

# CHILDREN'S HOUSE: THE PREPARED ENVIRONMENT AS AN OASIS

by Cheryl Ferreira

*Cheryl Ferreira vigorously pursues the Montessori principles that are implicit for preparing a classroom where “children find all that is needed to work at self-formation and to maximize their inner potential.” The Montessori philosophy is precisely conveyed as Cheryl Ferreira details the specific elements and principles, both physical and social, that make a powerful prepared environment.*

An oasis is a fertile or green area in an arid desert region and is a place with water and trees. An oasis is a place to refresh and renew a traveler's energy so that they can continue on their journey with a renewed enthusiasm, thus with a better chance of arriving at their destination.

## ETYMOLOGY

The word *oasis* comes into English via Latin: *oasis* from Ancient Greek: *óasis*, which in turn is borrowed directly from Demotic Egyptian. The word for *oasis* in the later attested Coptic language (the descendant of Demotic Egyptian) is *wahe* or *ouahe*, which means a dwelling place.<sup>1</sup>

The word *oasis* is also used to refer to a peaceful or pleasant place that is very different from everything around it, something that provides refuge, relief, or pleasant contrast. An oasis is sometimes

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Harper. "Etymonline: Origin of 'Oasis.'" Online Etymology Dictionary. July 7, 2011 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oasis#cite\\_note-1](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oasis#cite_note-1)>.

In order for the Children's House to remain an oasis of peace for all that spend part of their day there, all of the adult members of the community must work in harmony. Children soon sense a lack of harmony between adults and this detracts from the peacefulness of the environment.

described as a paradise that heals the soul. Our world today can be compared to a concrete jungle or a spiritual desert; a world that changes constantly, where we are surrounded by chaos, stress, storms, and threats. We need to provide our children a place where there is consistency and calm, where their

physical and psychological (emotional, social, spiritual) needs are met. It is in this modern world that we can (more than ever before) call the prepared environment of the Children's House an *oasis*.

Maria Montessori saw the Children's House as being an educational environment that was different from other educational environments.

The general idea about the buildings of a modern school is that they should be hygienically correct, satisfying the laws of healthy housing, etc. Our idea is to build them so that they are psychologically satisfying; i.e., the building should correspond to the psychological needs of the children. ("The House of Children" 11)

In English we use the word *house*, which can often be interpreted as being the building in which we are situated. In Italian, the language in which Montessori lectured, she used the word *Casa*, which also means *home*. Maria Montessori envisioned the environment as being a "home sweet home" for children and a place where they felt truly at ease both physically and psychologically ("The House of Children" 11). We are all aware that an ideal Children's House comprises an indoor as well as an outdoor environment, and of this outdoor environment Maria Montessori says, "What is lacking for children is an open air environment of activity that will develop the psychic side" ("The House of Children" 17).

Let us consider what the factors are that will enable us to truly make the Children's House an oasis: a place of calm in a chaotic world. At the heart of an oasis are two factors that make it a vibrant and living place.

- Water—A lake or underground spring that comes to the surface.
- Trees—Migratory birds were often the first living creatures to find these water sources hidden in the vast deserts. The birds would stop to rest and drink and left behind seeds in their droppings, and the seeds grew along the banks, creating shade for travelers and animals and providing respite from the relentless sun.

Of these two factors, the most crucial one is the water because without water there would be no trees.

At the heart of the prepared environment there are also a few factors that are crucial and that make the Montessori Children’s House different from the other educational environments:

- the Montessori principles based on which the environment has been created, and
- the Montessori materials for development that are found in the environment.

Of these two factors again, one is crucial: the Montessori principles. Even the most beautiful, the most fully equipped prepared environment would not be what Maria Montessori intended it to be if the Montessori principles were not alive in that environment and were not actively embodied in the adults working in it. These principles must be constantly and actively practiced.

#### **WHAT IS A MONTESSORI PREPARED ENVIRONMENT?**

A prepared environment is an environment that has been specially prepared to meet the developmental needs of the children. It is a place where the children find all that is needed to work at self-formation and to maximize their inner potential. It includes the physical space, the furniture, the materials, the children, and the adults. It is a peaceful place that is free from stress, competition, and judgment. A Children’s House is a place where everyone feels welcome, accepted, and able to be themselves.

Montessori classrooms provide a prepared environment where children are free to respond to their natural tendency to work. The prepared environment offers the essential elements for optimal development. The key components comprise the children, teacher and physical surroundings including the specifically designed Montessori educational material. (Association Montessori Internationale)

The prepared environment must provide for all the developmental needs of the children: It must safeguard their development, continue to develop to keep pace with the changing needs of the children who live and work in it, and it must provide aid to life.

When we speak of environment we include the sum total of objects which a child can freely choose and use as he pleases, that is to say, according to his needs and tendencies. A teacher simply assists him at the beginning to get his bearings among so many different things and teaches him the precise use of them, that is to say, she introduces him to the ordered and active life of the environment. But then she leaves him free in the choice and execution of his work. (*The Discovery of the Child* 65)

In order then for us to create such an environment, we need not just the materials and the skill to present them but, more importantly, we must maintain it in a constant state of preparedness and guide the children who work in it. We need a clear understanding of the basic components of this environment and we must embody the Montessori principles from day to day in our practice.

