



The Art of Montessori in the Home

Three to Six Years

By Margaret E. Stephenson

Responsible human behavior is not the only thing that the child has to learn when he comes into our society of family at birth. He comes without the coordinated movement of the human being, except for the muscles for sucking. So he has to construct and to perfect the movements for creeping, crawling, standing, walking, and also the movements for grasping, for holding, for carrying and the fine, pincer movement of finger and thumb opposed. The human baby is given a period of time in which he can carry out none of these movements, but a period in which he can study all of them, if he is amongst other human beings who are carrying them out. This is why, Dr. Montessori tells us, the child looks so intently at what is going on around him. Before he can move he has to know how to and he has to know what activities are going to be executed using the movements he makes.

So he needs the life of his family being lived around him in the home environment. Then he can study this life, can see the movements through which this life is lived. He sees the way in which his family moves to do the actions that form part of our daily life, the actions through which physically we live our daily lives in the home. This is the reason why Dr. Montessori said that the child needed to be amongst his family members, so that, in the time before he is himself able to move, he has a chance to study movement. Then gradually nature begins to make it possible for him to move by himself. That is the time when the baby has to have the chance to move. Only then by moving after his time of study of it, can the child begin to perfect his movements, make it possible for himself to move easily and gracefully, as he himself begins to carry out the movements required to live his life in the family.

This is why Dr. Montessori suggested that instead of a crib, the baby should have a bed on the floor. As he begins to move himself around, he will be able to move himself out of his bed as it is so near the ground. He is in no danger of falling to the floor, as he would be trying to climb out of a crib. The baby begins to make judgements of his movements – he finds himself near the edge of the bed on the floor and moves himself back towards the centre of it, until such time as he feels himself confident of moving over the low edge and on to the floor and then continuing on his way, having made a new conquest in the development of movement. In this way, too, the baby does not feel himself cut off from his family, when he wakes up in the morning. Instead of being caged away from them like an animal, he is free to go and look for them.

Another advice Dr. Montessori gave to us with regard to the development of movement in the child, was about the play-pen. She said that if the child was to develop movement easily, he needed space for it. The play-pen restricts his movements to a very small area. When the child begins to walk about, he needs the space of the home to walk about in – his practise of walking on his own two legs allows him to conquer the upright stance for walking of the human being. The child in a play-pen after every few steps comes up to a barrier. But not only does the child need to walk about his home, when he is able to walk he also needs to walk about outside. The sidewalks, the paths in parks and gardens, give him the chance to tackle hills, to begin to realize that he has to walk up and down inclines, as well as on level ground. The child with these opportunities for practising walking does so with more confidence and is more in control of his movements. He should have no walker but the help of the adult's hand to grasp.

But Dr. Montessori also noticed that adults often had little understanding of the rhythm of the child. We know how to walk – we have made our own walk – friends from quite a long way off can recognize us by our walk – no two people walk alike. We have made our own pace, also. But the small child is still in the process of practising walking and his legs are much shorter than ours. So when taking the child for a walk we need to adjust our walking pace to his. Watch adults outside walking along with small children. They have the child by the hand and he or she is then dragged along at the adult's walking pace, little legs being hurried along. Then watch an adult taking a dog for a walk. The dog is also often attached to the adult as the small child is. But the dog is allowed usually to make its own pace to which the adult adjusts, to stop and sniff around, while the adult stands still and waits, until the dog is ready to move on. Do we often see an adult walking with a small child allowing the child to stop and explore around? And waiting for the child to be ready to move on. So let us watch ourselves and allow the small child the opportunities for a stroll rather than an enforced march – let us give the child the time that we allow the dog.



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Dr. Montessori wanted the small child to have also other opportunities within the home environment for practising the movements he would need in his daily life. If we think of all the things we have had to do since we woke up this morning and that involved movements of one kind and another we might be astonished – especially if we also begin to think that the small child has to learn them all.

