

## LECTURE 4

APRIL 11, 1927

by Maria Montessori

*Using examples from the animal world, Montessori speaks of the natural laws of life and the phases of childhood that are different than that of the adult. The child develops independently of the adult. Montessori says, "The child is the period when man is created," and "The child is a worker." Through work, the child can arrive at his own formation (finality). In addition to preparing the environment, the adult must understand that the child must be active beyond what the adult perceives as maximum effort. Growing beyond the expected only happens when the teacher respects the child's independent activity and allows the child to discover his own "mission." This lecture was delivered at the 13th International Training Course, London. The same lecture was given by Maria Montessori earlier that same year at a national Montessori teacher training course in Milan. Copyright Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company, 1927. NAMTA is grateful to the Maria Montessori Archives for making this article available.*

I am not here to express to you the necessity that there is for loving the child. I am not here to show you the way in which we come into union—into communion—with the child. Who does not love children? Certainly love is the basis, but upon this basis of sentiment we have to build up something which is also intelligent, something which is the comprehension of the child.

We must be convinced of the necessity of separating ourselves from the child, and we have therefore to find out two ways—the way for the adult, and the way for the child. These two different ways render such a thing possible. If we wish to present ourselves as the finality, if we wish to place ourselves in the same path as the child, we shall meet with endless inextricable problems, whereas, if we start with the clear conception that the two ways are quite separate—our way, and the way of the child— and if we try to find the harmony between these two ways, then we may succeed, then many problems will be made clear.

You will allow me to make use of a comparison, which will render the thing clear.

Let us suppose that the adult lives upon a table-land, where he carries out his own social life, with the strife and the work which is proper to him. The child, on the other hand, is the being who has to mount up, in order to reach this table-land. These are two quite different things. The one who has to mount up, has to go alone, and to find his own way. The adult cannot help the child in this by his example, and his own finality. He has to understand this different finality, this different path, belonging to the child. This conception, which today is so much studied, might be called the problem of the childhood, this difficult path, which all of us have to mount by, in order to reach the higher plain.

The first thing to understand is, that childhood does not always present a direct preparation for what is to follow; because the child is following the laws of life, and these are not the laws with which we adults are surrounded. In every period of young life, we see an indirect preparation. The way that the child has of preparing himself, is something individual, something which we have to consider separately.

The important thing is not that the child should aim at the conditions of adult life, but that he should completely and perfectly evolve in the present. That which is of value—not only to the child, but to the adult which he is to become—is the complete evolution in the moment. Thus the aid that we can give, is to help the child to fully live his life in the present, without regard for the future.

Let us consider that animal which has such a marvelous faculty of flight—the bird. The young bird prepares for flight by finding itself in a nest, within very close limits, where hardly any movement is possible. The adult is not to be anxious about how this creature is going to fly later on, but he must have peace, and faith in nature, and know that later on the creature will fly, and that for the present he has to keep still. The same thing with winged insects—with butterflies. In order to achieve this fact of flight they have to remain some time as it were barred in, imprisoned, without movement.

The metamorphosis in these insects illustrate to us this fact, that the living creature passes through various stages, in the same way as the child. That is to say through phases, which are different from those of the adult, and the way in which the young creature reaches the state of adult life, is through passing completely, and perfectly through these different stages.

The important thing is not that the child should aim at the conditions of adult life, but that he should completely and perfectly evolve in the present. That which is of value—not only to the child, but to the adult which he is to become—is the complete evolution in the moment. Thus the aid that we can give, is to help the child to fully live his life in the present, without regard for the future. Because, in order to become a perfect adult, there is no other way than to pass completely along the paths of infancy. Of this we have examples in child life, even if we confine ourselves to the elementary details.

We know that the child in his physical life, prepares for the digestion of solid food, by quite a different process; from the taking of milk. We know that in order to develop the possibility of walking, the child has, for a long time, to be almost motionless. This fact is not limited to physical life. This is the fundamental principle on which we have to dwell.

