

## THE FOUNDATION OF THE HUMAN BEING



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Dear Friends,

Certainly it is not difficult, before this audience, to present the idea that prenatal time and first years after birth are the foundation of the human being. We easily agree that this period is the base on which all the subsequent, never-ending process of humanization/self-perfection will be supported. Montessori explains clearly the importance of the first years at the very beginning of her last book, *The Absorbent Mind* (but she gave the Italian edition the better title, *The Child's Mind*, i.e. *La Mente del Bambino*):

*The greatness of human personality begins at the hour of birth ... During this early period education must be understood as a help to the unfolding of the child's inborn psychic powers. The child's true constructive energy, a dynamic power, has remained unnoticed for thousands of years ... the men of our day make progress after progress in civilized life without noticing the treasure that lie hidden in the psychic world of infancy ...*

*Today we are beginning to see the value of the ungathered fruits, more precious than gold, for they are man's own spirit.*

*The first two years of life open new horizons before us, for here we can see the laws of psychic construction hitherto unknown. It is the child himself who present us with these revelations ... a kind of psychic life totally different from that of adults. Here is the new path! (1)*

*By the age of three the children have already laid down the foundations of their personality as human beings. (2)*

Of course, these spectacular results are not reached just because the time passes and children become three years old. Montessori clarifies that such a miracle happens only when children can live and work in a specially prepared environment. This is why Montessori tells us that she could envisage the possibility of a New Human Being who become the center of the education itself. She also underlines that:

*We do not develop only at university, but we begin our mental growth at birth and pursue it with the greatest intensity during the first three years of life. To this period, more than to any other, it is imperative to give active care ... If we follow these rules, ... we will see in the children the builders of our own minds ... who labour indefatigably in joy and happiness, at the work of constructing the greatest marvel of the Universe, the human beings. (3)*

During this period it is necessary to “**aid life**” so that the enormous inner potential can become a reality. Montessori continues saying:

*What has to be defended is the construction of human normality. Have not all our efforts been aimed at removing obstacles from the children's path of development, and at keeping away the dangers and misunderstandings that everywhere threaten it? This is education, understood as help to life, an education from birth which feeds a peaceful revolution and unites all in a common aim, attracting them as to a single center. Mothers, fathers, politicians: all must combine in their respect and help for this delicate work of formation, which the little child carries on in the depth of a profound psychological mystery under the tutelage of an inner guide. (4)*

Meditating about all this, I came to the conclusion that instead of giving advice about what should be done, nowadays it is more important to focus on **“removing obstacles”** when providing education from birth (and even before!) in order to really **“champion the cause of all children.”**

Today, year 2005, we are confronted with many great obstacles that can jeopardize forever the human development. At the same time, these great obstacles can be eliminated very easily because there is no money involved. On the contrary, we can save a lot of money while giving the children the possibility of living a better quality of life for themselves and our planet! What is needed is the **awareness of these obstacles** that are all concentrated at the very beginning of life and, for this reason, have such great destructive power as they interfere with the first fundamental, extraordinary acquisitions of the human personality thus compromising it forever. It is also interesting to notice that it is exactly today, when we have so much more knowledge about the process of human development, that we produce so many deviations.

We have received from Montessori a **“discovery of the child”** that psychology, cognitive and neurosciences confirm continually. This discovery and the educational practice born from it have been used in the last hundred years everywhere and in every possible condition – always with enormous success.

As Montessorians, we are committed to protect and **“defend the great inner powers children possess”**. (5) These powers are a gift of life to all children, but too often after they have lived with us for only two or three years, their potential is almost completely ruined. The little that remains of this incredible richness, called by Montessori, **“more precious than gold, the real spirit of the human being”** still allows us to achieve the miracles of our extraordinary science and technology! (6) But our personal happiness and our moral qualities do not progress in the same way.

The more we progress, the more we can see that many habits and practices contrary to human development are accepted everywhere, and even the natural guardians of our physical and psychological health, the medical people, do not take action against them. Many times, unfortunately, they even encourage such wrongs!