There are not only all the things we do in caring for ourselves, but also all that is involved in daily living, all the house-keeping tasks that are necessary for us to be able to live a human life. Dr. Montessori wanted the child to have a chance of learning all these too. She wanted us to help him help himself wash and dress himself, take care of his own personal self, as his conquest of movements made him gradually capable of these actions. She wanted him to be able to feed himself and to learn how to do this according to his own society's customs. And she wanted him to take part in the daily life of the home, sharing in the tasks of the family, as he became able to carry out these tasks, after being shown how to do each one and been allowed to practise doing them. In this way, Dr. Montessori helped us to understand that the child develops a sense of security, of belonging to this family unit into which he entered at birth. This sense of security, of belonging, forms a foundation for his future security as he grows older and later moves on into a wider society, and needs to learn other behaviors.

There is another purpose and an important one, behind the child's need to learn the behavior of society and how to control his movements within it. These two aspects of life, the ways of human society, and coordinated human movements, are not things the child knows when he enters our life at birth. They are things that have to be learned. And the child can only learn them if we show them to him and if we then allow him to practise them, until he has made them his own, an integral part of himself.

Their significant purpose and aim is to allow the child to attain independence, to become himself, that unique human being he was destined to be, to take his own place in human society. When he is just born, he is dependent on the adult for everything. He depends on the adult for food, for clothing, for movement from place to place, for everything that is to do with his life. He knows nothing of the ways of the people around him, he cannot walk or move like them, he cannot carry out any of the actions and activities, any of the work or play, that they are doing. It is easy to forget that he has everything to learn, even the most simple things. And it is only by our showing him how to do them, by then allowing him to do them, that the child gradually begins to live his own life, to do things for himself, and thus to become independent of us.

It is independence the child is striving for – that is what he has to achieve and he has to achieve it through his own actions. This is why the small child becomes upset, appears to rebel, when we try to do things for him that he can do for himself. We are not allowing him to function independently. Once again, this is why the small child asks us – “help me to help myself”. Not abandon me to my own devices – the child could then never learn all that is necessary for his independence. Not help me, because that would be to carry out the actions for the child instead of letting him do them for himself. Instead, to learn how to measure out, for each individual child, remembering each one is different – to measure out the exact dose of help needed by each individual child. That is where the artist in each of us needs to come in. Because that individual measuring of the exact dose of help needed, requires an artist's eye and touch. This is another reason why Dr. Montessori speaks so forcibly of the adult's need to learn how to observe. Observation of needs is the key to knowing how much help to offer and when to offer it. Unless we are very careful, very observant, we can spoil the independent work of the child, by thinking we are helping him, when the real help should consist in being able to stand back and let the child do all the work for and by himself, offering help only when the child can no longer do any more.

So in the home, with the smallest children, and when they are beginning the struggle to do things for and by themselves, we need to watch very carefully to see what the child can do already, what he is learning to do and will become able to do, by repeated actions, and the times and activities in which he needs to be shown the action again, or to be helped through it. This involves patience, very watchful eye and an ability, not to want to do everything for the child, because it is quicker for us. We have to remember as adults that we want things done, and as quickly as possible, so that they are finished and out of the way, whereas the child is interested and content with the doing, not the done. If we can allow the child his own activity, then we have really learned how to help him help himself, because we have understood that each human being has to learn how to become an independent person. We have begun to understand that the only way for this to happen is through the help the adult gives to the child to enable him to act on his own and by himself.



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We have now spoken of three things that the child has to develop for himself: self-control of his or her own behavior, the self-controlled movements which belong to the human being, and independence so that he can do things for himself. Parents have the responsibility of helping the child achieve these.

But the child needs to make other developments if he is to be fully active human being, able to take a full place in society when he is older. One of these other achievements he has to make is language. When the child is born, he has no language. He can cry and smile but he has no words with which to talk to his parents and his family. What he has when born is the potential, the power, to make a language that he can use and that is the same as the language spoken around him in his own family unit. In order to make a language for use, the child has to hear it and to hear it clearly spoken around him. Watching the very small child, when people are talking around him, we can see his head turn in the direction of the voices he hears. He seems drawn to this special sound, picking it out from amongst the other sounds around in the environment. Dr. Montessori speaks of the child's being attracted to the music of the human voice, as if knowing, but not consciously, that he has to make the sounds in his turn. And a little later, the baby does begin to practice making some of the sounds he hears and parents are delighted when he starts to say ma-ma, da-da, ba-ba. As he grows, he tries out more sounds, eventually words, and then groups of words, and begins gradually to speak as those around him speak. What fascinated Dr. Montessori in this, and what should fascinate us, is that children everywhere in the world, are talking by the age of two and a half.