The child develops by following his own ways. Not by imitating the adult, but by following the lay of autocreation. When the adult has arrived at a clear vision of this principle naturally his action will be in conformity with it. The result of this attitude to the child will be respect of the child's notions, because the notions of the child are the outer expression of phenomena which are unknown to us. Therefore, it is that we say that we must observe the child and let him act.

But when we say observation we do not use the word in the sense in which modern science uses it. Observation, according to the sense of modern science would mean observing the child in order to guide him, (they would say we must observe the child) in order to know him. We use the word observation to another sense. We mean rather, the ecstatic observation of the child who is growing, as we observe the marvels of nature, as we watch the opening

bud or the flower, in order to learn, to spy out, if I may use that expression, the secret of this opening, unfolding life, our observation we might say proceeds from a mystical point of view. It is as if we said on considering that God created man, "Oh, if I could have seen, if I could know how that happened." We ask, how did this creation happen, and it is the child who is our answer, the child who proceeds from nothing we can see, and forms himself., the child is the answer. It is as if we saw matter surrounding a centre, and into this centre, life is breathed. That is the attitude in which we are to observe the child.

The child is the period in when man is created. But in these things there is a cooperation between those who help the young beginning to live, and the young life itself. This is our cooperation.

Consider the child in this way. The child is a great worker, the child has a great mission to fulfill, and this work of his is the formation of the adult. Certainly this work of the child is a tiring work, but not in the sense in which we use the word fatigue, when we speak of ourselves—the adults— and for this reason the adult and the child cannot fall into the same path of progress. Their work is different. There is no doubt that it is the child himself who has to work out his own formation, and no other can do it for him. The child has to say "Either I work, or I die". In the child's existence, there is no possibility, as there is in our own social life, that one should take the place of another and should work for another. The point therefore is, that the child should be able to live, and that we should help him. That the child's life is a vital action, therefore we have not to be anxious that the child should initiate us in our social connections, but that we shall be able to aid the child in his formation. This therefore is the finality which we propose in our method of education. What you have heard responds to this principle.

We have said that it is necessary to prepare for the child his surroundings, an environment in which he is to live, suited to his present needs. It is like the bird which prepares the nest, or nature which prepares the chrysalis. This principle is doubly important, because we ourselves live in an artificial environment, and the child needs something different. Any help which we give the child is to meet his needs.

As is well known today, for the child's development, it is necessary that he should be active, therefore, in the environment we have to provide means which will draw forth his activity. Generally, when we speak of activity in relation to the child, we think of the child's physical movements, but when we speak of activity, we mean something more complex of all the activities of the child, because the child's whole personality is developing through activity. The human personality of the child has to be spiritually active, therefore, our help to the child will be in seeking out means which are adapted to his activity. Thus, we find an intense vivacity on the part of the child, in responding, and we have here the proof that we have found what the child required. Instead of being indifferent, or passive, the child responds actively.



Gardening at Blackfriars School, Sydney, New South Wales, 1914

In general, we have seen that in providing the suitable means for the child's activity, he will give proofs of more advanced powers than we thought he was capable of. Obviously, the child who has to develop, must do so by successive, continuous effort. He is a creature who is mounting upwards, and who needs some superior help always. You will allow me to give an idea of what I mean, by a drawing: Let us suppose that this circle represents the limits of the child's possibilities. But the child has a further possibility for effort, and this is represented by the other circle—

almost invisible, and larger than the first. If we provided for the child merely what corresponded to the first circle, the child would not respond to us with the same vivacity, but if we provide larger limits for the child—though not in excess of his powers—we shall find that he will respond with a very great vivacity. Our search is, to find this larger circle which corresponds to the possibilities which are latent in his.

If we present to the child something which is too difficult, he does not respond—something too easy, he is not interested, but if we could find something which is exactly adapted to him, we would see the response—we shall see, as it were, a transformation of his personality.

Let us suppose that someone shows the child something by which he may mount upwards—suppose it is a rope or a handle which is out of his reach, or suppose it is too low, it serves for nothing. But if it is the right height, so that he can reach it, then it is stimulating, and he pulls himself up. Therefore, we have not to try to make the child imitate us, we have to find something which—at the actual moment in the life of the child, is adapted to him, and to his possibilities. If therefore, we find the stimulus, that will appeal

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to the child's whole personality, we shall find that he responds with enthusiasm, and will continue doing his work over and over again, with the same enthusiasm.