It is time for us to wake up, and it is my great hope that this Congress can strongly contribute to the comprehension of the difficulties/obstacles we put on the road of human development during its most critical time, the very beginning! In The Formation of Man, Montessori says:

*If the whole universe is governed by fixed laws, is it possible that the human mind be formed haphazardly, without any laws at all? There is a vacuum in our present scientific knowledge, an unexplored territory, an unknown factor – and this void concerns the process of formation of personality. (7)*

Since then this void has been replenished for what concerns the scientific knowledge, but there is not yet what concerns its practical application. “The basis of the reform of education and society, which is a necessity of our times must be built upon the scientific study of Man the Unknown.” (8)

Maybe it is necessary to clarify that we are not forgetting the many millions of children who still do not reach a mere survival and die every moment because of malnutrition and diseases that could also be easily avoided. But today I would like to concentrate our attention on the obstacles that have no justification in the so-called developed countries because in these places the new scientific knowledge is available and can easily be applied. These obstacles are:

- separation of the newborn from the mother after birth and during the following days;
- the wrong use of the pacifier;
- restriction of movement and observation;
- suckling at a bottle forever ... so the process of weaning never occurs!; and,
- wrong use of good technology.

These obstacles can be easily eliminated just with the goodwill of using the right knowledge that Montessori gave and that many other scientists have provided for us.

Of course, I would like very much to have time to talk about the incredible happenings of prenatal life and how easily we could improve, both physically and psychologically, this very special period of human life by just giving a few advices to perspective parents. But, as this is not possible, let us go immediately to the moment of birth where we find the first great obstacles to the good human development: separation from the mother immediately after birth and during the following days, and also pacifiers and the impossibility of both free movement and exploration of the new environment.

## **1. Separation of the newborn from the mother after birth and during the following days**

Today still, in many hospitals and maternity clinics exists a place called “nursery” where the newborns are brought after birth and kept there all the time, except when it is time for food, so they immediately become “**orphans**”.

This practice comes from the inexcusable ignorance of the fact that pregnancy is not only the time we pass inside the mother but that it has two periods equally important from physical and psychological points of view: the first nine months inside of the womb and another nine months outside of it. We distinguish these periods as **internal and external pregnancy**. Montessori has been a pioneer in understanding this important aspect of human development as it appears clearly in the conference given in Geneva in 1932 at the International Office of Education:

*The human gestation is not as brief as the one in the mother's womb. The children go through another kind of gestation in the outside world, incarnating a mind whose seeds are latent and unconscious within them. Delicate care is required to protect the children as they do their work, which they perform by means of experiences in contact with the outside world. The children perform work with inner wisdom, guided by laws like those that guide every other task that is accomplished in the realm of nature, following rhythms of activity that do not have the slightest resemblance to those of the aggressive adult bent on conquest. (9)*

This special work of incarnation is called by Montessori “psychic gestation” (10) and ...

*If in this delicate and precious period of life a sacrilegious form of enslavement of the children is practised, the seeds of life will become sterile, and it will no longer be possible for the human beings to carry on the works that life has summoned them to perform. The battle between adults and children takes place in the family and in the schools during the process that is still referred to by the time-hallowed word 'education'. (11)*

Montessori expresses again this powerful concept in the 1946 London course in the fifth lecture entitled, "External Pregnancy in Mammals and Human Beings":

*...we must come to the conclusion that the first two years of life are a psychic creation rather than a growth ... The acquisition of the first two years are miracles, but they depend on the child's environment. These first two years are like a nebula which forms a star that will be obedient to its orbit forever! (12)*

Why is this separation at birth so negative for human development? Modern research describes the newborns as **"the most powerful learning machine of the universe"** (13). They are also recognized as having **"a brain that is the most complex thing in our galaxy"** (14). These extraordinary human beings we call newborns are separated from the mother and left alone immediately after birth, exactly when they are more in need of help for the complex work of adaptation to the totally new environment! The separation from the mother means the sudden loss of all the points of reference of their previous life, the abrupt disconnection from the natural supportive system needed for physical and psychological survival! With no sensorial inputs for exploration/observation of the environment, wrapped in tight, wrong clothes and without any freedom for the body movement which they enjoyed even in the very limited environment of the womb! **What a pitiful situation!**

