



The Art of Montessori in the Home

Birth to Three Years

By Margaret E. Stephenson

Just outside a Montessori classroom in London in the 1920's, Dr. Maria Montessori heard a small child say, "Help me to help myself." She was struck by this so-wise saying of the small child and, in a way, adopted it as summing up the message she had begun to give to adults. "Help me to help myself" – she noted that the small child had not stopped at saying "Help me." It was a special measure of help that was being asked for – "help me to help myself." Help was being asked, but only in the measure that the child could then give himself help. This is why I am talking about the art of Montessori. The help needed requires an artist's eye, an artist's touch, an artist's vision, to be able to imagine what is not yet there, and to bring it forth into being. But very often, when art and artists are mentioned, people feel uncomfortable, shy, somewhat lost. How many people consider that they are not part of the artist's society – that artists are a people apart, not for the company of ordinary people, that artists are a special segment of the population. But one artist, Eric Gill, has expressed this opinion – "The artist is not a special kind of man, but every man is a special kind of artist."

And it is this theme that I would like to explore, that our dealings with the small child, first of all as parents, then as teachers, call for us to be this special kind of artist, as our vocation is to help bring into being something that is not yet there is its fullness and that needs an artist's touch for it to come to full fruition.

Dr. Maria Montessori had begun her work with children as a medical doctor. She was the first woman doctor in Italy. After graduating, her further studies took her into hospitals where children were confined along with mentally-handicapped adults. She began to study nervous and mental diseases. But her attention was drawn forcibly to the plight of the children, who were certainly cared for and fed and clothed, but were offered no occupation. Dr. Montessori began to give them various manipulative activities, which involved handling materials, and eventually thought that some of them could enter for the regular school examinations. These supposed mentally-handicapped children passed the state examinations and caused Dr. Montessori to wonder why supposed normal children were not doing better in school.

Somewhat later, in 1907, Dr. Montessori got the opportunity to undertake the care of a group of poor children, housed in a room of a new apartment building, erected by a philanthropic Building Society to house poor families. Dr. Montessori called this room "the Children's House" and so began the work which still goes on today in Montessori schools.

We have Dr. Montessori saying to us: "The adult must recognise that he and she must take second place, endeavour all they can to understand the child, and to support and help him in the development of his life. This should be the aim of mother, father, and teacher." This sounds as if Dr. Montessori wished to overturn the structure of the family, to put the child in a position of dominance, and the parents and teachers in a subservient state. This was not so. Dr. Montessori recognised the family unit as the building, the foundation, unit, of society and that without the strength and stability of this family unit, society would crumble. We see this happening all around us today and this is why we need to know how to help the child and the family.

What then did Dr. Montessori mean when she understood the child's request to help me help myself as giving us the key to the fundamental programme of the development of the human being, in which we, parents and teachers, must take a significant part, if human society is to survive intact in the coming years? And so we have to return to our theme of the artist.

When asked throughout her life, to explain what her work entailed, Dr. Montessori always disliked giving it the name, the Montessori Method, explaining that she had not invented something and that her work was not a method of education. Instead, she said, "Let us think of it in terms of 'aid to life.'" So it is 'aid to life' with which the artist in us has to be involved, the life of a human being, a child, whose task, Dr. Montessori said, was "the formation of man, orientated to his environment, adapted to his time, place and culture."

Adults are to be there, to be at the service of this life, helping to bring it forth to full potential, as the artist brings forth the vision and allows it to stand before us, in paint, or stone, or marble, or gold and silver and precious stones.



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First of all, as parents in the home, how can we be that artist who helps the child in the development of what he is destined to become? We need to remember that we cannot make the child become anything whatsoever. The child has to make himself. But that throws an immense responsibility on us, a greater responsibility than if we were doing the making. Because what we are asked to offer entails an ability to stand back, to observe, to wait, in attendance, to be willing to serve. We have to remember that we cannot move for the child, he has to make his own human movements, of legs, body, hands; we cannot speak for the child, he has to make his own human language; we cannot be independent for the child, he has to make his own human independence.

At the moment of conception, the germinal cell becomes endowed with the power to carry out a plan. This plan is unique, it is the plan which will result in a unique human being, one who has never been there before, one who will never be there again. Parents have, at each time of conception, set in motion a unique plan, which will result in a particular human being. This is the wonder, the excitement, and the responsibility of the parents' role in the life of the child. What a great thing this is to think about!

Dr. Montessori spoke of "the secret of childhood." By this she meant that none of us can know what exactly the child will become, where his human potential will take him, what his destiny will be. That is why Dr. Montessori asked us "to help me help myself" – "to help me help myself become myself." Not just to become anything, anyone, but to become the self, the person I was meant from always, to be. The mother, the father, each has a part in this new human being, but the new human being is a separate being, one in its own right. And it is the development of this new human being that is entrusted to us, first as parents, then as teachers, as the parents hand on to us part of their task. These duties, these tasks, this particular service, have always been known and recognised as such by parents and by teachers. But from time to time they get lost, submerged, become unrecognised as eternal truths, and the child, and therefore humanity, suffers in consequence.

