

Montessori: Now More Than Ever

By Dr Annette Haines

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Like everything in the universe, the human child is created in accordance with the ordered power of nature. The template is 'a very delicate and great thing which must be cared for. It is like a psychic embryo.'¹ All the organs of the body develop in the embryo in the womb so delicately, yet so prearranged, that scientists can now describe physical changes in the foetus day by day. Nature defends this physical development by providing a special protective growing place.

But the spiritual embryo does not have this strong defence, this shelter. It must develop in the world. Nature gives some help, the help of the maternal instinct... Yet this delicate construction must be completed in an environment that is not prepared for it to-day. So the spiritual embryo meets many obstacles. If the foetus had met with such obstacles, a monster would have been born. Each child would have a different physical deformity. It is because the spiritual embryo encounters obstacles in the environment that we get deviations from the creative line of natural development. These deviations from right development come from the beginning of life.

This is why the children of three years of age who come into your schools are not the sweet little angels they should be at this age. It was no different in Montessori's time. In a London lecture in 1946 she said:

*The nurses say they are devils and the mothers only want to give them to the nurses to look after. The teachers wonder what they can do with them. They all say that the children are impossible, that they are capricious, bad-tempered, destructive, inattentive, etc. Grown-ups say, 'I can live with cats and dogs, but don't give me children. They are too much for me.' I have heard many people say: 'No sacrifice is greater than to teach little children and nothing is more difficult.' Why is this so? Because the monster is there, not the child. We have a quantity of little monsters under our care.'*²

In 1970, Ayn Rand wrote an article called the "Comprachicos". In it she translated a fragment from Victor Hugo's novel, *The Man Who Laughs*:

*In China, since time immemorial, they have achieved refinement in a special art and industry: the moulding of a living man. One takes a child two or three years old, one puts him into a porcelain vase, more or less grotesque in shape, without cover or bottom, so that the head and feet protrude. In the daytime, one keeps this vase standing upright; at night, one lays it down, so that the child can sleep. Thus the child expands without growing, slowly filling the contours of the vase with his compressed flesh and twisted bones. This bottled development continues for several years. At a certain point, it becomes irreparable. When one judges that this has occurred and that the monster is made, one breaks the vase, the child comes out, and one has a man in the shape of a pot. (Victor Hugo, *The Man Who Laughs*)*³

Repressions come when the forces of growth, the creative forces of the psychic personality, are bottled up. Children are repressed

when they cannot have the special activity that nature imposes on the human personality in order to grow well. According to Maria Montessori, all the disordered psychic movements of children come from two sources in the beginning: mental starvation and lack of activity.

Now it seems unthinkable that today, in this modern information age, children would be suffering from either mental starvation or lack of activity. However, that is the case.

The Problem

There are an infinite number of deviations from normality; they take all kinds of forms. Today society has all kinds of new names for them: ADHD, behaviour disorders, sensory integration problems, and so forth. Montessori said these strange behaviours are all a form of wrong functioning.

Learning Disorders:

- ADHD
- Sensory Integration Dysfunction
- Dyslexia
- Dysgraphia
- Dyscalculia
- Developmental Articulation Disorder
- Developmental Expressive Language Disorder
- Dyspraxia (fine motor problems)
- Nonverbal Learning Disorder

Disruptive Behavior Disorders (DBD):

- Oppositional/Defiant Disorder (ODD)
- Eating Disorders
- Antisocial Personality Disorder
- Conduct Disorder (CD)

Conditions Causing Learning Difficulties:

- Attachment disruption
- Emotional trauma
- Anxiety
- Depression
- A home environment not conducive to learning
- A mismatch between child's learning style and parents' or teachers' expectations

They are not immoralities, they are illnesses. Montessori was, first of all, a medical doctor. She knew that bodily illness can come not only from malformed organs but also from malfunctioning organs. Some illnesses are congenital and not much can be done about those. But those that come from wrong functioning can be remedied by improving the living conditions, the diet, exercise, etc.