We know that the most important points of reference of prenatal life are related to the mother who has been the living container of this period. They are the constant sounds of her heartbeat, her respiration and, especially the sounds of her voice that has the power of conveying the emotional feelings toward the unborn child. We must also consider the sensorial richness of prenatal life, like the warm amniotic fluid touching their skin night and day, the floating of their bodies, the movement of their limbs. The maternal points of reference are essential for a smooth transition into the external environment and are an important part of the external/psychic pregnancy. So it is clear that the mother is the most important person for the newborns, the only person capable of really helping them through the demanding process of adaptation to external life. In addition to all this, her body also produces the only food newborns are expecting to receive. Fornari, an Italian psychoanalyst, says that:

*The newborns come into the external world with the faith that a nurturing breast exists so they are born with the capacity for hope or despair. This faith must be saturated by the presence of the mother. (15)*

Fornari also writes that:

*The **protosounds** (the voices of the mother and father heard during the last months of pregnancy) and the **protorhythm** (the mother's heartbeat) allow the **continuum** of the newborn's personal experience avoiding the trauma of **birth as separation**. (15)*

If we study evolution, as Montessori recommends so much, and consider the special characteristics of mammals, it is evident that the Wisdom/Superior Intelligence of Life has planned the passage from internal to the external pregnancy extremely well providing newborns with a mother! The ethnologist Niko Timbergen affirms:

*The just-born children are awake and vigil and are awaiting anxiously the contact with the mother. These newborn children are programmed towards things that must come from her. So we can affirm that a non-conscious mother or a newborn transferred too quickly to the nursery can put in a vicious circle the special links between them. (16)*

This is why it is so important to follow the recommendation of Montessori (London 1946): **“We must learn the laws of development, the work of construction of the human being.”** (17)

Also very remarkable is what Montessori wrote in 1949: **“There is a special bond uniting mother and newborn, almost like a magnetic attraction”.** (18)

I have been profoundly touched when I learned about the discoveries of Neurocardiology, a new branch of medicine. We have a fifth brain which is not in our head but in our heart (19). The HeartMath Institute found that:

*The electromagnetic energy produced by the heart forms a ‘torus’ or field that extends as far as twelve to fifteen feet from the body where it is generated. **The first three feet are the strongest.*** (20)

We all produce such an electromagnetic field so, during pregnancy the torus produced by the heart of the mother and the heart of the fetus come into connection establishing a very special bond between them. Keeping the newborns far from the mother more than one meter (the three feet), interrupts this special connection so when newborns are separated from the mother, who is the only necessary human being for them at this moment, they are alone, feel abandoned, are very unhappy and cry. As the crying of a baby is unbearable, we do not solve the situation according to the scientific knowledge we possess, of keeping mother and newborn together. We use something that proves to be another great obstacle on the road of human development, we give newborns a pacifier!

## **2. The use of a pacifier**

The pacifier is a clear demonstration of our lack of right knowledge as to who newborns are, that we ignore completely their vital necessities and their profound expectations. Pacifiers also show clearly that we believe that to suckle is the most gratifying experience for them, and this perpetual movement of the mouth is able to satisfy the hundred billion neurons (100,000,000,000) of their brains. The use of pacifiers also shows that we are not aware that:

*The newborn’s ability and desire of suckling is part of the evolutionary program for re-establishing, in a different but even more satisfying way, the preferential relationship of the internal pregnancy. Breastfeeding not only provides the best nutritional food but, due to the intimate way necessary for getting this milk, it provides also the possibility of a repeated daily experience of a “renewed and special attachment” keeping mother and newborn together for reciprocal physical and psychological welfare.*

The strict relationship with the mother; the vision of her loving face; the hearing of her voice, heartbeat and respiration – all are sensorial gratification added to the necessity of food. The great emotional side of breastfeeding can never be underestimated. Newborns are waiting for this encounter in order to have all their necessities satisfied. They are waiting to receive not only the milk necessary to survival and physical growth but, as Erich Fromm puts it, they are waiting for **“milk and honey”**. Body and mind are in need of a mother who can offer the right food necessary for optimal human development.



And, the 6-8 weeks immediately after birth, a time called ‘symbiotic life’ or external/psychic pregnancy, have a special meaning. Its successful completion produce the **“basic trust in the environment”** which means that forever this human being will feel the world as a positive place. Optimism is achieved!

