



The Montessori

OBSERVER

Absorbent Mind

Published by the International Montessori Society • 8115 Fenton St. #304 • Silver Spring, MD 20910 USA • Tel. (301) 589-1127



Participants in the Chicago, IL workshop — *Creating the New Education* (June 19-20, 2004)

Creating the New Education in USA

The Society's "Creating the New Education" workshop is a two-day experiential learning event designed to improve Montessori teaching skills through inner preparation. Conducted by Lee Havis, IMS executive director, it includes the technology of being committed to laws of nature, which has evolved through over 100 of these workshops since 1986.

Chicago, IL

June 19-20, 2004

This first Chicago area workshop brought together teachers, parents and other educators from Wisconsin, Alaska, Illinois, Michigan Nebraska and Indiana. Participants discussed particularly how best to exercise instinct, judgment and common sense to implement the exacting scientific skills of Montessori teaching technology.

Havis noted the primary importance of avoiding and controlling undue reaction to feelings and deeply hidden prejudices in being with children. Havis noted, "the workshop technology helps guide and regulate our actions in an objective, scientific manner. Following these precise techniques and protocols, we must however still employ considerable judgment in their practical implementation."

Havis also pointed out the difficulty of correcting many common mistakes with children that go unnoticed in ordinary society. He said, "we can only control the many hidden defects of conventional teaching through careful inner preparation. Avoid the advice of those who justify such errors as unimportant or necessary. Instead, surround yourself with those who will observe your actions based on the higher authority of absolute commitment to laws of nature".

Washington, DC

June 4-5, 2004

This event included the participation of parents and educators from Virginia, DC, Maryland, Pennsylvania and North Carolina. Many attended from the nearby *El-Amin Academy* (Annandale, VA), which is seeking to more fully incorporate Montessori principles into its faith-based school environment.

Havis offered many practical demonstrations of how to overcome misbehavior problems with children. He particularly emphasized the need to challenge detrimental dependency on friends, professional associates, school or organization.

Havis said, "the adult personality we must control around children is not entirely contained within our own physical body, but includes the actions of others as well. We must therefore overcome the fear of dependency and emotional attachment with others. We may well risk disapproval and anger from others by pointing out their errors with children we supervise. However, this process of interactive self-examination and correction is vital to remove the detrimental influences of the adult personality."

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Character Teaching

Since 2001, the Society has been supporting the development of a character teaching project to provide a new educational experience for poor children in countries where abuse and neglect of these children is most acute. Formally known as 'street teaching', this project aims to create new conditions for the development of normal character qualities in harmony with laws of nature.

Lee Havis, IMS executive director, originated the Character Teaching project to operate with two essential elements — an informal tutoring component and a formal demonstration classroom for young children. The informal component would train teachers to provide brief instructional lessons with poor children each day, according to an exchange of value, time for money.

Havis has sought funding for these projects to operate in several countries, based on interest and cooperation of various US and host country government agencies. In July, 2003, he founded *Character Teaching, Inc.*, to serve as the project's prime sponsoring entity in the United States.

Havis is seeking to develop the project in a number of Latin American countries, by inviting persons to serve on local consultation boards and asking for support from pertinent government agencies. Based on this interest and support, he aims to schedule an initial consultation visit to each country to begin staff training and basic project operation.

Montessori Workshops

Learn Montessori Teaching Skills
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Absorbent Mind

by Lee Havis

"...The Absorbent Mind...receives all, does not judge, does not refuse, does not react....It puts its hope in everything, accepts poverty equally with wealth, adopts any religion and the prejudices and habits of its countrymen, incarnating it all in itself."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Absorbent Mind*, p.266

Montessori teaching makes its greatest impact in the early childhood period, when children have an absorbent mind for effortless learning through their own direct experiences in the environment. Only during this formative time of life can the environment so profoundly influence the child's whole path of development thereafter. Unfortunately, nature does not prolong this amazingly absorbent mental form beyond the age of about six.