What today would cause children emotional trauma, anxiety, depression and so forth? This is almost a rhetorical question for everyone knows the answer. Yet no one seems to be able to do anything about it. Societies everywhere are moving in a very dangerous direction.

*'Contemporary man,' said Montessori, 'is like a child lost in the forest. He is not afraid of the things he can see, nor of animals that may be lurking about, but of little things, of the rustle of leaves and the echo of ghostly footsteps. He is terrified of things that do not really exist.'*⁴

We hear dire warnings of terrorism, of flu pandemics, global warming, nuclear proliferation, earthquakes and tsunamis, and chemical and biological warfare. We live everyday with fear and anxiety. Why shouldn't the children feel it too? We have violent images on our televisions and video games and we experience instability in our families, drug addiction, alcoholism, and violence. How much more so the children—they incarnate the world and make themselves out of it!

Children need nature. It can be said to be a childhood right. Yet, a growing number of professionals are expressing concern that children are spending less and less time outdoors. Children are losing access to outdoor space because of the many barriers and restrictions our modern environments contain. Traffic, parents' fears of children being abducted, kidnapped or physically harmed when playing outdoors too often sensationalised by the media. Children today suffer from a lack of play space due to the rising cost of urban land and the shift of public resources away from parks and recreation, and a curtailment of playtime, including time for free play outdoors; electronic media, air conditioning, and so forth, also reduce the amount of time spent outdoors. As a result of such restraints, Montessori would say, the child degenerates, and becoming irked with his prison, kills insects or small harmless animals. And we look on this as being normal, something natural to do, 'and do not notice that his soul has already become estranged from nature. We simply ask our children to adapt to their prison without causing us any trouble.'⁵

We do not realise we are asking them to adapt to a prison when we put them in front of the TV. We think we are entertaining them, doing something educational. There are even videos for babies now and Sesame Street is creating baby Big Bird for six-month olds.

An explosion of kidvids for the bouncy chair set has hit the market. These include "Baby Einstein", "Baby Mozart", "So Smart", etc. TV shows, such as "Teletubbies", aim at 18-month-old toddlers. These videos are peddled as educational tools to 'give your baby a head start.' The truth is, they are a video-tether that keeps baby out from underfoot.⁶

'Max is Learning German Right Now from a Video'

When parents pop in "Baby Einstein", they do not realise they are taking away crucial life experiences from their child, but they do love how it takes the baby out of their hair for a while. Listen to what parents say in testimonials about infant videos:

I love spending time with my boy but let's face it, there are times when you just have to have 10 minutes or so to yourself so that you can wash the dishes or do laundry; that's when you pop this video in. It's 25 minutes of entertainment that holds the attention of even very young children.

There are times I rewind it and play it again and again until I get the dishes done and order restored. My son is captivated (and hopefully learning something).

*The only thing I wish is that the videos were longer than 30 min.'*⁷

A study from the American Academy of Pediatrics shows that watching videos as a toddler may lead to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD, also called ADD in the UK) in later life. TV watching rewires an infant's brain, says Dr. Dimitri A. Christakis, lead researcher and director of the Child Health Institute at Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center, Seattle, Wash. The damage shows up at age seven when children have difficulty paying attention in school.⁸ It is estimated that in the United States twenty-six percent of US children younger than age two have a TV in their bedrooms—often watched from the crib, and thirty-six percent of families leave the TV on almost all of the time, even when no one is watching, according

to a 2000 Kaiser Family Foundation study.⁹

In the United States there are TV's in the cars now. We put a plug in their mouth, strap them in car seats and put a monitor in front of them. It probably will not be long before we put TV's on the ceilings over the baby's bed so they will lie on their back (that way they will not suffocate) and not bother us! I haven't seen this yet, but if I can think it up, I'm sure someone has invented it.