So it is good that we had Dr. Montessori in the early years of this century, and still have her work around us, to remind us of our responsibility to the children amongst us. She gave us a new vision of the child and his work of formation of himself. She showed us a new way of looking at the potential of the human being. And not only that, Dr. Montessori was able, through her own observations of the child at various stages of development, to point out to us the ways in which we could aid our child's development.

She asked us to look at the child and to reflect upon what he or she actually is – to think seriously about the fact that this child has a great task to accomplish, to construct himself, as man or woman, able to take a unique place in the society of his nation, and perhaps of his world. What is the child at birth? We see a physical form of a human being, but who essentially cannot carry out the intellectual activities of a human being. We have a child who is in need of care, protection, security, love and who without these essentials, will never fully function as an independently committed and integrated human personality.

Dr. Montessori considers this giving of a loving, secure environment to be the child's birthright – the first right of the child, to which his family should be totally committed. But she also explains that this does not mean that the mother and father must be accepting of him in all situations. She says that, as long as the child knows for sure that he or she is loved, it does not matter if the parents have to scold him – the child will still be able to know that he is loved and secure.

So Dr. Montessori advises us what to do. All societies have rules, for the safety and security of their members, to enable them to live in harmony with one another and to be able to respect one another. These rules should not be thought of as prohibitions, as factors to make life difficult, to forbid actions, to limit freedom. Instead they should be viewed as safeguards for our actions and for those of others, to give freedom, to allow life to be lived without fear.

The family is a society, the first unit of society, the unit upon which the society of the race, of the nation, and ultimately of all humanity, is built. And so the family society needs its rules. These must be thought through carefully, they must be weighed and measured, they must take into account all the members of the family, they must not impose undue hardships on any member of the family and they must be capable of being kept. They must be made, keeping in mind what we said before, the security and the good of all the



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family, enabling each member to recognise that he has a special place in this family society, and that it is a place of love and acceptance. In this way, the smallest child can find and cherish his place, can witness the behaviour of the other family members, can see their acceptance of the rules, can note their relationships to one another and can begin to grow and to develop within this loving, secured environment. Then the firm "no" to the child for inappropriate behaviour, for actions which might harm him becomes something that the child can accept and respond to, without arguing (which should never be allowed), without a temper tantrum (entered into to get his own way and from which the child must never be allowed to win), but a "no" which follows a consistent pattern. "No" has not disappeared from the Montessori vocabulary, though some people seem to think so.

The child needs order in his life, a routine which he can learn to accept and to follow. So the "nos" must always be for the same situations, and the "yeses" the same. Then the child knows where he stands, in relation to his behaviour and actions, and to his family's responses. The child who cannot learn to obey is a child who is never sure whether today the response will be "no", when yesterday to the same situation it was "yes" or "it doesn't matter." The child does not come into social life at birth with a sense of moral values inculcated, with norms of behaviour already known. He can only make his sense of morality, his knowledge of codes of conduct, from those given him first of all by the society of his family.

Not to help the child conform to the behaviour of society, is to defraud him of a fundamental right. For the last and worst analysis it is to give him the key to continuing anti-social behaviour in later life and perhaps to the misery of criminal behaviour. The art of training the child to social behaviour and acceptance of the rules of society needs a gentle touch coupled with a firmness which recognises that to love means to will the good of the other. To love the children who have entered our family society, means that we will their good enough not to accept conduct which later on may lead them to be cast out of society. We must love them enough to be able to be strict with them in helping to develop a human way of life.

One of the problems facing teachers in schools is that they may have children in their classes who have never been made aware of the fact of appropriate human behaviour. This is a growing problem in all schools. It is particularly significant for Montessori schools, because it makes it difficult and sometimes impossible for the child to profit from the advantages being offered by the Montessori environment and activities for learning.

Such children do not come from any one sector of society. They come from the poor, the rich, the middle-class, from single-parent situations and from the usual family background. The problem of these children has arisen from the loss of a sense of responsibility amongst society. For too long, the word and the meaning of responsibility have been lost. Society has wanted freedom – adults have grabbed it for themselves – they have handed it out to their children, and what they have taken is license not liberty. Adults have lost the awareness and have therefore not been able to instill it in their children, of the fact that we cannot have freedom without its complement, responsibility. And we cannot show responsibility unless we are free. Therefore, because of our loss of recognition of what we are and have as human beings, we have children and adults doing as they like, and therefore acting irresponsibly, instead of acting according to reason, which enables us to weigh and judge our actions and accept our responsibility for them. The result of all this is the anti-social behaviour of children, which leads them to waste the time they spend in the Montessori classroom.

By showing us what it means to be a human being, with the ability to act as one, and by making us aware of the fact that the smallest child is forming himself as a human being, Dr. Montessori has helped us to find the way to help the child become a responsible, free member of human society.

And so the art of Montessori in the home, which we have to practise if our children are to make the most of their Montessori education, is to help them understand the rules of life in the society at home and to keep them. It is also to cooperate with the teachers and the schools in making the children aware of the fact that school and classroom have their appropriate rules and that we expect our children to keep them also. Parents and teachers have to form an alliance, because both are involved in helping the child help himself, and the fullness of that help can be given best by both together.