

In the Beginning:

The First Years of Montessori



Title Quote on Screen:

*Is there anything more precious and more vulnerable than a newborn...
more deserving of a family's love and a society's care?*

Newsweek Special Edition on Infants

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The first three years of life...

A time to explore...

A time to see, to touch and to hear,

to develop trust and

to begin the development of language

A time to take the first steps towards independence.

But how do we nurture this growth during this important period when the brain is developing faster than at any other time of life?

Montessori education is based on observation. For nearly a century Montessorians have been observing infants and toddlers and creating a learning environment that responds to the developmental needs of early childhood. For the next few minutes we will visit two Infant/Toddler Montessori programs: The Burke Center in White Plains, New York and Hope Montessori in St. Louis, Missouri and observe how these schools are meeting the special needs of infants and toddlers.

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fade up on title: **INFANTS**

Given a loving, nurturing environment, infants learn faster than at any other time in life. Maria Montessori referred to this period as the "unconscious absorbent mind." By this she meant that infants not only have the ability to absorb knowledge but also the capability to teach themselves.

She also found that children go through "sensitive periods", sometimes called "windows of opportunity", where they have a particular ability to absorb certain types of knowledge and abilities. During a sensitive period, a child can learn rapidly if the opportunity is provided. He may also find it more difficult to absorb these skills and information after the sensitive period has passed. 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, she satisfies her natural curiosity and begins to build a sense of confidence in her 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 try out developing motor skills. Pillows... mirrors... low wooden steps... mobiles...tiny tables and chairs...tunnels to explore. Most parents immediately sense that the Montessori environment offers their children something special:

Parent Voices over classroom images

The facility... everything was very geared towards young children. Everything from the furniture to the location of pictures and everything else.

The infant program particularly was very different from other places I have seen, letting them try, letting them be very independent at a very young age. The beds, their ability to go in and out when they want to. Sitting at a table and chair at a very young age. I just found it very much contributing to a child's self confidence and ability that yes he can do it.



And I think part of the initial things that you get are just how quiet it is, how peaceful it is, how happy the children are, how happy the staff is.

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 for 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. Any achievement is considered preparation for the next step.

Particular care is also given to avoiding overstimulation of the infant's senses. In these early months of life, everything is new and the ability to tune out distractions is still developing. The adults in a Montessori infant classroom respect the infant's ability and need to follow her own curiosity without being interrupted. The effort is focused on observing the child and ensuring that the environment offers challenges that are developmentally appropriate. When a child masters a new skill, the adult may introduce new materials that build upon that skill and increase the challenge.

Parent Comment



I think it is calmer here because the caregivers assist the children. They don't try to make them do something that they don't want to do. They help them get some work or maybe show them how to do it or give them something (phone rings) they can investigate.

Although this child is not yet ready to handle a spoon, the adult holds the spoon near the child's mouth allowing him to choose to bite.

An opportunity to enjoy a walk in the woods, provide these children with a chance to wonder about the natural world around them.

The child is trusted to communicate her own wants and needs and is given the freedom to choose her own curriculum avoiding over stimulation.

INFANTS

Sensitive Periods: The Need for Order

Parent comments

The caregiver's truly respect the children and they follow their schedule. When they are hungry, they eat. When they need to sleep they get a nap. They don't try to put everybody on the same schedule.

*** I was very pleased with the environment. How calm it was and soothing. It was very clean. I was very surprised with all these babies how quiet it was. And I like the setting as far as the beds. They didn't have the cribs and they didn't have the swings or the playpens that children would go into for an hour or so at a time.*

Children need a sense of order in their lives to focus on learning. Infants need to feel secure that the adults in the classroom will be consistent. They need to know that the adult they feel comfortable with today will be there tomorrow and that all the adults in the classroom will respond to their needs and assist them when necessary in meeting new challenges.

Beds 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

Sensitive Periods: Language Development

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 prepares the infant for the process of verbal communication.



When a baby babbles or gurgles, adults will often respond with words to help the infant learn the rhythm of conversation. During this sensitive period, infants and toddlers have a remarkable ability to develop language skills which will diminish as the child gets older.

TODDLERS

As the infant becomes a toddler her mind is moving from the unconscious absorbant mind to more conscious choices and actions. The toddler environment involves more complex developmentally appropriate activities.

This child is learning to prepare a snack of sliced bananas. He is allowed to cut the banana. serve it and

clean up after himself. The adult assists him in the peeling of the banana which she has observed is too challenging for him at this point. Rather than peeling the banana for him, she loosens the peel so that he may enjoy the sense of independence in completing the task. Toddlers strive to learn simple life skills they see modeled by their parents at home and by their peers in the classroom.

Parent Comments



Yeah, I think mostly as a new parent, I would have rushed to help him to do things where now I just kind of sit back and let him do it himself unless he asks for help or I see he's getting frustrated you know then I will approach him and try to help him learn versus doing it for him and that in observing how the staff does it here and how he interacts with the other children.

And in this environment, she seemed to really thrive. She was able to dress herself, not completely, she can't tie her shoes and that kind of thing, but she likes to put on her own clothes and pick out her own clothes and she really likes that.

It's how they learn how to learn with the Montessori approach. Everything is out there for their taking. They can do what they want to do and develop at their own rates. That is not something other children are able to do.

This boy and girl have become skilled at setting the places for their classmates at snacktime. Toddlers enjoy big work, moving the table and chairs into place and doing the important job of setting the table.

Parent Comments

Well, I guess the thing that I find amazing is her independence at such an early age. She has developed excellent daily living skills. It seems to really help her self esteem. She gets her own place at the table and cleans up after herself. She really becomes independent. She doesn't seem to throw temper tantrums like other kids her age because she has really learned to do things herself.

And it was just amazing how they were helping each other and that they would take their meals afterwards and be able to clean up after themselves and set their place at the table. It was just amazing.

This boy is watering the garden using a watering pitcher. He is fascinated by the way the spout works and experiments with the different ways the pitcher can be poured. The freedom to teach himself the function of the pitcher is one of the strengths of the Montessori respect for the child's ability to teach himself. He is free to work with the material for an extended period of time without interruption.

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

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

The adult observes each toddler and introduces new activities when a particular child seems ready to move on to more challenging work. The toddler's rapidly growing mind thrives on difficult challenges.

Toddlers are beginning to notice the relationship between cause and effect and particularly enjoy activities that build on this relationship. Turning a light switch or a water faucet on and off delights the toddler. This girl is enjoying the way the ball rolls through a maze and pops out at the bottom after she hits it with the plastic mallet.

Parent Comments

I guess I really underestimated her as an individual and from looking and seeing what they do here I can see that she can do so much more than I originally thought she could. When I see other kids and what they are going through, it seems like parent's tend to hover and don't allow their children to have independence and I think at the Montessori here, I can see that she can do all this stuff, so I allow her to do that at home.



Infants and toddlers thrive on the freedom and independence of the Montessori classroom. The consistency and daily structure allows them to feel relaxed and confident in their activities. They are nurtured by the safe boundaryless environment and the sense of trust the adults in the classroom have in their ability to accomplish the basic tasks of life.

Closing Quote:

Let a child's own interest set the pace...

Maria Montessori