In 1907, when Montessori made her discoveries in San Lorenzo, children grew up in a world that was mostly quiet. There were no automobiles on the streets of Rome, just the clippity clop of horse drawn carriages. Entertainment took the form of story telling, and music and dance during leisure time. Now CD players and ipods, radio, television, videos and video games, electronic toys, computers and the Internet are radically altering the way our children experience reality.¹⁰ Television and other electronic media have been shown to destroy not only the capacity of the viewer to attend, but also to disable a complex of direct and indirect neural pathways, shut down verbal and analytic functions, decrease vigilance and create a trance-like fixation, a hypnagogic state that is antithetical to normal waking brain rhythms.¹¹ The simple act of watching the cathode ray of the TV or video screen creates a mind vacuum, regardless of the content displayed on the screen.

Technology and today's sedentary urban life-style of traffic jams, strollers and car seats, playpens and backpacks, concrete, asphalt and high rise apartments combine with the incessantly dulling effects of electronic media to create a brave new world of mental starvation and inactivity for today's little children unimaginable in Montessori's time.

The Cure

As a remedy for the many deviations of modern childhood, Montessori said we must 'give them another chance, another form of life. We must not attempt to correct their deviations, but we must give them a more normal life in which their bodies and minds can be active.'¹²

*One day one child may concentrate. Another day another child. Little by little you get the phenomena of real concentration and once this happens everything good comes from this concentration in interesting work, in which all their faculties are concentrated. This phenomena comes through interesting work with the hands...(and) from this concentration comes the real change in children.'*¹³

Montessori, herself, said she did not know what exactly happens internally to create this psychic phenomenon. But all the functions come together. There is an integration of the personality, not just an integration of the sensory functions, but of all the functions, sensory, motor and mental. This, she said, 'is like a fairy tale,' but only it is true. You can observe this fairy tale, this miracle, even now in classrooms around the world. Functions, she said, which could not function because they were repressed, begin to function. With normalization we still get the 'unification of all the energies and the creation of a new person.' When normalisation occurs, 'education is possible.'¹⁴

This, I think, is at the heart of the problem of education. It is not their fault, but traditional educationalists have no plan for nor even an understanding of the process of normalisation, and consequently education in the true sense, in the old sense, is no longer possible because of the extreme deviations of children today. In the United States we are no longer shocked when we hear of even very young children shooting other children; children doing horrible things. There is even discussion around 'how young' should the death penalty be enforced. The country that has carried out more documented executions of child offenders is the USA.¹⁵ Adults are clearly stymied by today's young children.

A Message of Hope

Montessori's is a message of hope. The difficulties are not due to nature. The children have difficulties because they have met

obstacles in their environment. Repression is lack of development and a repressed person cannot develop normally. Concentration is not possible in the family. Homes are not suitable places. Homes are designed for the comfort of adults and usually have a TV as the central architectural feature. Schools are not the place. They are designed to create Wal-Mart clerks and burger flippers—civil servants and consumers—rather than self-reliant, critical thinking individuals. ‘Schools,’ says Montessori, ‘do not prepare young people for social life but rather for earning a living. They train young people for a trade or profession. And all of them exercise their trade or practise their profession as slaves.’¹⁶

Nor are computers the answer. Microsoft, Google, Yahoo and Cisco have all agreed to censor the Internet because of the economic enticement of the Chinese market. If all we know is how to surf the net and if the Internet is censored by governments, all we know will necessarily be limited to what our governments want us to know.

I’m not saying the world is in a worse mess than ever. It’s been a mess a long time. For over 50,000 years civilisations have risen and fallen and the monumental ruins left behind by these past societies testify to the former wealth and power of their rulers, the scale of human ambition as well as the futility of that ambition. It’s as if the builders were saying, ‘Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!’¹⁷ Yet the builders vanished, abandoning these great structures they had created with such effort. How can societies that were once so mighty end up collapsing? And what very human mistakes may have contributed to their decline?

