

## TEN MONTESSORI IDEAS THAT CONVERT PARENTS TO THE CHILD'S POINT OF VIEW

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*This outline serves as a guide for Montessori teachers and administrators with the intention of moving parents into Montessori thinking so they can make careful decisions about their children's lives. Each of these topics would be used in parent discussion groups to begin to get the parents to see the world from their child's point of view as it evolves through ages and stages. These are topics to be developed in future NAMTA publications.*

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### Introduction

Parents are not replaceable; they are uniquely ordained to raise their children. Nobody knows the child better than the parents. They do not respond to scripts or how to instructions. They need principles, and Montessori principles are life principles. Principles are tools; they frame parent decisions. Most important, they impact on a parent's way of seeing child-rearing in its most positive light. They convert parents to the child's point of view.

When a child is introduced to the family, he or she can be seen all at once as a sleep invader, energy consumer, beauty destroyer, laundry maker, time eater—or as the living embodiment of potential, filled with innate tendencies, gifted with an absorbent mind. The parents have an infinity of critical choices in ways to respond to this absorbent mind. The particulars are minute. The consequences are gigantic. To the young child there is nothing bigger and more awesome than a parent; and to the new parent there is nothing more challenging than the unfolding needs and mystery of human development of their particular unique child's personality. Equipped with Montessori principles, parents can be converted so that, like you, the trained teacher, they see their children as sensitive, self-teaching builders of themselves, and, like you, the trained teacher, they see how to intervene only as a help to life because Montessori gives them the inside orientation to a very deep and totally essential journey.

In order to think in bite-size steps, let us take ten principles, ten revolutionary principles to present to parents so that they change their minds about childhood. These principles can lead parents into an altered state of flow, where they can enjoy their children by understanding them as developing beings through the ages and stages, through the changing developmental challenges. This understanding allows parents to predict the child's key psychological needs and characteristics. Montessorians have the keys to developing new vision implicit in the planes of development, the sensitive periods, the absorbent mind, and the human tendencies. Now how do we make these principles operational with parents? We have to make them want to know more by revealing the true secrets of childhood. Everyone loves to be let in on a secret! When the parent finds the life force (*élan vital*) that propels a motivated, productive self, it is parenting's most engaging vision. Here follows a list of principles that are chosen as those most helpful to parents.

### 1. The Developmental Continuum

Parents are attracted to the overview of child-rearing and encouraged by knowing that there is a way of predicting their child's future and improving it.

- Montessori is a consistent developmental psychology from the prenatal period through adolescence. “Adolescence is a second chance, but also your last chance.”
- Montessori schools respond to a universal view of developmental stages in young children. The child’s psychological development is the school’s actual blueprint for architectural expression and expansion.
- Each stage of development prepares for the next, enhancing the personality of the child; each stage is an inevitable unfolding from the previous and is in that way organically seamless.
- The Montessori pedagogy across the planes of development took one hundred years to develop.

## **2. The Child’s Love of the Adult**

Parents seldom consider the awe and high esteem children have for their parents, and they are moved by it.

- The first learning principle from out of the womb is that there is a connatural parent bond, an externalised dependency that is comparable to the peak romantic love of a young couple who cannot bear to be apart.
- The child wants to be with the parent all the time.
- The spirit of sacrifice is a direct outcome of love.
- As a result, the adult is matured.

## **3. Love of the Environment**

The parent is amazed by even a practical life presentation, non-verbal, done with the magic of the adult hands, capturing the attention of the child as he or she is being shown how.

- The prepared environment (the child’s love of the environment) is a parent’s best friend, a mediating guide between the child’s desire to be with the adult and the adult’s need to find activities for the child in order to co-exist in harmony, feeding the child’s need to belong and feel useful.
- There needs to be a Montessori corner in every room in the house.
- Almost every case of parent-child conflict can be addressed through conscious use of the prepared environment.

## **4. Sensitive Periods, Human Tendencies, and Outcomes**

Parents need to know the complexity of the child’s alertness, how children are constantly drawn into activities that are basic to their functioning as growing human beings, and what this means as a result.

- There is a time for every type of learning, and it sometimes only occurs once in a lifetime because the child’s love of the adult/love of the environment is the love of his or her life.
- The child’s learning is part of a fundamental nature; it is an intrinsic series of time releases—the human capacity for learning is made up of windows of opportunities, sometimes called critical periods by brain theory specialists, who realize that the brain usually controls sensitive periods.

