

By Judi Orion

The Untapped Potential of the Absorbent Mind

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I would like to begin today's session with a brief reminder of one of the basic frameworks of Montessori's approach to human development. That framework, as you know, is the Four Planes of Development. This framework has provided the structure around which Montessori education has been based for 100 years. To review the framework, the four planes consists of four six-year periods from birth to 24 years, some planes sub-divided into sub-planes of three years each. Each plane and/or sub-plane has specific characteristics, specific environmental needs and specific training for the adults working with children in the various groups. I'm going to focus my talk on the first sub-plane of the first plane of development – the years from birth to three, the period of the unconscious absorbent mind.

In 1949 Montessori wrote: *"It is clear that there must be a secret fact in the psychic creation of man - if we learn everything through attention, volition, intelligence - how then can the child undertake his great construction as he is not yet endowed with intelligence, will power, attention. It is evident that in him there acts a mind totally different from ours and that therefore a psychological functioning different from that of the conscious mind can exist in the unconscious."*

She went on to realise that under the age of three the absorbent mind functions unconsciously, that the child is not aware of the construction taking place. As the child gains experiences, understanding and motor skills, she becomes more and more aware of the acquisitions being made. Dr Montessori said that the mind of the child under three functions unconsciously and that over three the mind functions more and more on a conscious level.

Montessori, from her clear, objective, cumulative hours of observation of young children realised that young children – children under the age of three – are not merely spending time until they become 'old enough' to learn; they are active from conception on in their own construction. They have little control of their physical body and yet their mental powers are taking in information which they integrate and use in their process of self-construction. As they develop motor control they are able to utilise their physical body in this self-construction.

As the child gains motor skills she reaches out to the environment, to attempt with her limited motor skills, to comprehend this environment into which she has been born.

This active infant, both physically and psychically, attempts to explore with whatever capacity she has, so as to gain knowledge and comprehension of her world.

What can we do to support a child during her stages of development so that she can use this unlimited power to build the foundation upon which all subsequent learning scaffolds? For it is clear to neuroscientists today, as it was clear to Dr Montessori 100 years ago, that the foundation of one's personality is created in the first three years after birth.

What must this environment now provide in order to take advantage of the absorbent mind? Life is the material the child needs – life in all its various manifestations. Life and a prepared space to explore this life. A child under six primarily explores using the senses; therefore, we must provide opportunities for continued sensorial exploration. This exploration of life is again real life, not make believe life, not cartoon figures, and not information that a child cannot comprehend sensorially. We can save all of the experiences that require the use of the imagination until the second plane of development.

Let's think, for a moment, about the three major acquisitions of the child under three: movement, language and independence.

We study movement development; we provide materials and opportunities to aid this development. We study the development of language and create lovely language materials that appeal to young children. We create practical life materials, designed to aid 'the growth of independence'.

We observe children reach the age of two and a half or three being able to walk and use their hands with a certain amount of dexterity. They can use their language to express their needs, their thoughts and ideas. They reach a certain level of functional independence.

When this development does not reach exquisite levels, it is easy to point the finger at the home environment, at television, video games, fast pace of life, too many structured activities and not enough 'free time', etc. But I think each of us could, perhaps, find ways of improving our own work with the children, thereby better serving this absorbent mind.

It is important to be clear that we are serving this power of the absorbent mind – not creating it, not doing its work, but serving this power by preparing an exquisite environment – both the physical and the human environments.

Let's examine then how we might do this. In training we discuss the spiritual embryonic period – that period of the child's life between birth and two / two and a half when the child creates her 'psychic organs'; the 'organs' of movement, language, independence.