The necessity of food that is especially prepared in the mother’s body is intertwined with the necessity of acceptance and love so that the newborns can be protected not only from physical diseases but, through the experience of the great joy coming from such a strong human relationship, they can love the new environment and love the fellow human people in it. With this understanding, it is easy to see that breastfeeding greatly surpasses the offer of a very good food and becomes **“the prototype of any subsequent human and social relationship”**. (21)

It makes possible the direct experience of how wonderful it is to be accepted in the arms of a loving person. It makes possible to learn the profound gratification of social life and how to respond appropriately.

Unaware of these great and so well-programmed happenings, we dismiss the Wisdom of Life and give newborns a pacifier, a piece of awful rubber intended to substitute for the human presence, for the tangible expression and incarnation of acceptance and love!

There is another very negative consequence in the use of a pacifier when we consider the development of language, one of the greatest achievements of our species! Keeping the mouth always occupied with the movement of suckling, we make it impossible for our children to manifest the first phases of language development. At birth children have a very limited possibility of voluntary movement – they can only suckle, swallow and cry. These voluntary actions make it possible for the newborns to perform the strong muscular effort necessary for bringing maternal milk from inside the breast into their mouth and then sending the milk down in order to digest it and for crying whenever they are in need of attention. This is really **“a survival kit”**!

But newborns cannot produce the sounds of human languages yet because their larynx is still in a pre-human anatomical situation. This is due to the size of their brain that is much bigger than the brain of our evolutionary ancestors, called ‘superior mammals’ and, more colloquially, ‘monkeys’. It takes a couple of months after birth for the larynx to descend and reach the appropriate human position, and this is when newborns can start emitting the sounds of vowels like **“a a a, o o o”**. When this happens, children are very surprised but also very happy and, through continuous repetition, they become aware that these sounds come from their own voluntary work. They realize that they are able to send out, whenever they wish, the same sounds they were hearing since prenatal life!

This incredible achievement, whose profound meaning is that the process of humanization of these children, is on the right way. They are starting the acquisition of a special, unique way of communication – the spoken language. As we all know, this capacity is also prerequisite for reaching the possibility of reflexive, abstract and imaginative thinking.

If there are no impediments, the second phase of this development happens at five months when children become able to put together the vowels with some consonants, the consonants that require the movement of the lips, like **m, n, d, t**, etc. So we have everywhere the words ma-ma, pa-pa, da-da. Are we aware that a pacifier impedes the first manifestations of such great achievements in the domain of spoken language?

We should not only make possible these acquisitions but should also celebrate them as the cornerstones of our evolutionary development.

Let us now consider some other obstacles that newborns find on their way, also immediately after birth.

### 3. Restriction in Movement and Observation

These are also obstacles in the road of optimal human development. Let us listen to Montessori:

*The first activity of the newborn, which may well be called a conquest, is the use of the senses. The eyes are bright and eager, not only affected by light. Newborns are **active seekers** in the world and **looking for impressions**. (22)*

*The newborns are endowed with an urge or need to face the outer world and to absorb it. We might say that they are born with **the psychology of the world conquest**. They are **in love** with the world. (23)*

It is clear that children come into this world eager to explore it in order to know it, to orient themselves in the new place and to make sense of it. Let us remember that they already have all the hundred billion neurons in their brain!

What do we usually offer in response to this necessity and eagerness for knowledge? With affection and best intentions we buy fancy clothes that restrict movements and cribs and beds with bars. Imagine the type of vision available for these children who, being in the supine position, must look night and day to a white ceiling. And, if this is not enough, let us think about the type of fragmented environment they can see because of the bars of their bed.

What happens to the psychology of the conquest and to the love for the external world that these children have inside? How can they use the human tendencies at work in this period, especially the human tendencies of exploration, orientation and order that are there exactly for helping them enter happily and securely into the new life? Montessori gave us, a long time ago, the right answer:

*One of the greatest helps that could be given to the psychological development of children would be to give them a bed suited to their needs ... Children should be given a low couch resting practically upon the floor, where they can lie down and get up as they wish. Like all the new helps for children's psychic life, a low bed is economical! In many families this reform in a child's sleeping habits has been achieved by placing a small mattress on the floor and covering it with a large blanket. Children can thus of their own accord go off cheerfully to bed in the evening and rise in the morning without disturbing anyone. (24)*

The low bed Montessori proposes is the true, first act of love towards the newborns! We, the people who work with children at the beginning of life, use these beds, and we can testify that newborns love them, look around with great interest, concentrate for a long time on the objects available to them. Sooner than we can think, they come out of these beds and also slither back there when they want to sleep. They have perfectly understood that it is comfortable to stay there when in need of rest.

