

OBSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

FROM DR MONTESSORI'S 1946 LONDON TRAINING COURSE

by Maria Montessori

This article exhorts the observer to take notice of the unconscious and conscious levels of the young child's absorbent mind (infant stare). Montessori notes the social awareness of young children and suggests that their amazing awareness of people, not merely their activities, is integral to observation. Reprinted with permission from AMI Communications 2 (1978): 2-5.

In the beginning the child is unconscious and from this state comes a state of consciousness. The child goes through successive stages, from the unconscious to the subconscious (i.e., under the conscious) and so arrives at clear consciousness. This consciousness is shown by a desire to have objects, to choose certain objects from among other objects, to prefer one thing to another. When a child does this, we are sure that real consciousness is present. Modern psychologists say this is when a child is 10 months of age. But before this the child has been able to distinguish many things, he has distinguished light and some objects. He does not become conscious from one day to another, but by gradual development. Intelligence comes little by little, like the gradual rising of the sun whose light increases until midday. So the light of consciousness comes little by little over a short period of time. Before consciousness can exist there must be an internal work.

The psychology of the very little child is the psychology of the unconscious. It is possible to study it by direct observation without mistakes, whereas it is difficult to perceive the subconscious in grown people. Once you have a clear idea of the transition from unconsciousness to consciousness you can help the child's development. If you are to help the child, you must see clearly that the child has a psychic life before he attains consciousness. This is why the study of the psychology of the child at this very early age is so important.

In this subconscious, that grows through to consciousness, activity must be very carefully considered. The child must have experiences in the environment in order to grow. Before he can distinguish colours and choose ones he wants, he must have seen them many times and registered them in his subconscious. He may see different coloured dresses in the environment, but unless he has opportunities to see colours and does an internal work he cannot, at the grand old age of 10 months, have choice within himself.

It is interesting to study this day by day development. It is important for you to know that this subconscious exists and that the child must have experience in the environment. We do not need to urge the child to have experiences, because nature urges him. Nature urges him to look at all the things around him.

For you, the most important part of this study is observation. Observe little babies; look at their eyes, and you will see that they stare at the same thing for a long time. This means that the child takes images from the environment with great energy and power. The unconscious urges him to study environment. The child takes in everything around him through the senses, he absorbs the environment through his senses with great energy.

The baby has a poor miserable body, incapable of even movement. Why has he been given this intelligence without the power of movement? Why is he so interested in seeing things before he can move? Perhaps before a child moves, he exercises his intelligence, he prepares his intelligence, so that later, when he does move, he will move intelligently, with a purpose.

The child is a worker, a diligent observer, he looks straight at things, he stares at them for a long time, he is interested in getting to know the environment. It may be a flower he stares at, absorbing its image. This work gives him happiness and peace, because in doing so he is following the urge of nature.

A child cannot move by himself. At first he can only move his eyes, after a bit he begins to move his head a little. He acquires movement gradually. He begins to move his head, then at about

three months he tries to lift it up. He tries very hard and goes on trying, perhaps the effort tires him, but he continues to try, because if he can lift his head, he can see better and so better prepare his consciousness in his own way. From then on he continues striving, absorbing, apparently making associations and reasoning.

In Spain I once watched a little child not quite ten months old, there was a cushion with rather a crude picture of flowers and children on it, the child kissed the children and smelled the flowers in the picture. This showed that he could distinguish images and had real understanding of what they represented. In that country everybody kisses children and smells flowers. It was something very developed on part of the child to recognize this.

Perhaps psychologists do not see these things, because they are too busy with tests. You must not bother with tests, you must really observe and study children from nature. If you only study books, you are studying at second hand and books on psychology are very complicated. Instead, watch what a child does, when he is following the urges of nature.

There was a child of nine months old that I knew who liked to go to see a piece of brown marble every day. This piece of brown marble was set in a brown wall in a garden full of trees and flowers of all colours. There was very little difference in colour between the marble and the wall, but the child was so interested in it, that every day the nurse took him near to let him look at it. There was nothing attractive about it, it was just like a stone and so like the brown wall in which it was set. Yet, the child delighted in it. Before he was ten months old, he liked the difficult work, to distinguish between the two shades of the same colour which were so alike. It is not easy for people to realize that the child likes hard work, you will come to know all these things about children only if you observe them, before studying or doing any scientific research, that is without any preconceived ideas.

Today I saw a child of four months old in my house. The mother brought him to me to admire. She wanted me to see how physically well he was. But all I saw were the eyes of the child who looked so intently at me for such a long time, as if to get to know me. Then

Mr. Montessori came in and the child was excited to see another person and looked and looked at him. Later a lady collaborator came in and he looked at her in the same way. There were many things to look at in the room, there were flowers, but nothing else mattered. Whatever else was done around him, he went on looking at the people.