This comes about, but only fully if the child has had the chance of hearing language spoken around him by adults. He cannot make his language from nothing. So this is another way we help the child develop as a human being – give him the material, in this case our talking, with which he can make the language of his society. And give him names of things, because he is fascinated by words. We can give the names of the birds in the garden, the flowers that grow there, the trees that he sees, the vegetables and fruits he eats that we buy.

Adults have a responsibility for the language the child makes and uses. Just as we are responsible for giving him the pattern for his social behavior, the pattern for his human movements, the pattern for human independent activity, so we have a responsibility for this language. So we give him words of things around, to extend his vocabulary. Then if we want the child to develop a socially acceptable language, we have to make sure that is what the child hears around him and from us. If the language used around the child is inappropriate, then he will make for himself an inappropriate language and he will use it. If we want the child to become able to fit into the society of his nation, and eventually to find a working-place within it, he has to make a language that he can use in communication with this society. We help him do this, not only by providing language to which he can listen as we talk and by giving him more and more words, but also by making him aware of the prohibitions regarding the use of language, just as we discussed the prohibitions, the rules for acceptable behavior and movement. Just the same as with behavior, movement and independence, now with language, we help the child help himself, by giving him the model of our positive, constructive approach to life and its language.

Besides talking words, conversation, in the environment of the home, there is another great way we can help the child make his language, and more than that make a love for language. We are surrounded by the language of television and radio, with so much of it being of very poor quality. One of the important things we can do to help the child's potential develop fully, is to turn off the television for most of the time the child is around. If the television screen is not there for the child to give himself to, he will make his own games and play them in his home. It is amazing what simple things the child will begin to use, to occupy himself with, and he will begin to play like a child, instead of being transfixed and passive, watching what the television offers, and which is mostly violence and rubbish.

Without the television, we can offer the child, also, something infinitely more valuable, something which used to be a natural part of a family's life together, and which has been taken away from the child's enjoyment, because time together has been usurped by television. Perhaps many of you may remember that lovely time when you curled up and were read a story by mother, father, a grandparent, or an aunt, or perhaps an older brother or sister. It was a comfortable, secure time, warm and loving, the story unfolding as the pages were turned. Maybe we had got ready for bed first, and this was the treat before we finally got into bed. Or maybe this came first and we became sleepy as the reading went on, and we toddled off to bed with the last bit of the story in our minds, to send us off to sleep. Today, so many children are



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deprived of this joy and have never yet known the happiness of this lovely time of story. There is a very good book, the *Let's Read Aloud Book*, by Jim Trelease, in which he strongly advocates the return of the family to reading aloud to their children, if they want to help the children with language development and enjoyment, and counteract the insidious trespassing upon minds and personalities being carried on by television. Jim Trelease advises reading to the baby from the moment he or she is brought home from the hospital and when asked when reading aloud to children should stop, says 'never' and tells of adolescents he has known who would listen to stories being read to their younger brothers and sisters, even though they would pretend they were not listening. If you are not already reading aloud to your children, why don't you see if your child's school, or your public library has a copy of Jim Trelease's book, then borrow it, read it, find some of the books he mentions for reading to your children, borrow them from the library and start tomorrow night, turning off the television, cuddling up comfortably with your children and reading aloud to them. I promise you that you and they will enjoy it and if you keep on with it, the enjoyment will grow and the children will ask for a longer and longer time of your reading.

But there is still something else that you can do to help your child's development. Dr. Montessori strongly emphasized the need for order in the development of the human being. Within the womb, the baby is formed on a pattern of order. The cells, the organs which are developing are following a certain pattern of time and construction. In all human embryos the same pattern is followed. No organ usurps the time of another in the process of development of all those organs which go to make up the human being. If something interrupts the constructive pattern of cells and organs, then there comes the ending of this particular human being. The pattern of ordered construction continues after birth. The child cannot creep, crawl, stand, walk until a certain order of movements has been established. The child does not walk before he stands. This pattern is so natural to us to expect, that we tend not to think of its importance. And therefore not to realize how significant order is in our lives. Order is not a rigid, militaristic structure that stifles. It is what puts logic, reason, pattern into our lives and makes them comprehensible.