Suppose we have a child of two years, or a little more, and we offer him work of cleaning something. It will seem that this work is superior to his possibilities at this age. We may think that this little child is only capable of drawing, perhaps, a little cart. But now the child has possibilities which are represented by the halo round the first circle—these are the real possibilities of the child. The child will not only clean the object with enthusiasm, but he will go on cleaning, after the object is clean. Therefore, seeing that the child goes on and on doing the work, we shall see that he is not doing it in the sense that we would do it, with an exterior purpose, but he is increasing his own possibilities by doing it. But when he has reached this point, our stimulus is no longer of an interest for him. Then it is that we must find him a superior piece of work which will correspond to new possibilities.

The child who has learnt to dress and undress himself, will dress and undress himself times without number. Therefore we see that though he has reached an external aim, it is not this which has carried him through so much work. Therefore, it is not merely the joy of working, but it is the condition of this work, which corresponds to an inner need which does not seek to realise an external aim. This reveals a fundamental difference between the adult and the child, because the adult proposes to himself some external aim, and tries to reach this aim with the least possible expenditure of energy. Therefore we have the law of the least effort, which is characteristic of the work of the adult, which leads individuals to take advantage, often, of the work of others, in order that they may lay out the smallest amount of energy. We may say that in the case of the child it is exactly the opposite. The child seeks means to outlay the greatest possible amount of energy, and gains by this outlay, whereas the adult often diminishes his capital, his reserve of strength, by effort.

It may seem contradictory to say that the child grows by the outlay of effort—so it would be, if we considered the work of the child, as we consider the work of the adult, if it were we who pro-



posed some work to the child, then it might be, that by the doing of it the child might lose rather than gain. Therefore it is that the adult is not to direct the energies of the child, but to offer him the means for work. Give him means by which to rise, and then allow him to develop his spontaneous energies.

There are two important things; to provide the suitable means for exercise, and to allow the child full opportunity to do the exercise. In our schools then, there are these two important things to be considered. The environment, and these means, or stimulus of the child's activity, and the preparation of the adult, that he may respect the activity of the child without intervening.

The great thing for the teacher in this method, is to know how to respect the activity of the child, and this needs a knowledge of the means which are provided. Therefore the preparation of the teacher, is in a great degree, a negative one, because, in learning to respect, and not to interfere, the teacher is learning something of a negative nature. And, if the teacher has not this attitude with regard to the work of the child, he will interfere with the work that the child would do.

Then we have to make acquaintance with the memos to be used. These means might conceivably be changed, but the attitude of the teacher is always the same, and the real thing to be made clear is this new attitude. The teacher must know that he is no longer in an environment that belongs to him, he is in the environment prepared for the child. This environment is adapted to the child, and the teacher is an outsider. We do not say that the teacher is to feel himself a child among other children, but he has to feel that he is a stranger, an outsider, who enters the environment not made for him, but made for the child who possessed it.

This child, being of a different make from the adult, is an unknown person to the teacher, and the teacher must feel a kind of humble respect for the work of the child. He must understand that he stands on another path, from the one on which the child finds himself. He is not to feel as an enemy, but he has to realise his place as an outsider, and he must allow the owner of the environment to deal with it in his own way.



The daily sin of the teacher, is that the child should carry out his activity in an orderly and continuous way. The teacher who succeeds best in this method, is one who succeeds in being passive, and here we may well apply the words of St. John the Baptist. "We must increase, and I must diminish". If the child's activities are to unfold, the teacher must be passive. The adult, having understood that the child's way of development is not the adult's way, allows the child to take the way which is appropriate to him. This is therefore the place which belongs to the child, in which he can advance, following out his own mission, and the adult will help him, but realizing that his own is a different path. The adult will acquire this new attitude. It is no longer he who serves as an example, or who is to urge or drive the child. In this attitude, we have the whole of the new conception of education.