- Human Tendencies reflect a universal quality for which we can show activities that stimulate and sustain the child's interest:
  - Abstraction
  - Orientation
  - Order
  - Exploration
  - Communication
  - Activity
  - Manipulation
  - Repetition
  - Exactness
  - Self-Perfection
  - Work

With the emergence of the adolescent, we are getting closer to seeing the outcomes of our work.

- Early Childhood Sensitive Periods:
  - Language—the one-time effort of a native tongue
  - Order—the importance of assisting the global absorbing mind with isolated offerings
  - Refinement of the Senses—the importance of universal aesthetic experience through keys or spotlights on reality
  - Movement—freedom to move
  - Small Objects—attraction to tiny objects, which are challenging to manipulate
  - Social Behaviour—the need to be with other children
- Elementary Sensitivities:
  - Language—the whys and wherefores, definitions and causes
  - Imagination—the ability to see beyond the present environment, the flaming ball of human consciousness that moves through space and time
  - Moral Language—the language of fair and unfair, just and unjust, right and wrong
  - Abstraction—the classification and ordering of systems of information and retrieval
- Noble Characteristics of Adolescents (Outcomes):
  - Reflection on the Transcendent—some spiritual orientation, idealism
  - Moral Development Based on Experience—sense of overall well-being of a group versus individual needs
  - Passion for Humanity/Sense of Mission—love of adult society and serving a purpose
  - Civility: The Balance of Freedom, Limits, and Social Participation—need to belong
  - Solidarity and Compassion—ability to identify with people who are different than themselves, to identify with the human condition

## 5. Positive Discipline

Parents need to realize that discipline is internal, formative, and not externally driven.

The Montessori concept of discipline converts negative to positive, not curtaining with punishment and not enticing through rewards, but rather helping the child to find an inner guide, to develop self-construction and self-motivation based on interest and true obedience.

- Common terms of discipline that everyone thinks about include spanking, time out, sticker charts, and rewards. The Montessori concept of discipline converts negative to positive, not curtaining with punishment and not enticing through rewards, but rather helping the child to find an inner guide, to develop self-construction and self-motivation based on interest and true obedience.

- Disciple meaning ardent follower, one who follows out of love, discipline in its true sense means “the art of establishing conditions favourable for cooperation” (Peller 99).
- Independence coupled with interdependence: working side by side. This is the notion of working for oneself but still understanding the needs of the whole community.
- Right use of the home environment as discussed above, under Love of the Environment.
- Substitution of the adult will, where the adult force-feeds the child, is a very undermining approach. Telling people what to do does not engender the greatest initiative. Many employers know this to be true of adults; it is true of children as well.

## 6. Flow/Normalization

If a parent can understand “flow” as ultimate concentration and engagement from the adult standpoint, then there should be a much clearer understanding of how a Montessori school produces flow for children.

- What is flow? Renowned psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as “what you feel when you’re doing things that are so enjoyable that you want to pursue them for their own sake” (7).
- Csikszentmihalyi identifies a balance of the activity’s challenges and the person’s skills as the main factors that produce flow; when challenges and skills are matched at a high level, the resulting state is flow (16).
- Csikszentmihalyi lists the conditions of the flow experience as follows (8):
  - Goals Are Clear: One knows at every moment what one wants to do.
  - Feedback Is Immediate: One knows at every moment how well one is doing.
  - Skills Match Challenges: The opportunities for action in the environment are in balance with the person’s ability to act.
  - Concentration Is Deep: Attention is focused on the task at hand.
  - Problems Are Forgotten: Irrelevant stimuli are excluded from consciousness.
  - Control Is Possible: In principle, success is in one’s hands.
  - Self-Consciousness Disappears: One has a sense of transcending the limits of one’s ego.
  - The Sense of Time Is Altered: Usually it seems to pass much faster.
  - The Experience Becomes Autotelic: It is worth having for its own sake.
- Flow is when you lose track of time because you are so involved with your work. When you are in flow, problems fade away and your involvement goes deeper with every step. Every adult can give examples of flow—skiing, knitting, reading, etc. Likewise, in the Montessori school, every child chooses activities that give flow. The environments are designed to create an optimal learning experience. Flow, applied to the adult stage, is able to help adults connect with Montessori’s concept of motivation in early childhood.