What about another sensitive period, the one for assimilation of images that also starts at birth in order to make it possible for these children the storage of perceptions in the part of the brain that can be considered their personal illustrated dictionary?

Psychosomatic medicine explains to us that: "In the first phase of organization of our perception it is fundamental to have the possibility of coordination between motility and sensations." (25) In

this same book we find: “When the energy of the sensitive periods cannot be used in real situations, it loses its right direction and it remains fixed in a lower stage of development.” (26)

Simplifying these mental, evolutionary mechanisms, we can say that the internal program of the newborns must find in the environment the possibility of being satisfied so that the sensorial impressions can become perceptions, be stored in the memory and, when needed, be retrieved for their mental work.

CLOTHES are another tragedy for newborns during the first months and years of life. In some maternity hospitals, during the preparation courses, mothers are told to contain tightly the newborn because they need to be contained! What about the significance of coming out of the womb, called by Montessori **“the first act of independence”** and **“coming out of a prison”**? (27)

We can conclude that the basic needs of human newborns are:

- direct contact with mother;
- space for unhindered vision and movement;
- exploration of the new environment with all senses; and
- order in which actions are done to them and order in the environment.

More recently, many researchers and scholars have tried to better understand prenatal life, newborns and children of the first three years. None of them refers to Montessori, but they say exactly what she discovered so much before. Let me give just two examples:

- 1) From *A Primer of Infant Development*:  
*Infancy, the brief period between birth and the use of language, is the most critical period of human life, the period when all the basic human abilities and all processes of thought are formed. The newborn is a fascinating organism and can learn from the first day. The experiences of this period have a permanent effect on the following development.* (28)
- 2) From *The Scientist in the Crib*:
  - *in the crib is the greatest mind ... p. 1*
  - *at birth newborns have in their original program ... p. 7*
  - *they have a flexible brain ... p. 8*
  - *they are scientists capable of thinking, observing, reasoning, and actively research in the environment ... p. 13* (29)

#### 4. Suckling at a bottle forever ...

**The process of weaning never occurs!**  
**The second act of independence is lost!**

While suckling at breast or at a bottle in the arms of the mother is beneficial for both the physical and psychological development, still this special way of getting food is part of a special period and, as everything else in life, it becomes soon the moment for change. A new step in independence is reached, and we must be attentive to acknowledge it and make it happen.

Weaning time is clearly linked to physical and psychological achievements that are all intended to faster great advancements in the life of children. There is a sensitive period for weaning that shows



in the interest they have towards the environment, the beginning of the sitting position, the eruption of teeth, the increasing refinement of eye-hand coordination. With attention to these changes and with a little investment of time, we can help our children to become more a part of the human community, sharing not only the variety of food available in every environment but also the social value of eating with people.

It is important to underline that the new food requires a completely different way of using the mouth, a movement we call mastication, that goes from up to down different from the aspiration necessary for suckling. This movement is also the one needed for producing the spoken language.

The process of weaning should start at 5-6 months and be completed around 9-10 months exactly when the external pregnancy, or psychic pregnancy in Montessori words, is also over. The children of this age are greatly progressing in the process of humanization, have reached complete independence from the mother's body (womb and breast) and have also achieved freedom of movement in the space with the ability of crawling.

Unfortunately, many of us do not acknowledge all these advancements and do not offer the new experience of food at the right time. We just change what is in the bottle but not the way of eating so children continue to suckle for many, many years until when the bottle is changed with a mineral water bottle that has a very long top very similar to a nipple. These bottles are accepted as a necessity everywhere and in every circumstance, starting from the classroom setting. There are two obstacles for development in this situation:

- reduced experience and use of language; and
- addiction to a perpetual oral gratification at the expense of other, more advanced ways of interacting with the external world.