We tend not to think about order in connection with language – we are used to hearing the words in sentences coming after one another in a certain accepted order. Supposing for the rest of this talk, I changed this accepted order around! You would not be able to make much sense of it, and you might even think I had become a lunatic! So language needs order, we have spoken of the development of the embryo in the womb needing order, we have also mentioned the development of movement after birth needing order. As we look around, at the created universe, of hills and trees and water, of plants and animals and birds and fishes, we can see that each of these needs an order for its activities or its life. Each of the plants and animals needs a specially prepared environment, in which it can find all those things which allow it to live its own life, in the way it was meant to do. And the same for human beings – we need an environment in which order is established, which includes all the items that we have to use to form ourselves as human beings.

So for the small child's movements, using movement to walk around his environment and its furnishing, Dr. Montessori reminded us that if the child has to learn to move easily in and out amongst tables and chairs, cupboards, the piano, he needs to know that they remain always in the same place. Then he can make a remembered pathway amongst them.

The same goes for his own possessions, in his own little special environment, his own bedroom, or his own part of a shared bedroom. He needs to find his clothes, his toilet accessories, his toys, in the same place each time he goes to take up one or another item. We can help him keep order by himself, by not giving him too many objects at any one time. Even if friends and relatives keep him supplied with too many toys, too many clothes, we can help him keep the order amongst them, by storing some of them away leaving the child with a limited supply of toys to play with, of clothes wear. Then we can change this limited supply from time to time, the child has something new to play with, to wear, and he has few enough to be able to keep them in order.

Another way we can help the child establish order in his environment and keep it easily, is to make sure that he has a shelf, a box, a cupboard, drawers, in which to keep his belongings – to give him hanging hooks that are low enough for him to reach. This supplying of storage space becomes easier for us if we only need a limited space for a limited number of shoes, clothes, toys and games. In this way, if we help the child keep order at home amongst his possessions, we will have given him a head-start for when he begins in the Montessori class. Your child will be ready to start working with the materials in the Children's House, instead



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of having to learn first of all how to treat the materials with respect, how to put them back in order in their place on the shelf, and how to hang up his clothes and keep his outer garments tidily arranged. Your child will be ready to move way ahead in his work because the teachers will not have to spend time with him, teaching him how to keep the environment and the materials in order. Just think what a lot of extra benefits you will have given your child, just by giving him a sense of order in your home environment.

We have thought so far of the child at home in the family, the child needing help to help himself, in the years from birth to three years of age, the years before he goes to the Children's House, the primary Montessori class. So let us sum up the ways in which we can give this help to our child, to help him make this first positive construction of himself as a human being. These ways are:

1. to help the child form an acceptable human behavior, learning to become in charge of his own conduct, to understand rules and obey them, and to be joyfully obedient;
2. to help the child perfect his own movements, so that he can control himself;
3. to help the child develop independence, being able to look after his own person and do things for himself in his life;
4. to help the child develop his own language and love for it;
5. to help the child develop an order in his environment and an ability to maintain it.

Now what I would like us to do, is to take one of these ways, one that we are not using to help our child, or one that we are not very successful with, think about it and make a resolution to put it into practise more positively, so that we use this way to give our child help. Make a note to yourself that will be a reminder for you each day – do not get discouraged if you forget one day, but do something drastic to yourself if you miss a week! Try out this way of help you have chosen for a week or two, then choose a second way that you think needs taking on, and add it to the first for a week or two. Notice and give yourself and your child credit for the improvements you see, after some weeks of this positive help you have given your child. And then add a third, and fourth, and a fifth help, if you decide that you have not been using them to help your child help himself.

BUT and this is a big but – do not decide to use all five ways of helping your child, all together and to begin with. This resolution I am asking you to make is like New Year's Resolutions – you may have decided, on some New Year's Eve, to change yourself in some ways and have made a long list of things you intend to do about yourself. Probably what happened is that you found you kept none of these resolutions – there were too many to remember, it was too hard to do them all – you would most probably have kept the resolution if you had made just one. So be warned – pick one of the ways to help your child and start with just this one.

