

Preparation for Life: Montessori Infant-Toddler Communities

The first three years of life...
A time to explore...
A time to see, to touch, and to hear...
to establish trust...
and to begin the development of language...
A time to take the first steps towards independence.

Montessori education is based on observation. For over a century, Montessorians have been observing young children, and creating a learning environment that responds to the developmental needs of early childhood. For the next few minutes we will visit three Infant/Toddler Montessori programs: The Montessori Children's Center at Burke Rehabilitation Hospital in White Plains, New York, The Seton Infant Toddler House in Chicago and Hope Infant Toddler Community in St. Louis and observe how these schools are meeting the special needs of infants and toddlers.

With the benefit of a caring, nurturing environment infants learn faster than at any other time in life. Maria Montessori referred to this learning process as the "unconscious absorbent mind." By this she meant that infants have the ability to absorb knowledge and the capability to teach themselves.

The human brain has a remarkable capacity to adapt and change, but timing is crucial. While learning continues through the life cycle there are optimal periods which Montessorians call "sensitive periods."

During a sensitive period, a child can learn rapidly if the opportunity is provided. After the sensitive period has passed, he may find it more difficult to absorb these skills and information. For infants and toddlers the sensitive periods include: Movement, Order and Language.

INFANTS

Sensitive Periods: The Need for Movement

Infants are attracted to everything. They want to investigate and touch, to taste, to feel, and to see as they learn to use their senses and to become more agile in their movement. The Montessori infant environment is a safe place for exploration - a place where the child has the freedom to move without barriers or fear of being told to stop.

As the child explores the prepared environment, he satisfies his natural curiosity and begins to build a sense of confidence in his ability to discover what the world is about. The objects in the Montessori classroom are infant-

sized, designed to appeal to the child's senses. A variety of surfaces from carpet to tile to wood stimulate the infant's sense of touch and challenge him to act on developing motor skills. Pillows... mobiles... mirrors... infant-sized tables and chairs... Most parents immediately sense that the Montessori environment offers their children something special:

Mother:

My son who is almost three says he wants to do it all by himself instead of me doing it for him.

Father:

The environment itself, I find very nurturing, very calm. You just know that your children are being cared for in I think a very positive nurturing environment that teaches them how to be independent.

The most important part of the Montessori environment is the adult who is responsible for preparing this special environment. The adult is constantly observing the infant based on a broad knowledge of infant and toddler development. When the child is ready to take on new challenges, the environment can be adjusted to meet that need. At the core of every decision is a respect of the child's ability and desire to achieve independence. If a child can walk, he is not carried. If she can stand, she is diapered standing.

Particular care is also given to avoiding over stimulation of the infant's senses. In these early months of life, everything is new and the ability to tune out distractions is still developing. Infants are given the opportunity to explore the prepared environment with few interruptions.

Although this child is not yet ready to handle a spoon, the adult holds the spoon near the child's mouth allowing her to choose to bite. Infants are encouraged to begin feeding themselves as soon as they are ready.

Father:

There would be surprises we would have and we would go to school and say well they did this and we would find out that they had been working on either simple things like using utensils and these types of things - drinking out of a regular cup. Now that is something that at home you transition that slowly because you have to deal with spills and those types of things. Here it is just kind of part of the environment and they see other children doing it.

Nature is also emphasized at all levels of the Montessori curriculum.

Mother:

The emphasis on nature, they are constantly going outside, come winter, spring, summer.

Mother:

There were flowers in the classroom. Course there was a live animal in each classroom, whether there was fish or the bird or anything they had it was just really kind of made the kids feel a sense of comfort and a calming portion to it.

INFANTS

Sensitive Periods: The Need for Order

Children need a sense of order in their lives, which is brought about by the consistency of the adults in the environment. They need to know that the adult they feel comfortable with today will be there tomorrow. It is critical for all of the adults in the classroom to respond to their needs and assist them in meeting new challenges.

Father:

You know it is great for the children, especially at a young age, they get used to seeing a certain caregiver, they develop bonds with some but not all people so if there is a constant turnover it is very difficult to try to re-associate them to that.

Father:

I think it is important that children are able to have a sense of security and predictability in their day such that they are not constantly startled by new people and new layouts to the environment and I think that is reflected in the base philosophy of the Children's House. It is not an institution that the children are attending every day. It is almost an extension of their home.

Beds or areas to nap in the Montessori infant environment are accessible to the children without adult assistance, if a child feels the need for a nap. They are also free to wake up and begin their exploration of the classroom anew. The child is seen as competent rather than helpless.

INFANTS: Language Formation

Language formation is encouraged through conversation that respects the child's desire and ability to communicate.

When adults need to change a diaper or wipe a nose, they explain what they are about to do. This conversation shows a primary respect for the person

the child is and prepares the infant for the process of verbal communication.

When a child babbles or gurgles adults will often respond with words to help the infant or toddler to learn the rhythm of conversation.

During this sensitive period, infants and toddlers have a remarkable ability to develop language skills - an ability which will diminish as the child gets older.

TODDLERS

As the infant becomes a toddler, her mind is moving from the unconscious absorbent mind to more conscious choices and actions.

Separating from the primary caregiver is an important task for the toddler and each child's own timetable for making that transition is understood and respected.

The Montessori toddler environment employs more complex, developmentally appropriate activities.

While infants are attracted to everything, the toddler is developing the ability to focus on one activity and will also repeat an activity over and over until he is satisfied to move on.

This child is learning to prepare a snack of sliced bananas. The adult assists him in learning to slice the bananas and putting them in his bowl. Soon he will master this skill and perform it on his own.

Toddlers are continuously developing independence in caring for themselves.

At lunch time, toddlers set the tables. They thrive learning to do the things they observe their parents doing at home.

Materials that develop small motor skills and large motor skills are available to build dexterity and coordination.

Books and songs that involve repetition are particularly enjoyable to the toddler and stimulate her mind to practice newly developed language skills.

Teacher:

Now we have the?

Child:

Dandelion

Many materials and activities focus on vocabulary development.

Child:

Hasta

Teacher:

The Hasta

Toddlers are beginning to notice the relationship between cause and effect and particularly enjoy activities that build on this relationship.

The adult observes each toddler and introduces new activities when a particular child seems ready to move on to more challenging work.

The toddlers rapidly growing mind thrives on difficult challenges.

Mother:

It really impresses me every time I sit down to observe the children how it just brings a smile to my face when I see Aaron working so hard and having fun.

Father:

One of my daughter's first phrases when she was 23 months was I can do it, letting me know that she could do it and that I was getting in her way and that perhaps if I stood back she could cut the fruit, put the shoe on or do whatever else needed to be done. So she was telling me, the parent to perhaps take a step back because she had learned in class that she could do it.

Father:

I saw the value once our children were in the environment and started learning and started doing new things and just growing. I mean their development was astonishing.

Infants and toddlers thrive on the freedom and independence of the

Montessori classroom. The consistency and daily structure allow them to feel relaxed and confident in their activities. They are nurtured by the safe boundary less environment and the sense of trust the adults in the classroom have in their ability to accomplish the basic tasks of life.