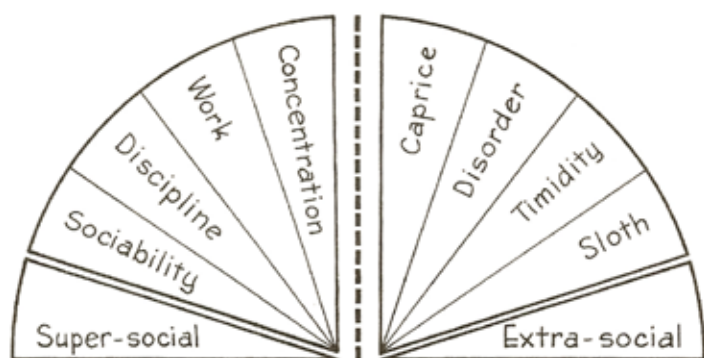
Montessori says, ‘there is a constant interaction between the individual and his environment. The use of things shapes man and man shapes things. This reciprocal shaping is a manifestation of man’s love for his surroundings.’¹⁸

Time and again, this shaping of the environment has taken an ugly and destructive form as inadvertently people inflicted damage on the environment: deforestation, strip mining, over-grazing, soil depletion, urban sprawl and so forth. In an attempt to possess it, we have exploited the physical environment for its material wealth and for its energies.

If we have a natural love of our environment, we have seemingly loved our environment to death. We certainly have not learned to live in harmony with it!

Montessori goes on to say, ‘harmonious interaction—when it exists, as in the child—represents the normal relationship that should exist between the individual and his surroundings.’¹⁹

And so we have another kind of normalisation which must occur: the normalisation of our relationship with the environment. And that relationship, when it is normal is one of love. There are two distinct paths we can take, says Montessori: towards love and peace or towards possession and power. One, she says, leads to Heaven and the other to Hell. And we do not take one or another of these paths through our own free choice. The choice we make in this regard really depends upon whether we have developed normally or abnormally.



Here is a chart of Montessori’s showing ‘normal and deviated traits in children.’²⁰ The perpendicular line represents normality, and she says normalisation is the child’s gift or potential contribution

to society. On the right side of the line are the deviations: from benign to severe, from capriciousness to disorder, to timidity, to laziness, to antisocial behaviour. On the left side of the line, coming from concentration, are work, discipline, sociability, and pro-social behaviours.

Love is the result of normal development. Do we love our neighbours or do we wish to dominate them? Can we love our environment and live harmoniously with the animals and plants, the rocks and the oceans or do we wish to own them and manipulate them to make ourselves rich off the spoils?

Montessori goes on to say that whereas we have explored the hidden potentialities of nature and exploited them to their utmost, ‘the abyss of man’s subconscious has not been scanned.’²¹ Man, as a spiritual being, has been left to the mercy of outer circumstances, and therefore has become ‘a destroyer of his own constructions.’²²

In an address given in London in 1939, she said,

*Men are better than they appear to be. Indeed human beings impress me as being extremely good and charitable, but they practise goodness and charity so unconsciously that mankind does not realise that it possesses these virtues.*²³

*Even if men are fighting one another today or have fought in the past,...they have nonetheless all been working throughout history to build the world that will be the world of peace.*²⁴

How could she make such a ridiculous, paradoxical statement? Because of a discovery she made almost 100 years ago in that slum of Rome. The secret of childhood was revealed to her by the children and the secret was the revelation of man’s fundamental instincts which, when allowed to develop naturally, are to love work and to love the environment. And this ‘love of the environment’ according to Montessori, is the energy behind all of man’s progress and is the source of social evolution. It inspires us to learn, to study, and to work. It is the vital force which drives the modification of the world, humanity’s cosmic task.

In another lecture in London in 1946, she says, ‘education today needs one reform. [If] it is to prepare man for the present, to our own time and the immediate future...the real purpose of education [must be] to prepare the orientation for the future man who will be on a new plane.’²⁵

Now this is what we need today, is it not? The creation of future men and women who will be ‘on a new plane.’ As much today as in Montessori’s time. Certainly, we have a few of these new children in our midst and they seem to be cropping up more and more as the children in our schools grow to become fine young adults. But we have not scratched the surface with our little Montessori schools here and there, mostly for a few privileged children of the upper classes. A new humanity is needed if we are to bring a change to a world tied in conflict by prejudices which cannot be eradicated.