Child from three to six

So far we have talked only of your child in the years from birth to three years of age. I know that not all of you have these smallest children at home. So now I would like to think with you about the child from three to six, the child going to the Children's House, the primary Montessori class.

You have helped you child, in his first three years, or you are now going to help him through your resolutions, to take on appropriate behavior within his home and family, to develop controlled, careful movement, to make a language to use in talking within his family and friends, to achieve a certain measure of independent activity, related to his age and growth, and to have a sense of order and pattern in his life. The child should now take this foundation he has formed, or that you are now going to help him form, as he passes on into the Montessori class and continues his human development. What he now needs is help with the extension of this development. He will get this help in the Montessori class, but he also needs help at home, since his time is now divided between home and family, and classroom and companions there. So parents need to continue the same program as they put into action when they undertook to help their child help himself in the years from birth to three.

The child needs continuing help to sustain acceptable behavior. He may now have made friends with children whose parents do not have the same values as your children, whose behavior you would not care for. Your child may now try to imitate this behavior at home. So you may need to remind the child of the family's rules, the behavior that is not acceptable, and give your child continuing support and help and encouragement to do what he knows should be done.



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Your child is also getting bigger and stronger. He may want to try out his strength in the home environment. There are certainly appropriate places for acrobatic activities, but walking down the middle of the dining room table, as I heard about two children being allowed to do, is not one of those appropriate places or activities. At this time, too, we may need to help our child refrain from trying out his strength on another child, to teach not to hit and fight, not to lash out physically when something crosses him; we shall need to help the child, entering into this new environment, be aware of the ways in which he can help others, can care for others. If the child has come from a caring, loving family, where each member has been helped to help the others, this concern will be taken on into the school environment and be put into action there. What the home first gives, is what the child absorbs and what becomes a natural part of his personality.

And then we have the extension and development of the language the child created in his first three years, from his home and family environment. This language will be extended and developed through the language work presented to the child in the Montessori class. But in the home, we, the parents, still need to help ensure that the child continues to use appropriate and acceptable language. The language we do not accept at home, is language that he should not take into the classroom, to use with teachers or peers.

And also we should remember reading aloud. This should continue and will provide the child with the repetition of well-loved stories and rhymes and poetry, and will also add to these, as we find new books and stories to read to him. This reading aloud should continue even when the child begins to read for himself. Another development that must continue is that of independence. In the home environment the child should have had the chance and the help to do many things for himself. This can and should continue, with the addition of other activities as he gets bigger and stronger. Not only should he continue to take care of his personal needs, but take part in more things that belong to home life. The child can begin to extend the things he does in the home and garden, to help more around the house and to take on more household tasks.

And also pattern and order should continue. Order is still necessary for the child's life. Now in school, he will not only be extending the language he uses to talk to others, but he now will be learning that other language, that human beings have developed to express mathematical ideas. And order is just as vital for the understanding of mathematics as it is for making language have meaning and not be nonsense. Three comes before four and after two, in the series of ten numbers that is the basis of the decimal system. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, is an order and an order that we need to accept if we are to make sense of mathematics. And there is other order and pattern, not only in arithmetic, but also in geometry and algebra. If we have helped the child establish order, first in the family and home environment, then we have given him something of use to his further studies. But we need to help him keep this sense of order. And so the resolutions we talked about and some of you have made to help your child in the first years of his life, are the same resolutions we need for the next three years, when your child is in the primary Montessori class.

Remember that Dr. Montessori has asked us to support and help the child in the development of his life. She has said that this should be the aim of parents and teachers. She has reminded us that we are dealing with a trinity, parents, child, teachers. The child needs the supporting help of both adults, parents and teacher, as both are in contact with the child's development and both need to play their part in helping the child. This is why parents and teachers need to study and reflect, to understand the role of each other, to help one another help the child. It is the cooperation of parents and teachers which strengthens the help each can give to the child and ensures that his development will progress fully. This is another resolution that some of us may need to make, if the Montessori class is to be the place which continues the positive development which you began at home with your child in his first three years. The art of Montessori is not an art just for the home, nor is it an art to be used just in the classroom. The art of Montessori, which simply means finding the best way to help the child help himself become what he was meant to become from the first moment of conception, is an art that joins home and school. That means parents and teacher supporting one another in their responsibility to the life of the child.