And again I quote Dr Montessori: *"It follows that the newborn child has to do a piece of formative work which corresponds in the psychological sphere to the one just done by the embryo in the*

physical sphere. Before him there is a period of life different from that which he led in the womb, yet still unlike that of the man he is to become. This postnatal work is a constructive activity which is carried on in, what may be called the 'formative period', and it makes the baby into a kind of 'Spiritual Embryo.'" (The Absorbent Mind, Chapter 7, The Spiritual Embryo)

Just as the physical embryo constructed the physical organs of the body from the 'materials' provided by the prenatal environment, the psychic or spiritual embryo takes from its environment what it needs to construct itself. If there is an environmental issue in the physical embryonic stage, if the environment does not or cannot provide all the materials needed for the necessary construction, then the embryo is left with 'congenital malformations' – formations badly made from the beginning. This analogy holds true for the spiritual embryo as well. If the environment does not provide the necessary materials, then the psychic organs being constructed will not be as well formed as they could have been.

"The first formative years of the child are of exceptional importance in the formation and evolution. They embody a nucleus of energies and capacities that must be assisted to develop wholesomely, for if they deviate, the consequences are irreparable."
(Maria Montessori, The San Remo Lectures, 1949)

Would that be so bad? Is it so tragic that a child could not develop to its full potential? If our mission as Montessorians is to change humanity for the better – and I believe that is our mission – then we must provide the best possible environment so that each and every child in our care can reach their full human potential. Think of the possibilities for humanity if each and every one of us was a fully realised human being.

Let's take a look at each of these acquisitions and look more deeply at what the physical environment could offer.

BEGINNING WITH MOVEMENT – IMPORTANCE OF HAND

We know that around three to four months the infant 'discovers' her hands. Any time the hand crosses the field of vision, the baby stares intently at this instrument until the hand jerks beyond the field of vision. It is as if the baby is asking, "what incredible capabilities do you have as a tool?" as she stares so carefully at her own hand.

To aid the perfection of reaching and grasping, the baby needs something to reach for and grasp. Something that is small enough to put the hand around, something that is attractive so as to catch



the baby's attention. Something that is safe enough to go into the mouth as what the hand grasps the mouth then explores.

This grasping ability begins with a palmar grasp, gradually moving to a grasp incorporating the thumb and gradually refining to a pincer grasp. These changing abilities are created neurologically. Once the primitive pincer is neurologically possible, around nine months, the baby needs the environment to refine this. Otherwise, this ability remains rather primitive.

Once the baby is up on hands and knees, the hands are used to help with locomotion. Crawling and creeping need the cooperation of the legs/feet and arms/hands. At this point the baby crawls or creeps to the desired location and the hand then reaches for and grasps the desired object. A bit later the hands are used to pull erect and then to manipulate. For a short while the hands are still used when the baby does attached walking. Once the child is walking independently, the hands are available for a completely different kind of work. The child becomes a collaborator, working along side an adult, until they gradually acquire enough functional and emotional independence to work alone.

Do we offer babies enough challenge for their hand development? We have all the lovely eye-hand coordination materials offered in training. These attractive wooden materials are expensive, but easy to buy; they look pretty sitting on the shelf. However, these materials do not engender concentration. Once a child has mastered the hand skill involved in the material, the material no longer holds interest for the child. They either ignore them, or in lieu of other possibilities of work, they choose them and find something 'very creative' to do with the materials. Knowing that neurologically the child can make a primitive pincer by nine months of age, it is up to the adults in the child's life to challenge this ability so that it continues to refine.

GROSS BODY MOVEMENTS

From a supine or prone position the young child absorbs the movement patterns she sees in her life. These patterns are absorbed very early – long before the child is able to make the movements herself. She watches, incarnates the patterns, and once sufficient motor skills are developed, she performs the movements in the way in which they were absorbed.

One of our colleagues whom many of you know walks with a limp – with her right leg unable to bend. This happened when she was in her early 20's and so to her is a very natural way of moving. She has four children. All four children began walking with a limp. After a few days of walking with a straight right leg,



they each realized they could bend their right leg also, and so their movement pattern changed. But the pattern they had absorbed from their mother was the pattern they initially used when beginning to walk independently.

Once a child walks, do we offer enough opportunities to refine this ability. Do we offer possibilities for climbing, sliding, jumping, hopping, riding, pushing, pulling, running?

WHAT ABOUT LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT?