## 5. Wrong use of good technologies

There is no necessity of talking much to say that TV, video cassettes and video games are absolutely of no help in the development of the first years. We have now a great body of research demonstrating that these good technologies become wrong when used at the beginning of life, the time when the brain is growing rapidly and needs to create its optimal neural paths. We also now have the official confirmation from a study of the American Academy of Paediatrics showing that watching videos as a toddler (but many start as newborns!) may lead to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in later life. TV watching rewires the infant's brain and the damage shows up at age 7.

The Academy of American Paediatrics already in 1998 recommended that children under two years of age not watch TV at all. Today doctors also blame TV for increasing aggression and obesity in children.

Dr. Dimitri A. Christakis, lead researcher and director of the Child Health Institute at Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center in Seattle, Washington tell us:

*In contrast to the way real life unfolds and is experienced by young children, the pace of TV is greatly sped up. Quick scene shifts of video images become **normal** to a baby when, in fact, it is decidedly not normal or natural. Exposing a baby's developing brain to videos may over-stimulate it, causing permanent changes in developing neural pathways. (30)*

In the study of more than two thousand children, Dr. Christakis found that for every hour watched at age one to three, the children had a ten percent higher chance of developing attention problems in school. (30)

*Are parents who use infant videos such as Baby Einstein, Baby Mozart, So Smart, etc. aware of putting their children at risk for a lifetime of Special Ed classes, school "behavioural therapy" and Ritalin? (April 2004 issue of Paediatrics) 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. (Jean Lotus) (31)*

Yale University Television Researcher Dorothy Singer says:

*When one-year olds are playing with a toy, they can explore it, poke it, drop it. They are learning about space, about sound, and they are developing a sense of competence. Watching a TV show just does not provide the same sensory experiences. (31)*

This is exactly what Montessori said so long ago: "Children can only develop fully by means of experiences in the environment. We call such experience work." (32)

And, we know very well that children need to satisfy also the human tendency of repetition in order to reach exactness and self-perfection?

The family psychologist Mary Pipher in her best-selling books says that TV is one of the main culprits in the breakdown of family life and that:

*What TV does is to set children up for conduct disorders, for addiction. We have TV in the birthing room so the first thing a baby can hear when it pops out of its mother is a commercial! And kids may get 400 ads a day. (33)*

Brian Swimme maintains that television is teaching primarily consumerism and that:

*A three-year-old child, a typical child in America, is taking in ten thousand of these advertisements a year. These are put together by extremely intelligent people, using an understanding of human psychology and using art and the power of archetypal symbols – they are using all of this power in a way that swamps the defence of a young child. So they are being drawn into a particular worldview that eventuates in a demand for more and more, and the ongoing destruction of so much of the earth. (34)*

Twenty-six percent of U.S. children younger than two have 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. (35)

It is not necessary to continue, but let us remember that it is our responsibility to become aware of the obstacles which impede the right development of our children's lives. Montessori recommends this when she says:

*What has to be defended is the construction of human normality. Have not all our efforts aimed at removing obstacles from the child's path of development and at keeping away the dangers and misunderstandings that everywhere threaten it? This is education as help to life, an education from birth, which feeds a peaceful revolution and unites all in a common aim, attracting them to a single center. Mothers, fathers, politicians: all must combine in their respect and help*

*for this delicate work of formation, which the little child carries on in the depth of a profound psychological mystery, under the tutelage of an inner guide. This is the bright new hope for mankind. Not reconstruction but help for the constructive work that the human mind is called upon to do, and to bring to fruition, a work of formation which brings out the immense potentialities with which the children, the sons and daughters of human beings, are endowed. (36)*

And this is the bright new hope that we wish to support with our presence at the Congress today. Please let us help children enter and stay in the world with the joy arising from fulfilled expectations that are their birthright! We want to champion the cause of all newborns and children of the first years and make them all **free of obstacles** in their development in order to become the great **HOPES and PROMISES** they are supposed to become.

And let me add something Montessori tells us, and I like so much:

*Through long experimentation we have now arrived at much elimination of error and the possession of a key which can unlock for children the gates of a happy education. On our courage and perseverance and its use depends the future of humanity.*

Thank you for listening to my bad English! ■

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36. Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*. Clio Press Ltd. 2000. pp. 15, 16