“Only “normalised” children, aided by their environment, show in their subsequent development those wonderful powers that we describe: spontaneous discipline, continuous and happy work, social sentiments of help and sympathy for others....

Its principal feature never changes. It is “application to work.” An interesting piece of work, freely chosen, which has the virtue of inducing concentration rather than fatigue, adds to the child’s energies and mental capacities, and leads him to self mastery....

One is tempted to say that the children are performing spiritual exercises, having found the path of self-perfectionment and of ascent to the inner heights of the soul.” (Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind* 257)

## 7. Imagination

Transport beyond the immediate—to the past or future—brings parents to a point of awareness that imagination is more than fairies, ghosts, Power Rangers, or Disney princesses.

- It is easy for an adult to imagine the extension of particle waves from where they are into space. The elementary child can imagine without conscious thinking.
- Montessori refers to human consciousness as a “flaming ball of imagination” (To Educate the Human Potential 10).
- The lure of the story introduced by the words “in the beginning...” never fails to arouse the six-year-old: “In the beginning, before your mother was born, before your father was born, before there were even people....”
- “To grow under the heat of flaming imagination” (Montessori, To Educate 11) is to harness a generative energy from within; it is a mental fusion of facts, not a memorization of subject matter.
- “From seven to twelve years, the child needs to enlarge his field of action” (Montessori, From Childhood to Adolescence 3). The child who once walked with his eyes and absorbed the interesting facts of the immediate environment now, at age six, walks with the mind’s eye, beyond the four walls of the classroom and home, beyond the neighbourhood, the city, the state, the country, the continent, the world, the solar system, the galaxy—into the universe.
- Imagination is movement toward either the infinitely small or the infinitely large.
- Imagination provides the “flexible grasp” of reason and understanding: “Not only can imagination travel through infinite space, but also through infinite time; we can go backwards through the epochs, and have the vision of the earth as it was, with the creatures that inhabited it” (Montessori, To Educate 10).

## 8. The Child in Nature

We can overcome “nature-deficit disorder” (Louv) through nature attachment.

- Nature supports healthy child development, increases social engagement, and motivates learning across the disciplines and planes of development.
- The earth speaks to those who take the time to listen and be present to the natural world.
- Early outdoor experiences establish a relationship to the natural world for life.
- Nature maximizes interaction and concentration with the environment on a spontaneous basis.
- Nature connects the elementary child with the magnitude of the universe.
- Contact with nature works best when it is informal.
- Nature appeals to the aesthetic sense of the adolescent and converts sensual to sensorial experiences of the outdoors.
- Nature helps connect young people to the celebration and ritual of food.

- The Montessori farm school is a viable alternative for adolescents.

## **9. Spiritual Role of the Family/Parent**

Parents have spiritual involvement in their child-rearing.

- The God Who Has No Hands story not only sows the seeds of the sciences, but introduces the dialogue between evolution and religion.
- Montessori's view of history includes a "final cause," whereby providence will help the world community achieve its highest goals.
- Work leads to self-perfection; every human has a right to work to construct herself, a process often thought of as "good works" or "great work."
- The child has an intrinsic metaphysical nature, asking questions about origins, creation, purpose, and God.
- Moral guidance is most effective when parents live their religion rather than just talk about it.

## **10. Montessori as Positive Psychology for Making a Future Contribution**

Montessori children will be gifted with optimism, a sense of being able to take charge of anything, overcome adversity, and see the world with new eyes, forging the conscience of their time, place, and culture. They become creative and cooperative agents of change for the better.

- With the power of the authentic self, our children will be able to see the truth in reality penetratingly.
- They will be able to adapt to different kinds of challenges and find concentration and productiveness based in a strong and independent work ethic.
- They will be joiners and decision makers.
- They will be lifelong learners because they enjoy what they do and learn in order to envision.
- They will be socialized because they have worked in an open multi-age group relationship where classmates are friends; they are supremely socialized.
- They will succeed in academics not because of the external motivation of grades and competition, but because they have in-depth understanding of the keys to the disciplines, which means they genuinely understand what they do. They can also work independently, budgeting their time because they are used to working in an open-ended learning situation.

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