Mental Form

"...a child less than six years of age has a 'mental form' different from that which develops after he has reached the age of six or seven...things absorbed during that unconscious period...are those which persist in such a stable manner that they are identified with the person."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Discovery of the Child*, p.324

The young child naturally adapts itself to the environment by absorbing experiences directly through its senses – integrating such experiences deeply within its whole being for life. Through various forms of sensory interaction, the child's uniquely absorbent mental form makes a complete and exact match with its surrounding environment – fitting the child perfectly to its particular time and place in the world. Whatever is around the young child therefore can make profound impressions that establish the essential basis for all later learning and development.

Impressions

"Impressions do not merely enter his mind: they form it. They incarnate themselves in him. The child creates his own 'mental muscles', using for this what he finds in the world about him. We have named this type of mentality, the Absorbent Mind."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Absorbent Mind*, p.24

Adults ordinarily constrain the development of children through various forms of abandonment and repression, imposing on children their own personal values and beliefs that conflict with the child's own intrinsic inner plan of creation. During the early years, children form deep impressions from these destructive adult impositions, adopting these to themselves to establish corresponding patterns of conventional fear, prejudice and dependency on

others. By contrast, Montessori teaching creates a supportive environment for children to form their own true personality according to the perfect plan of natural laws of the universe.

Personality

"A child is forced to come to terms with his surroundings and the efforts entailed lead to an integration of his personality."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Secret of Childhood*, p.35

Montessori teaching aims to create the right precise condition that are necessary for children to follow their own path of self-directed normal development. This condition is a psychic space committed to laws of nature, which allows the child to construct its own normal personality through concentrated free activity with other children and physical objects in the environment. We create such a *normalizing* condition in part by restraining our own detrimental patterns of behavior that the child would otherwise readily adopt from us through its powerful instinct towards imitation.

Imitation

"Nature does not merely give the instinct for imitation, but the effort in oneself to become transformed into whatever the example demonstrates."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Ed. for a New World*, p.45

Young children instinctively imitate the behavior of others — absorbing what they see and hear into themselves as an intimate part of their whole basic way of being. Adults must therefore practice the protocol of "model good behavior", to minimize any unintended consequences that would arise from imitation by children. Otherwise, children will readily make these negative patterns of adult behavior into their own, reflecting the potential destructive effects of adult insinuation.

Adult Insinuation

"The period of childhood when a child starts to become conscious of himself and his senses are in a creative state that is particularly subject to suggestion. During this time an adult can insinuate himself into a child and animate his will and mobility with his own."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Secret of Childhood*, p.91

Adults ordinarily insinuate themselves on children in many unconscious ways — suggesting, assuming and imposing various needs, emotions, opinions, judgments and prejudices under the guise of help or teaching. Such adult insinuation occurs commonly through such subtle means as setting ground rules for children or imposing various types of predetermined teacher-directed curriculum. By contrast,

the method of Dr. Montessori frees children from these types of adult impositions, providing instead a context for their own self-directed normal activity in the environment.

The Method

"...the method...is...connected with a particular mentality that is found only in the creative period of early childhood."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Discovery of the Child*, p.323-24

Montessori teaching cooperates closely with the child's own perfect teacher within by applying the basic approach of 'control the environment, not the child'. This indirect method of teaching is to follow laws of nature that closely approximate such principles as (1) *Observation* (2) *Individual Liberty* and (3) *Preparation of the Environment*. We can use these principles to

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Look for the
November Observer
featuring
Human Nature

ISSN 0889-5643

The Montessori Observer
published by

INTERNATIONAL MONTESSORI SOCIETY
8115 Fenton St. #304
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910
Tel. (301) 589-1127 • e-mail: havis@erols.com
Worldwide Web:
<http://www.wdn.com/trust/ims>
Lee Havis, Executive Director

The *Montessori Observer* is mailed four times each year, in March, May, September and November, to Society members throughout the world. The purpose is to provide news and information about the Society's work in Montessori education, and to extend awareness of Montessori principles throughout the world.

