive quantity of the educative material may dissipate the attention, render the exercises with objects mechanical."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Spontaneous Act. in Ed.*, p. 77

Since the "unnormalized" child tends to become overwhelmed and distracted by too many objects, a Montessori environment at first may well contain only a modest amount of the most simple "practical life" materials; i.e., exercises for cleaning, pouring, polishing, folding, etc. These most simple activities provide an opportunity for deep concentration, and a positive experience of success and self confidence. In this way, there develops in the child a state of expectation for success and order in the more advanced areas of the curriculum.

State of Expectation

"...it is the already present "easy work" which puts the attention into a state of expectation."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Spontaneous Act. in Ed.*, p. 158

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Look for the
May Observer
featuring
Hope

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Lee Havis, Executive Director
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INTERNATIONAL MONTESSORI SOCIETY

The International Montessori Society is sponsored by Educational Services, Inc., a non-profit corporation organized in Maryland, U.S.A. The Society's purpose is to support the effective application of Montessori principles throughout the world.

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Moment of Peril

Grabbing Materials

from Observer, November 1991

by Lee Havis

When children "grab" materials for improper use in fantasy or otherwise (see Observer, November, 1991), the Montessori teacher must control the "physical objects" which are a detrimental influence in the environment at such times. Where the child is grabbing these materials directly from the teacher and otherwise avoiding the teacher's direct efforts to provide this "control", the "adult personality" is also directly detrimental in the environment.

A four-year old child of average intelligence, such as Jennifer in the "moment of peril" here, is beyond the age of infancy when a certain amount of "grabbing" instinct is normal. With such infants, adults may "re-direct" their improper grabbing activity to more suitable involvement with other materials.

Jennifer's "grabbing" behavior here requires a more "verbal" type of adult-child communication -- to express some positive opportunity to manage the particular material in a suitable manner. The teacher may therefore say: "Would you like to show me what you can do with those _____ (objects)?" The teacher could then help the child to properly order and arrange her materials with a thoughtful regard to their "careful" use. Negative language which focuses on the "misbehavior"; e.g., "We don't use those _____ (objects) like that.", should be avoided as much as possible.

In the process of "controlling" the abused materials, the teacher must also avoid the tendency to "grab" the materials back. Such adult "grabbing" shows a negative example, and may even create a "tug of war" with the materials -- a physical power struggle which only increases the detrimental influence of the "adult personality".

Older children like Jennifer often "grab" materials because of a general distrust of the environment to provide them with positive opportunities to handle objects according to their own interests. Perhaps such children are used to being "blamed" and "criticized" for spilling and dropping objects. With this type of discouraged, distrustful child, the teacher must offer repeated opportunities for more positive, successful experience with materials. A child such as Jennifer may respond very well to lots of praise and encouragement for its positive accomplishments in completing tasks; however, any praise and approval must be based on indications of this need by "eye contact" and verbal communication initiated by the child itself.

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Attention

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The child who has absorbed the basic order of the physical environment from the "easy work" of practical life activity may then come to expect further successful experiences elsewhere in the environment. A simple "pouring" exercise, repeated over and over again with intense concentration, can set in motion a profound integration of the child's entire personality. The teacher who presents an interesting piece of work to a child is calling its attention with the voice of a trumpet.

Voice of Trumpet

"The teacher who tries to focus the child's attention on something real...speaks with the voice of a trumpet to the vague mind, wandering far from the pathway of its own good...the recapture of an attention which has escaped from reality, is all that is needed to effect a cure."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from Absorbent Mind, p. 266-67

The Montessori teacher must present various objects and activities to the "unnormlized" child -- to help focus its attention on real work. Like the voice of a trumpet, the teacher's lessons can call the young child's wandering mind into profound and intimate contact with reality. Using her "personality" with varying degrees of intensity and enthusiasm, the teacher is at first a very active presence in the environment.

The Teacher

"The teacher directs...but, in so doing, she is careful to avoid calling the child's attention to herself..."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from Spontaneous Act. in Ed., p. 165

Montessori teachers must use their "personality" as a precise tool to focus the child's attention on the materials. With just a single word such as "watch", the child may become keenly attentive to the teacher's specific handling of a particular piece of equipment. In this way, some brief adult intervention will arouse interest without jeopardy to the child's essential liberty to choose its own activity.

Liberty

"Liberty is the experimental condition for studying the phenomenon of the child's attention."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from Spontaneous Act. in Ed., p. 157

Lesson presentations with the materials are "experiments" to study the child's free response of interest and attention. The child's liberty to accept or reject the lesson is preserved by one's underlying commitment to the three basic Montessori principles: i.e., (1) Observation; (2) Individual Liberty; and (3) Preparation of the Environment. Such a committed way of being allows the child to follow a path of development as given by its own internal activities.

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Centering One's Being

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Self-Hatred

Many Montessori teachers cannot fully control their "personality" in the classroom because of such destructive unknown inner obstacles as "self-hatred"; i.e., a negative view of oneself which gives rise to guilt, blame, defensiveness, manipulation and other such negative attitudes and behavior with children. When children verbalize hateful thoughts and act with misbehavior and disobedience, the "self-hating" person tends to react defensively, e.g., to either accuse, condemn or otherwise control children, or to "abandon" any thoughtful positive action altogether. Dominated by an overwhelming sense of "self-hatred", there is a constant confusion and "power struggle" with children.