Humanity is like a beast; the body is the adult, and the head is the child. You cannot persuade the Sunni to love the Shiite or the Muslim woman to take off her veil. These habits come from a deeper origin. They come from the child who made the adult long ago from his or her environment.

We must look to the children as the means of bringing a change to humanity which is now tied by prejudices and habits which cannot be eradicated.²⁶

Montessori for the Next Century

When we create the right kind of environment, we discover a new child. It is not really a new child, of course—the human race has not evolved. It is simply a human being growing up without obstacles, growing up naturally, normally, without deviations from the path.

But first we have to build environments to meet the needs of these children and young people. Montessori, in *Education and Peace*, throws out this rhetorical question:

What has the world done to date with regard to that period of human life that precedes maturity? What has been done for children, for young people?...What has the world, with its wealth of great constructions, with all its comforts, done on behalf of children? It is not enough to love in an abstract way; we must begin to do something concrete, something practical—to construct the supernature necessary for the life of children and young people.

For the young child, we need to create Casa environments, providing all that is necessary for the life of these children. For the school-age child, we must build something new and not offer the same environment we have prepared for the younger children. 'The little objects, the four walls of a house', she said, 'are too confining; older children need to go out and explore the world'.²⁷ And they need broader social horizons, for what is good at one stage is no longer helpful at the next. Our world, and the animals, plants, and man which inhabit it, form a study which 'should be obligatory for the children...from seven years of age.' She spoke of a 'huge teaching assignment'—to give the information that education has forgotten about recently. 'Give them God and give them man.' Which,

...Truly it is no new idea for it has been the natural plan wherever there was education in the real sense of the word, though lately fallen into disuse. The children are to be taught the creation of the world and man's place in it as far as these questions could be answered in light of religion and philosophy. (M. E. Stephenson, 1987 Lectures, Ohio Montessori Institute, Teacher Training Course)

The child, by the age of twelve, should be taking an active part in social life: producing, selling, earning a wage,

*...not in order to learn a trade, but because working means coming into contact with social life, participating in the building of supernature. These young people should engage in economic transactions, learn the value of money, and take conscious part in productive activities.*²⁸

Montessori, of course, talked of the farm, living and working on the land. But she had another helpful suggestion which might be applicable to more urban environments: 'The handicrafts,' she said, 'could be entrusted to young people.' This would give them worthwhile goals which would involve them in calm, serene, beautiful work. Handwork helps the young person develop his or her personality. While the hands are occupied in the production of fine craftsmanship, the mind is free to meditate and prepare for their future life in humanity.

Imagine what our world would be like today if conditions in the world were 'normalised.' International relations is perhaps the only place where the term is still used (in English, at least) in the way Montessori used it. We say, of two warring or contentious factions, that once the situation settles down, once things have stabilised and everyone begins to get along peacefully that relations between the two nations have been normalised. In this statement we see a grain of the Montessori idea, seldom heard anywhere else, that the normal state, the normal condition of mankind, is peace.

But we need to reach many, many more children and young people if this new humanity is to reach anything near critical mass in the world. And we need to do it quickly if we are to bring about 'a reorientation from the self-extinction-bound human trending, and so within the critical time remaining...'²⁹

I want every one of you, if you have not already done so, to take AMI Montessori training at some level. And then I want every one of you to go out and start a school, to build Montessori communities in Europe, but also in Asia, in South America—Africa and so forth. That's what Montessori meant when she talked about a 'universal movement for human reconstruction.' 'This movement,' she said, 'is not limited to any one nation or any particular political trend, because it aims at the simple realisation of human values.'³⁰

To mark the Centenary of Dr. Montessori's momentous discovery of the child, we... as members of the Montessori Movement, pledge:

- To reinvigorate the Montessori movement and restore it to its original vigour as a social movement and
- To place all the children in our world at the centre of society and to assist them in becoming the transforming elements leading to a harmonious and peaceful humanity.

We need to do this now more than ever. And, as they say, 'If Not Now, When?'³¹

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Notes

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