

ATTENTION

by Maria Montessori

The Advanced Montessori Method, Volume 1 *was published in 1918 in English and is considered a seminal work along with The Montessori Method. In the foreword to this book, Mario Montessori writes: "...the refulgent figure of the child, Dr. Montessori pointed out, who had found his own path to mental health, who spontaneously and joyfully had taken to learning at an early age, has caught the general attention anew."* He refers to the immense power of auto-education and the dawning of a new science to bring a fuller understanding of all the traits of early childhood through observation including environment, attention, will, intelligence, and imagination. Attention refers to the stimulus that captures the child's focus or can be the attention propelled by an "internal impulse" or "spiritual hunger." It drives the child to repeat an exercise with attention fixed so intently from object to object that the initial learning brings a new kind of intense engagement. Reprinted from The Advanced Montessori Method, Volume 1. 1918. Kalakshetra Press (1965): 123-130. Reprinted with permission from Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company.

The phenomenon to be expected from the little child, when he is placed in an environment favourable to his spiritual growth, is this: that suddenly the child will fix his attention upon an object, will use it for the purpose for which it was constructed, and will *continue* to repeat the same exercise indefinitely. One will repeat an exercise twenty times; but this is the first phenomenon to be expected, as initiatory to those acts with which spiritual growth is bound up.

That which moves the child to this manifestation of activity is evidently a primitive internal impulse, almost a vague sense of spiritual hunger; and it is the impulse to satisfy this hunger which then actually directs the consciousness of the child to the determined object and leaves it gradually to a primordial, but complex and repeated exercise of the intelligence in comparing, judging, deciding upon an act, and correcting an error. When the child, occupied with the solid insets, places and displaces the ten little cylinders in their respective places thirty or forty times consecutively; and,

having made a mistake, sets himself a problem and solves, if he becomes more and more interested, and tries the experiment again and again; he prolongs a complex exercise of his psychical activities which makes way for an internal development.

It is probably the internal perception of this development which makes the exercise pleasing, and induces prolonged application to the same task. To quench thirst, it is not sufficient to see or to sip water; the thirsty man must drink his fill; that is to say, must take in the quantity his organism requires; so, to satisfy this kind of psychical hunger and thirst, it is not sufficient to see things cursorily, much less "to hear them described"; it is necessary to possess them and to use them to the full for the satisfaction of the needs of the inner life.

This fact stands revealed as the basis of all psychical construction, and the sole secret of education. The external object is the gymnasium on which the spirit exercises itself, and such "internal" exercises are primarily "in themselves" the end and aim of action. Hence the solid insets are not intended to give the child a knowledge of dimensions, nor are the plane insets designed to give him a conception of forms; the purpose of these, as of all the other objects, is to make the child exercise his activities. The fact that the child really acquires by these means definite knowledge, the recollection of which is vivid in proportion to the fixity and intensity of his at-

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tention, is a necessary result; and, indeed, it is precisely the sensory knowledge of dimensions, forms and colours, etc. thus acquired, which makes the continuation of such internal exercises in fields progressively vaster and higher, a possible achievement.

Hitherto, all psychologists have agreed that instability of attention is the characteristic of little children of three or four years old; attracted by everything they see, they pass from object to object, unable to concentrate on any; and generally the difficulty of fixing

the attention of children is the stumbling-block of their education.
William James speaks of

that extreme mobility of the attention with which we are all familiar in children, and which makes their first lessons such rough affairs. . . . The reflex and passive character of the attention . . . which makes the child seem to belong less to himself than to every object which happens to catch his notice, is the first thing which the teacher must overcome. . . . The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again is the very root of judgment, character and will. . . . An education which should improve this faculty would be *the education par excellence*.

Thus man, acting by himself alone, never successfully arrests and fixes that *inquiring* attention which wanders from object to object.

In fact, in our experiment the attention of the little child was not artificially maintained by a teacher; it was an object which fixed that attention, as if it corresponded to some internal impulse; an impulse which evidently was directed solely to the things “necessary” for its development. In the same manner, those complex coordinated



Seated for lunch in the glass-walled classroom, Palace of Education and Social Economy, Panama-Pacific Exposition, San Francisco, 1915.

movements achieved by a newborn infant in the act of sucking are limited to the first and unconscious need of nutrition; they are not a conscious acquisition directed to a purpose. Indeed, the conscious acquisition directed to the definite purpose would be impossible in the movements of a newborn infant's mouth, as also in the first movements of the child's spirit.

Therefore it is essential that the external stimulus which first presents itself should be verily the breast and the milk of the spirit, and then only shall we behold that surprising phenomenon of a little face concentrated in an intensity of attention.

Behold a child of three years old capable of repeating the same exercise fifty times in succession; many persons are moving about beside him; someone is playing the piano; children are singing in chorus; but nothing distracts the little child from his profound concentration. Just so does the suckling keep hold of the mother's breast, uninterrupted by external incidents, and desists only when he is satisfied.

Only Nature accomplishes such miracles.

If, then, psychical manifestations have their root in Nature, it was necessary, in order to understand and help Nature, to study it in its initial periods, those which are the simplest, and the only ones capable of revealing truths which would serve as guides for the interpretation of later and more complex manifestations. Thus, indeed, many psychologists have done; but, applying the analytical methods of experimental psychology, they did not start from that point whence the biological sciences derive their knowledge of life: this is the *liberty* of the living creatures they desire to observe. If Fabre had not made use of insects, while leaving them free to carry out their natural manifestations, and observing them without allowing his presence to interfere in any way with their functions; if he had caught insects, had taken them into his study, and subjected them to experiment, he would not have been able to reveal the marvels of insect life.

If bacteriologists had not instituted, as a method of research, an environment similar to that which is natural to microbes, both as

regards nutritive substances and conditions of temperature, etc. to the end that they "might live freely" and thus manifest their characteristics; if they had confined themselves to fixing the germs of a disease under the microscope, the science which today saves the lives of innumerable men and protects whole nations from epidemics would not exist.

Freedom to live is the true basis for every method of observation applied to living creatures.

Liberty is the experimental condition for studying the phenomena of the child's attention. It will be enough to remember that the stimuli of infant attention, being mainly sensory, have a powerful physiological concomitant of "accommodation" in the organs of a sense; an accommodation, physiologically incomplete in the young child, which requires to develop itself according to Nature. An object not adapted to become a useful stimulus to the powers of accommodation in process of development would not only be incapable of sustaining attention as a psychical fact, but would also, as a physiological fact, weary or actually injure the organs of accommodation such as the eye and ear. But the child who chooses the objects and perseveres in their use with the utmost intensity of attention, as show in the muscular contractions which give mimetic expression to his face, evidently experiences pleasure, and pleasure is an indication of healthy functional activity; it always accompanies exercises which are useful to the organs of the body.