INTERNATIONAL MONTESSORI SOCIETY

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

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Moment of Peril

by Lee Havis

Repeating Misbehavior

The teacher here is frustrated by 4-year-old Melvin's repeating misbehavior of throwing shoes. He does not positively respond to the teacher's questioning, when she uses the safe word phrase "where does this go?" (See *Observer*, May, 2004). Instead Melvin throws the same objects as he did before.

In the present *moment of peril*, the teacher has violated two key lesson protocols, even while she may have consciously well employed others. To effectively resolve any misbehavior scenario, the teacher must carefully follow all the protocols of good Montessori teaching — including particularly those that are most fundamental, such as "least amount of adult involvement" and "no negative attention to misbehavior".

At first glance, it may be difficult to see how the teacher's pleasant reference to the shoes is negative attention. However, it is clearly negative because the attention focuses on the objects at issue in the misbehavior situation, and their specific location, which was changed due to the throwing action of the child.

Using the 'questioning' technique here clearly violated the 'minimum effort' or 'least involvement' protocol. The questioning technique is perhaps the heaviest tool in Montessori teaching. We must therefore only use this technique when less involving and lighter means are unavailable or unlikely to work.

The teacher might well have successfully employed the lighter tools of *eye contact*, *patient waiting* or *distraction*. Even if eye contact or patient waiting does not resolve Melvin's misbehavior, distraction might well serve here, using a safe word phrase such as "come over here, I have something to show you."

When the child's anger is likely involved in misbehavior, such as throwing shoes in the present scenario, the teacher must recognize that anything she says is likely to result in a power struggle or negative reaction — a detrimental influence of the adult personality. Better here therefore to use the technique of distraction rather than questioning, to direct the child to something other than the objects involved in the misbehavior.

As the teacher employs the protocols and techniques indicated here, Melvin's misbehavior will diminish and finally disappear altogether. Then, he will find peace, order and harmony through normal work and interaction with others.

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Absorbent Mind

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help guide our actions to remove all detrimental influences and obstacles from around the child, specifically applying the basic principle of *Preparation of the Environment*.

Environment

"...the tiny child's absorbent mind finds its nutriment in its surroundings...and builds itself up from what it takes in...we therefore must make the environment as interesting and attractive as we can."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Absorbent Mind*, p. 88

Montessori teaching indirectly interacts with the child through a series of precise techniques and protocols that control and correct errors and obstacles in the environment. We can effectively use such protocols as 'least amount of adult involvement' to reduce the destructive effects of undue and excessive forms of adult help and teaching with children. Any adult involvement with children must aim essentially only to awaken their interest in carrying out intelligent goal-directed activity of their own free choice and will.

Awaken Interest

"...things about him awaken so much interest and so much enthusiasm that they become incorporated in his very existence. The child absorbs these impressions not with his mind but with his life itself."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Absorbent Mind*, p. 22

Dr. Montessori discovered that ordinary young children can fundamentally change their pattern of inattention, fantasy and disorder to a state of normal being in complete harmony with the environment — materializing the *normalized* child that emerges with such amazing qualities as perfect peace, love of order, eagerness for learning, self-discipline and attachment to reality. This normalization however will only occur in the right conditions, which require at times the adult to offer lessons with materials that awaken the child's interest to some specific piece of real work for concentrated attention. We also help children indirectly acquire the basic customs and habits of polite society by modeling various forms of grace and courtesy, presenting lessons that arise from our normal social interaction with others.

Customs and Habits

"...the child...absorbs the customs and habits of the land in which he lives, until he has formed the typical individual of his place and time."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Absorbent Mind*, p. 58

Young children naturally watch and listen to others in their social situation, absorbing in this way the basic patterns of behavior and language of the surrounding

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IMS Workshops in USA

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Philadelphia, PA

August 21-22, 2004

Educators from the states of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York and Maryland attended with workshop for all those involved in Montessori teaching in this east coast region of the United States. Persons from Germany and India attended as well.