When feelings of fear, tension and anger arise in connection with "self-hatred", the adult can still "center" oneself by conscious application of various relaxation techniques, e.g., deep breathing and "letting go" of any body tension. By this "centering" process, one can more easily deal with the surrounding emotional drama from a position of detached "observation" -- independent of hateful, negative comments and behavior of others. When others seem to justify a sense of "self-hatred", the "centered" teacher can nonetheless proceed with those necessary positive actions which are consistent with the emergence of the "normalized" child.

Resentment

Adults can feel "resentment" when they are faced with children who refuse to return materials properly to their place in the environment. In these "moments of peril" with children, the unknown inner sense of "resentment" emerges as a very reactive pattern of negative behavior. The "resentful" adult then tends to either (1) force, coerce and manipulate children to get their obedience or (2) "abandon" the issue entirely by "cleaning up" after children themselves.

"Centering one's being" can overcome the inner obstacle of "resentment" by creating an inner calm and clarity which is detached from the surrounding drama of disorder with physical objects. The "centered" teacher is then able to proceed with proper actions consistent with Montessori principles, e.g., to either patiently wait for the proper moment to direct the child to "clean up" or "put away" the materials on its own, or otherwise to show how to "put away" the materials as a lesson for the child who is watching. By "centering one's being", we are more able to naturally respond to the "moments of peril" with children in the spirit of true commitment to Montessori principles.

For more complete information about "centering", contact: Dr. Patricia Webbink, Brookmont Associates, 6109 Broad Street, Bethesda, MD 20816, Tel. (301) 229-8495.



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Reflections. . .

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around the room in a disordered and uncontrolled manner. At such times, we have tried to re-direct the children towards other more constructive activity in the environment. However, our efforts were often unproductive since so often we could not discern their true "interest" for real work while they were running; i.e., there was no object in their hands or no constructive activity apparent in their words and actions. To simply "stand and watch" this running behavior seemed to "abandon" the children since there was little or no "eye contact" at the time. If we tried to physically interrupt the children while running, their reaction was usually negative, in the nature of a "power struggle".

Most recently, I have come to recognize and acknowledge that children running in the room are communicating their interest in being together as a group; or perhaps to engage in some type of vigorous physical activity. Now, instead of trying to stop the "running" by physical force or to simply "abandon" the children to this activity, one of our staff may go to the piano and offer musical "direction" to their otherwise random movements. A song which directs the children to "walk", "run" "hop", "bend", etc., seems to calm the children by providing a focus to their energy. The children then usually return to a more normal goal-directed activity and order.

Positions & Placements

Montessori Teacher: for 3-6 year old class. We are an independent non-profit Montessori school in a charming New England Community. Please contact: Search Committee, Keene Montessori School, 91 West Street, Keene, NH 03431, Tel. (603) 352-4052.

Attention

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Internal Activities

"...internal activities act as cause; they do not react and exist as the effect of external factors. Our attention is not arrested on all things indifferently, but by those which are congenial to our tastes."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from Spontaneous Act. in Ed., p. 217

The Montessori "normalizing" environment respects the "teacher within" the child as the ultimate judge of what is proper work and interest in the environment. As long as materials are not mistreated or abused, the teacher must allow the child's own internal development activities to guide the direction of its particular exploration and discovery in the environment. Once the child's attention has come to rest on some particular object of interest, the teacher must then withdraw her "personality" presence so that the child may fully concentrate -- to become a delivered soul with its own independent path of self-directed "normal" development.

Delivered Soul

"The child whose attention has once been held by a chosen object, while he concentrates his whole self on the repetition of the exercise, is a delivered soul..."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from Absorbent Mind, p. 272

The child who has once learned to deeply concentrate its attention is thereby delivered from its prior state of instability and disorder -- emerging into a new form of "normalized" being in complete harmony with its environment. Such a "normalized" development is reflected by the child's independence, self-disciplined activity, order, sympathy with others, love of work and attachment to reality. This new child is the ultimate result of those particular experiences during early childhood which have intensely focussed the child's attention.

Moment of Peril

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As the child gradually acquires a more positive sense of its own capacity to properly handle objects in the environment, the greedy need to "grab" materials for unsuitable uses will diminish and disappear entirely. As always, it is the child's profound concentration on some one particular object of interest which sets in motion the child's "normalization".

Separating from Mother

Three-year old Molly is brought into class on the first day, clinging to her mother. When the teacher attempts to interest Molly in some materials, Molly clings even tighter to her mother who attempts to console Molly by picking her up and comforting her like a baby. After several further attempts to interest Molly in materials fail to attract her attention, the mother indicates that she "must go" and moves toward the door with Molly still holding on. The mother then begins to physically struggle with Molly to separate herself and leave, as Molly holds on to her mother in a fit of tears and considerable emotional distress. *What to do?*
Answer in Observer, May, 1992.

Montessori Conferences

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Advance registration fee of \$200 per person (\$160, members) is due by April 2, 1992 (New York) and by April 16, 1992 (Atlanta, GA.) Registration after these dates is subject to an additional fee of \$50. Upon registration, participants receive complete study material and information about conference location and accommodations. For additional information or to register, write or call: International Montessori Society, 912 Thayer Avenue, Silver Spring, MD 20910, Tel. (301) 589-1127.