

Healthy Environments, Healthy Children, Healthy Culture

By Judi Orion



Judi Orion is an AML teacher trainer and examiner at the Primary and Assistants to Infancy levels. She attended the first Assistants to Infancy course in Rome in 1980-81, and is currently the Director of Training for the Montessori Institute's Assistants to Infancy program in Denver, Colorado. Judi served as co-director with Dr. Silvana Montanaro at the Assistants to Infancy course in Osaka, Japan. In addition to her work at the Infant/Toddler level, Ms. Orion has also directed a primary level course in Cincinnati, Ohio.

We are in a crisis on this planet; we see many behavioural characteristics that are unpleasant, difficult to live with. We must remember the advice given by Dr. Maria Montessori years ago, that if we really want to make changes in our society, we must begin with the youngest members.

In Montessori education we put enormous effort and priority into creating a beautiful environment for children, we study which materials are appropriate for which stage of development and those materials are included in the environment. Creating a beautiful environment is one of the gifts of Montessori educators to the field of education.

But a beautiful environment is only the first step.

I'd like to focus this presentation on the role of the adult – more specifically the preparation of the adult. For anyone working with children under the age of three it is imperative to understand that the adult plays a critical role in the child's psychological development. Without a strong psychological base, the child's use of a beautifully prepared environment will be compromised. So we come to understand that how we approach children and use the environment is more important than what we do with the environment.

Following World War II Adele Costa Gnocchi, in collaboration with Dr. Montessori, created environments for children under three years of age and then began the process of creating a training course for adults to work with these children. This work began in 1947.

From the beginning, Costa Gnocchi insisted that adults planning to work with such young children must undergo two types of training – professional and personal/spiritual.

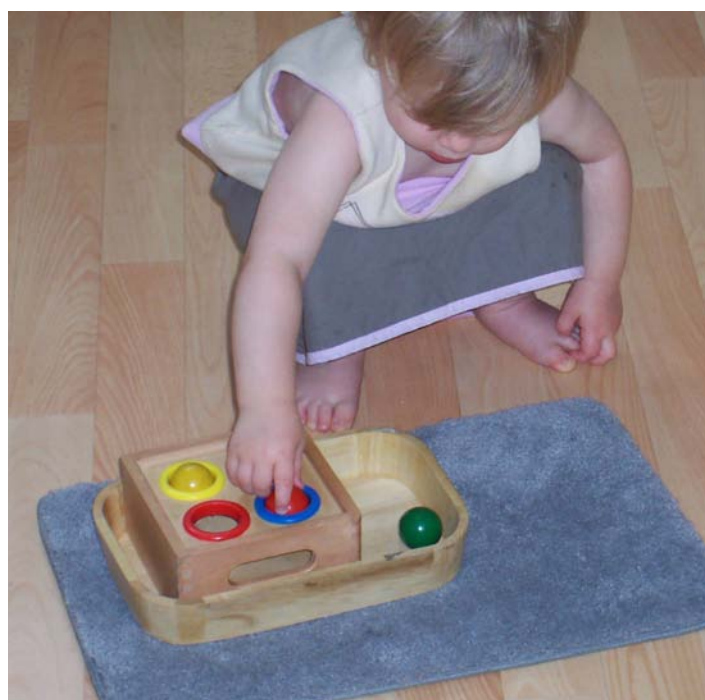
In speaking of professional development, Costa Gnocchi outlined the following steps in one's professional training.

- To study and attain a very deep knowledge of the developmental stages of childhood.
- To develop the ability to recognise those stages in children.
- To study and come to a profound understanding of the purpose of all the equipment in the environment.
- To learn how to transform any "mistake" into a learning opportunity.

- To learn to speak in a soft, calm, clearly articulated voice.
- To cultivate the ability to look at any sequence of movements and analyse those movements into a series of steps.
- To be willing to step back and let the child work by him or herself. To respect the child's plea of "help me to do it myself."
- To develop observation skills.
- To respect, in all circumstances, the educational rules established for the community.

Let's examine these aspects of training and consider practical implications in our work with children.

- Studying the developmental stages of childhood occurs in our Montessori training course. Some students arrive to Montessori with other experience in early childhood education that have also prepared them with this knowledge.
- Recognising the stages of development in children is something that comes with experience but comes relatively easily with children under three whose developmental changes occur so dramatically.