The discussion here focused considerably on the control of language; i.e., how to employ certain *safe words* to avoid the otherwise destructive effect of negative, judgmental and manipulative language with children. Havis explained, "we must employ safe words from the workshop through very exacting techniques such as *questioning*, *clear direction* and *reflective language*. Our careful use of language is vital for the effective control of the adult personality with children."

Havis also emphasized the need for supportive, regular communication with others, to notice and resolve hidden errors in our ordinary interaction with children. He stated "we can only control such errors through inner preparation, which is best achieved through a regular system of accountability with others who share our purpose and commitment to following laws of nature with children."

Boston, MA

September 11-12, 2004

The Boston workshop included the participation of teachers and other educators from the states of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine, and Rhode Island. Discussion focused considerably on the personal challenge of overcoming fear of countervailing popular opinion of others in society towards Montessori teaching.

Havis noted the ultimate supremacy of spirit over matter — the success of action for the truth over evil and illusion in the world. He said "progress of any revolutionary vision, such as Montessori's *new education*, depends not on the many, but the few who speak out and act clearly and consistently for this vision. Our efforts for the truth will finally succeed even against large and well-established prejudices, indifference or open hostility from the mass of popular opinion."

After the workshop, Havis visited the *Montessori School of Cape Code* (North Falmouth, MA), to help their staff implement the pertinent workshop techniques and protocols with children in the classroom. He encouraged staff and parents to work more closely together to help each other correct and control errors through inner preparation focused on the complete reality of the normalized child.

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culture. Adults are therefore always teaching the customs and habits of the culture indirectly and informally through their ordinary behavior and language in society. This process of cultural adaptation occurs most dramatically under the magical influence of the absorbent mind during the early childhood period — before the conscious mind forms itself and fixes in place what will remain as a permanent acquisition of patterns of thought and action thereafter.

Conscious Mind

“The powers of the absorbent mind are gradually dulled as the conscious mind becomes organized.”

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Discovery of the Child*, p.325

After the age of about six, the child enters into a new plane of abstract thought, reasoning and imagination, expressing itself now from the basis of prior learning during the formative period of early childhood. The older child's new conscious mind lacks the capability of effortless absorbent learning as before. Montessori teaching therefore must take particular advantage of the early formative years, to create during this period the environment that enables children to normalize through the powerful presence, influence and activity of the child's absorbent mind.



*Workshop participants engage in lesson presentation exercise with sandpaper letters
— Washington, DC, June 5-6, 2004*

Moment of Peril

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Parent Participation

The teacher is struggling to maintain the integrity of her Montessori environment, because parents often enter and engage in a manipulative, loud or disruptive behavior with children. She wants to welcome parents to participate and learn with children in the school, but finds that several parents do not seem able or interested to follow her directions for Montessori teaching with the children. *What to do?*

Answer in Observer, November 2004

Messages to IMS

May 25, 2004
Vancouver, BC Canada

Dear Mr. Havis

Thank you very much for teaching us to use your new techniques. We tried hard to have least involvement with the children, and it really worked. No stress for the teachers, and the class is much calmer...

Hema De Silva

Participant in Vancouver, BC workshop
(May 8-9, 2004)

May 24, 2004
Boise, ID

Dear Lee,

Thanks a lot for coming out to our school and helping us. My teacher...was very receptive to the new way of doing things. She, like I, was getting tired of the time-outs, bathroom passes, and telling children to use an inside voice all the time. She started using the techniques on the first day and was getting good results...I feel very lucky that I had the opportunity to go to your workshop...It was truly life-changing experience. I can't thank you enough. I guess I'll just help you change the world in return for what you have done for me.

Wendy Lieberman

Participant in Boise, ID workshop
(May 22-23, 2004)

June 22, 2004
Martinsville, IN

What a wonderful conference....I'm full of more specific ideas and confidence in applying them thanks to this well-run conference packed with dedicated Montessori teachers.... I really enjoyed the new pre-conference outlines including the techniques/protocols sheet, the safe words, and the prioritizing scenarios diagram. The question, the comments, the real-life scenarios were all super helpful to me..

Esther Rupert

Participant in Chicago, IL workshop
(June 19-20, 2004)