Why did nature give a baby such a big head and such a big active brain? I think it is because he must study the environment in the beginning. The baby has a poor miserable body, incapable of even movement. Why has he been given this intelligence without the power of movement? Why is he so interested in seeing things before he can move? Perhaps before a child moves, he exercises his intelligence, he prepares his intelligence, so that later, when he does move, he will move intelligently, with a purpose. So he must first know his environment. Nature has given him the power to do this.

Now that I have given you this advice, you must take an interest in observing little children. Observe them anywhere you can see them.

In order to grow, the child must, in this first period of life, see many things. He must look at the external world in order to prepare himself for the future when he will be capable of movement. If he does not get enough opportunity for visual experience, then later, when he walks, he will be one of those people who are incapable of exact, correct movement. He will be careless, he will fall often, he will bump into things.

In order to educate the child from birth, in order to help him, we must have understanding, based on psychological observation. This is not like hygiene. Hygiene states how much sleep a child should have, how his food should be constituted with artificial exactitude. Hygiene takes no account of psychology, it has forgotten the psychic. A look at the consequences!

The child must mix with the adults in life, go everywhere and see everything. He must watch his mother dressing, see ladies in their evening dresses, etc. He must know all the beautiful things

in life. This is the normal way for a child to grow. We know how intently he looks at everything. How interested he is in watching all that happens. We must take the child into the world and then he can take all the impressions he needs. Perhaps he will take impressions of everything he sees in the subconscious. We do not know how many, but if we take the child about with us, he will be able to take more than if he stayed in one place.

Get rid of the idea that the child needs so much sleep. There must be a new form of education from birth....We can look at reality and change our treatment of little children. We can learn how to really help the development of the psychic life. This must be the first problem of education. The answer is to bring the child into the world.

Psychologists give the child different coloured objects to see which he will choose, but he must not be limited, he must see all the colours many times in the environment. He is excited when he sees water poured out of a jug into a glass, or when he sees another child, etc. He is interested in watching everything that happens in life, so we must give him the opportunity to see everything.

Nowadays hygienic prejudice keeps a child in the garden, there he can see trees and flowers, but this is not enough. He must go all over the house: into the kitchen to watch you cook, into the drawing room to see the visitors and new faces. The child will find it all interesting and he must see it all. He will look at everything and with the natural urge of life he will take many impressions and prepare many things in the subconscious which will be useful to him later. He will orientate himself.

If there is nothing much for the child to look at, nothing much for him to do, if he lies in an empty room waiting for experiences which are not there for him, the only relief is to sleep. I have read in a book that the child of three months must not be awake for more than four hours of the day. But the child does not need to sleep all the time, when he is asleep he cannot see the world and prepare his intelligence, yet modern psychology says that the child must spend all his time sleeping. It says that the child should sleep for

long periods at all ages. They see only the body, but the body does not grow strong just by sleeping, it needs exercise as well. So this stress in sleep is just one of the prejudices of which the world is full, and which are obstacles in the way of the child's progress. This type of modern science has brought new prejudices.

You can tell me that humanity has existed thousands of years without psychology, without this knowledge of the conscious and the unconscious, without knowledge of the experiences which are



In the infant class, getting dressed and undressed is part of the school work. The child in this picture is the daughter of Silvana Montanaro, who has directed Assistants to Infancy training courses all over the world.

necessary for the children to have in the environment. You can ask me: When did people realize that the child must go everywhere, see everything? Well, it was not necessary to insist upon it because until modern times the mother took the child everywhere with her because she fed him herself. His food was in her body, so if she went out to work she took him with her. If she had to walk long distances, she took the child because he would be hungry without her. Every mother took her child with her. That is why there are babies with mothers in all the photographs of the different races in the geography books. Different races attached the child to them in different ways: some slung them on their backs, some carried them on their hips, etc. The Japanese carry the children on their backs with the baby's face looking over the mother's shoulder while the father carries the other child in the same way. They are the "race with two heads" for this reason. Children in this position can see the world as well as the grown-up person.

In the Eskimo country it is so cold, that we would keep our babies near a warm fire if we lived there but these people take their babies with them in a fur hood. Thus the children get accustomed to their environment so that when they begin to walk, they already know it psychically speaking. It will not be a new environment for them because they already know it in every detail.

It is the same with language. These children mixed with the adults all the time and heard them speaking. These were very living people, they did not destroy the human race. It was protected according to the laws of nature which made it necessary for the child to be with the grown-up all the time. Today we must get this idea back instead of thinking that the child must sleep.

Get rid of the idea that the child needs so much sleep. There must be a new form of education from birth. Naturally modern life has to be different, we cannot let the child and his mother be in the dirty streets, neither can we send her back to nature with him. But we can look at reality and change our treatment of little children. We can learn how to really help the development of the psychic life. This must be the first problem of education. The answer is to bring the child into the world.