From studies in neurophysiology we know about the concept of 'windows of opportunity' in brain development. It seems as if there is a 'window of opportunity' when the brain is hardwired for vocabulary. The time frame for this is from around ten months until just past the second birthday. If the child is in a rich language environment, full of clear, precise, explicit words, the brain is hardwired for dealing with vocabulary, making subsequent learning of vocabulary more possible. If the child is in a loving but language-poor environment, the same possibilities will not be present.

We know that all children babble universal language sounds in the beginning. Around six months a child begins to babble only those language sounds contained in their language environment. If a child's language environment is bilingual, then they will continue to babble the sounds of both languages (providing they are spoken to in both languages). This is the age that deaf children stop babbling.

During the end of the first year, when the baby is babbling complete conversations – with intonations, exclamations, etc. – we often miss those first words. Lise Eliot, neuroscientist and author of *What's Going On In There: Brain Development in the First Five Years*, contends that embedded in all that babbling during nine to twelve months are often clear words but we don't expect them and so we don't hear them.

During all the first year – when the child is actively absorbing language patterns, our language needs to be clear, precise, articulate, devoid of slang. This requires each of us to analyse our own language and work on deficit areas. Are we the strong, silent type? If so, we may have to force ourselves to use more language with the children. Are we a chatterbox, offering a running commentary on our actions? If so, we may have to reduce the chatter.

Do we enjoy music on all the time? If so, we may have to turn the volume way down or eliminate this background music most of the time. Lise Eliot mentioned earlier, also contends that children under the age of six, but especially under the age of three, are not neurologically able to screen out background noise and focus on language sounds. In communities of children (both nidos and infant communities) adults often play music for themselves. Music should

be a daily part of the life of the community but not as background noise.

Once the child begins talking, do we listen, do we offer precise vocabulary, do we play with words, giving synonyms? Remember the language material is language material only if someone is giving the language. Otherwise, they might be interesting manipulatives, they might offer the possibility of integrating new information into their knowledge base; however, unless someone is there to offer language, the vocabulary does not increase.

Do we read or recite poetry? Do we have conversations? Are we really interested in each and every child's language expression? Do we provide an environment in which the child wants to share with us what she knows and is interested in?

Language needs to be natural, exciting yet controlled, playful, real and in tune with each child. We need to examine our own language usage and become a better role model from which to absorb language. We must remember we are the most important language material in the environment.

The third major acquisition of the first three years lies in independence; children during these early years master certain abilities, giving them the foundations for functional independence. They learn to feed themselves, undress, then dress themselves, bathe themselves. With the acquisition of motor skills and then the refinement of those skills, children master basic abilities in caring for their own bodies. This acquisition of functional independence gives them human dignity, the ability to take their place in humanity knowing they are capable, having abilities like everyone else.

Within a Montessori context we refer to these types of activities as 'activities of practical life'. These are the activities that humans do every day to care for themselves and their environment. Small children move beyond being interested in their own bodies to being interested in doing what adults do to care for their environment: to water plants, to feed animals, to prepare food, set the table, eat together, clean up. To dust and sweep and mop. Our challenge in allowing tiny children to do these activities is finding and preparing materials small but functional. We then must give children the idea of how to use these materials, a presentation, but a presentation broken down into manageable steps. We must also understand that for a while, young children like to work with us – so the practical life activities begin as collaborative work. As a child's motor skills refine, as their comprehension improves, as they become more emotionally independent, the practical life work becomes more and more the child's independent work and less collaborative. Gradually, by the age of two and a half, children enjoy the challenge of doing these activities by themselves. This work then aids a child in their independent functioning.



Practical life activities and language activities are the two most important activities in a community of young children. They are the activities that will engender concentration, sustain their interest, build their intellect.

The physical environment, no matter how exquisitely and beautifully prepared, is not the most important environment for young children however. A human child, does develop movement, language, and independence through the use of the prepared physical environment. But they are human children and therefore need an environment in which they learn to be human – acquire those characteristics that make us human. And herein lies our most critical preparation and contribution. If we want our future humanity to be loving, considerate, caring, compassionate then we must provide an environment in which these qualities are evident. Children must be treated with compassion if they are to become compassionate; they must be treated with respect if they are to become respectful.