- Studying and understanding the purpose of the materials also comes with Montessori training but continues in our work with children.
- Transforming mistakes into learning opportunities requires observational skills, experience, trust in children and belief in our approach to children.
- Analysing movements requires first of all the understating of why this is important. Once the importance of this is accepted, the ability to analyse movements comes fairly easily. Once a series of movements are analysed, they must be practiced so the sequence appears to a child as a fluid dance of actions, not stilted "step-pause-step" movements.
- Respecting the child's appeal to "help me to do it myself." For some of us this requires an extremely deep level of trust and belief in a child's abilities. Sometimes it even requires sitting on one's hands to prevent ourselves from interfering! It also requires understanding how to create an environment that children can use, down to the smallest detail. If an environment works against a child, then no child will be able to function independently, to help himself.
- To develop observational skills. The distinction between "what I see" and "what I feel about what I see" begins in the observation training aspect of the Montessori course. To be an objective observer is not an innate skill; it is a skill that requires lots of practice and commitment. It requires being willing to listen to one's judgments about others. It requires being humble.
- Respect of educational rules. What kind of rules could we have for a group of children under three years? "Here we sit to eat." "We don't bite people." "We run outside." "When you take work from a shelf, it is your work until you return it to the shelf." Very simple rules consistently but gently enforced allow children to arrive at a point of trusting that these rules can be relied on.

The professional training in preparation for working with children under three is the easiest aspect of our work; some of it is accomplished easily in Montessori training. Other aspects of professional training are ongoing but are not difficult; they just require the passage of time and the accumulation of and reflection on experience.

The spiritual or personal preparation that one undergoes is more challenging for most people. It requires reflection. It requires the willingness to know ourselves. It requires accepting our faults as well as our strengths. It requires a willingness to put judgment aside. It requires introspection. It requires developing incredible humility.

Costa Gnocchi outlined three simple requirements:

To trust that every child is a carrier of great human potential.

In speaking of children having great potential requires that each and every day we look at each child as a new human being; that we forget the trials of the previous day, reserve judgment about what a child will or will not do and look forward to the glimpse of another facet of each child's potential.

To have a deep respect for each child as a unique individual.

Treating children as unique individuals is sometimes a challenge. We speak of "our children", "the children under two", the "threes", etc. We tend to mentally group children and categorise them by age, ability, sex, behaviour, etc. We must train ourselves to see each child individually, treat them as individuals and accept their individual characteristics and gifts to humanity.

To be a servant to life unfolding.

To be a servant to life unfolding requires untold humility. It requires that daily we acknowledge that each child "knows" what is needed for his/her own development. It requires to trust each child and follow their unfolding. It does not mean not being willing to set limits, not correct behaviours.



There are two quotes for Dr. Montessori I would like to share. The first one reads, "The preparation of the environment, and of the things (objects in the environment) is the first external act of a deeper transformation which consists in leaving the child free to act according to his natural tendencies."

The second reads, "The first aim of the prepared environment is, as far as possible, to render the growing child independent of the adult. That is, it is a place where he can do things for himself, live his own life, without the immediate help of adults."

When training to work with 3-6 year olds, it is much easier to think of preparing an environment in which the children can be free to develop, to pursue their own developmental needs without constant "helpful" interference from adults. When trying to apply this information to children under three it becomes even more of a challenge. At least three year olds can use language to create space around themselves whereas the toddler may not yet have language at his disposal.

What does it mean to "leave a toddler free" to develop? It certainly does not mean abandoning a toddler to her own devices. It does not mean allowing a toddler to function without limits; limits give structure, parameters in which to develop. We try to follow Montessori's advice of "following a child" but we are unclear about the meaning of this when applied to toddlers. A friend, familiar with the ways of toddlers, recommended following the soul of the toddler – that grounded, earthy, very wise aspect – but not necessarily the spirit of the toddler which is everywhere.

Perhaps the secret lies in understanding the developmental needs of the toddler, including the need for clear limits, knowing how to prepare a functioning environment for toddlers and coming to a deep level of trust in their abilities.

Let's take one practical situation and try to apply these ideas

to a day-to-day situation. The situation is the transition from home to school – arrival at school.

Do we give the child as much time as she needs to make the transition? Do we allow the parent to quickly undress the child and deposit her into the classroom? Do we rush the child into an activity before the child is ready? Do we provide an area for this transition within view of the teacher after the parent has left?

Often we have our own agenda regarding the child's activity for the morning and therefore fail to take into consideration the child's need for time and space to make the transition. One way of honouring a toddler's needs is to accept that each child will make her transition the way she needs to if given the time and space to do so. By doing this we give the child the possibility of entering that calm, sacred place from which she can follow her intuited developmental needs within an appropriately prepared environment. This environment must have an adult who is herself healthy psychologically, who does not need to be needed by the children, who can give of herself as much ego support as each child needs to further their secure development.

When the adult can arrive to that calm, secure, unhurried place, then children can be given the time and space to allow their true nature to unfold. They develop into secure, adjusted, happy, healthy children. With children given this opportunity from the beginning, allowed to continue in their Montessori education, I think we have a good chance at seeing a change in the adults of the future. I think we will see adults who consider the needs of humankind, society, and their planet. I think we will have an opportunity to participate in great transformations. But the transformation must first begin with the adults who work with the children.