It is believed that the neural structures for feeling empathy are created by the age of two and a half. Do we create empathetic environments so that children have the possibility of creating these structures from their daily experiences?

The Human Environment lays the psychological foundation that allows children to grow, to become human.

WHAT DO THE CHILDREN ABSORB FROM US?

"It is true that the child develops in his environment through activity itself, but he needs material means, guidance and an indispensable understanding. It is the adult who provides these necessities.... If (the adult) does less than is necessary, the child cannot act meaningfully, and if he does more than is necessary, he imposes himself upon the child, extinguishing creative impulses."
(Maria Montessori, *The Child in the Family*)

In this process of becoming an ideal role model from which young children absorb Life we must examine, continuously, various aspects of ourselves:

■ First of all, our Language

Do we understand the developmental stages of language? Are we providing the best language model(s) – bi or multilingual if that is a possibility, with rich, precise vocabulary, no slang. Do we use rich, descriptive adjectives? Do we exude a love of language?

■ Next, our Movements

Is our pace, our rhythm such that a tiny infant can easily absorb human movement patterns? Are our movements graceful or clumsy? Are we able to analyse necessary movements for any activity and remove superfluous bits?

■ Then, our understanding of and belief in Independence

Do we desire for infants and toddlers to be independent from us? Do we need to be needed by them? Are we able to appreciate their accomplishments in functional independence and support their drive to that end by giving them the extra time they need to do things by themselves? Do we take the extra time needed to prepare the environment with the end goal of the children using it independently?

■ And finally, our approach to LIFE

Are we joyful, happy to be alive each and every day? Do we anticipate the good parts of life, rather than focus on the challenges? Are we flexible? Can we alter our daily routine to celebrate the first snow fall, to celebrate the return of the sun after a week of rain? Do we maintain a sense of humor – never laughing at children but with them? Are we able to invest time, energy, money in the preparation of an exquisite physical environment and then 'give it to the children' for their development? Do we understand the importance of setting

limits on children's behaviour – limits set from a point of love and not from anger? Most importantly, do we accept each and every child 100% for the expression of their humanness? Or is our acceptance conditional?

"No one can predict what the destiny of any individual will be. The only thing one can do is offer every child the opportunity to develop according to its own potentialities, and to acquire new perspectives that will facilitate its exploration and internalisation of the cultural world around it. This is the purpose of the prepared environment..."
(Mario Montessori Jr., *Education for Human Development*, p. 58)

How full is our life? Do we read, dance, sing, go to movies, exercise, vote, work with our hands, worship or pay devotion to / connect with a higher power, live in harmony with ourselves, our colleagues, the children, our species, our planet? Are we 'exquisite material' from which a child absorbs humanness?

"Since we have the means to guide the child, it is clear that the formation of man is in our hands. We have the possibility to form the citizen of the world and the study of the young child is fundamental to the peace and progress of humanity."
(Maria Montessori, *The San Remo Lecture*, 1949)

"To this period, more than to any other, it is imperative to give active care. If we follow these rules, the child instead of being a burden, shows himself to us as the greatest and most considering of nature's wonders! We find ourselves confronted by a being no longer to be thought of as helpless, like a receptive void waiting to be filled with our wisdom; but one whose dignity increases in the measure to which we see in him the builder of our own minds; one guided by his inward teacher, who labours indefatigably in joy and happiness – following a precise time-table – at the work of constructing that greatest marvel of the Universe, the human being."
(Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*)

Children embrace the life that is lived around them, take in the opportunities given, incarnate this life and these opportunities as the 'normal' way Life is. Because of this tremendous power, the power of the absorbent mind, we have the opportunity to give children a Life rich in all its manifestations, life in all its beauty, its challenge, its exquisiteness: physical and psychological challenges, multi-generations, various skin colours, hair colour, ways of living life. This exposure allows children to grow without prejudice and bias, but with an appreciation for life in all its manifestations.

"We are the sowers - the children will be those who will reap. To labour that future generations may be better and nobler than we are - that is the task without egotism and without pride. Let us unite in this work..." (Maria Montessori)