I am sure that all of you are aware of these, but let us just run through the components of the prepared environment.

### **Space and Order**

Sufficient space must be available for the children to move about freely in pursuit of the purposeful activity that we call *work*. The space is made up of different areas, rather like a home, and each area is arranged in meticulous order. There is no clutter and nothing that would distract the child or hinder the child's development. We often say that there should be a space for everything and everything should be found in its place when it is not in use.

### *Indoors*

The main work area includes a kitchen or food preparation area, an area where children can rest if needed, an art area, a reading area, and a snack table. A dining area and restrooms should also be available to the main working area. The adult areas should include an office space, workroom, storeroom, adult restrooms, and kitchen.

### *Outdoors*

The outdoor area should have a quiet garden area with places to sit and read or work. There should be a space for purposeful outdoor activity, such as planting, weeding, and harvesting (practical life



Courtesy of Montessori School of Beaverton, Portland, OR

activities) and a space for gross movement activities, such as running, jumping, ball games, and climbing. The area should hold the possibility of sensorial exploration of color, shape, textures, smells, and other senso-

The child who has experienced the satisfaction of real activity, freely chosen and carried out with interest and joy, is a contented child. This will be a happy child who is at peace with him or herself and thus at peace with the world.

rial stimuli. It should also contain the possibility of language development (name labels on trees, plants, and shrubs).<sup>2</sup>

In this environment only those things are allowed to be present which will assist development. Out of it must be kept anything that would act as an obstacle, not least a too interfering adult. Even such things as are neutral or irrelevant should be rigorously excluded. The constructive psychic energy granted by nature to the child for building up his personality is limited; therefore we must do everything we can to see that it is not scattered in activities of the wrong kind. (*Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work* 267)

I will itemize below some specific elements of a prepared Montessori environment.

### *Beauty*

Everything that we put into the environment should be aesthetically pleasing and beautiful so as to call to the child and invite them to handle things. Ugly things put children off.

### *Nature and Reality*

The objects, furniture, and materials used should be natural materials as often as possible. When including tools, use real tools, not toys, and they should be efficient tools that really work.

### *Montessori Materials*

The prepared environment should have a complete set of Montessori materials in a good condition. This set of materials provides

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps it will not be possible to have all of these in the one garden. In such cases, children could walk to a nearby park for the gross motor activities. Often, with a little help from a landscape designer, many of these elements can be put in on a small scale. It is not necessary to have them on a large scale as then the garden would be too large for our young children.

the motives for activity as they stimulate spontaneous choice and this supports the development of the will.

### *Simplicity*

The materials should be simple and beautiful, not over decorative, yet practical and efficient. The materials should be easily recognizable for what they are.

### *Accessibility*

Materials should be displayed within reach of the child's eyes and hands. The child should not have to come to the adult and ask for things. This enables independence and choice.

### *Community*

The children should be a mixed-age group and be a proportionate mix of all ages between two-and-a-half to six years old.<sup>3</sup> The directress, assistant, and any other staff on the premises also form part of the community. In order for the Children's House to remain an oasis of peace for all that spend part of their day there, all of the adult members of the community must work in harmony. Children soon sense a lack of harmony between adults and this detracts from the peacefulness of the environment.

When children work as part of a community of mixed ages, they form a mini society and gradually learn to work with each other. Without adult help, the children learn to work for the community and they form what Maria Montessori refers to as a "society by cohesion." This is characteristic of the first plane. Each individual works for himself and yet works for the good of the whole. Initially this is done without awareness; as they grow older, the children become more aware, but they develop a sense of responsibility and will often demonstrate it in caring for the environment and for the younger children.

The children then are orderly and have a harmonious discipline. A discipline in which each has his different interests.... This is a social discipline and it brings people into harmony with each other. (*The Child, Society and the World* 24)

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<sup>3</sup> This can be tricky as it is often tempting to take on many young children to fill spaces and make ends meet – sometimes struggling financially for a term is the more difficult but wiser option.

## Basic Montessori Principles

The basic principle that the Montessori prepared environment is based on is *faith in the child and faith in human development*. This refers to the unshakable belief that every child has within themselves a tremendous human potential and also the power to actualize this potential to create a human individual. The unique personality will naturally unfold if provided with the assistance needed in an appropriately prepared environment. Remember “faith can move mountains.” This faith is translated into action through the adults in the environment in the following ways.

### *Respect*

Every individual in the environment must feel respected and this respect should be evident in the tone of voice and body language that is used. The respect we have for the child has as its basis our knowledge that the child is the creator of the human personality and that the child’s tremendous potential will be revealed to us. Children who live with respect will absorb this attitude and in turn will respect others.

### *Love*

The adults must love every child in the environment, in fact the adult should love every person in the environment. What do we mean by this? This love does not mean that we have to like everyone, but it does mean that we should be willing to think the best of everyone and to offer help and support when needed. We must try to see the positive in every person we come into contact with. Love can be described as follows:

Love sees only good and beauty  
Love is patient  
Love accepts all things  
Love is kind  
Love feels no envy  
Love finds joy in truth  
Love can hope til the end

The respect and love that we have for each child makes us treat each child as a truly unique individual, never comparing one with another. We see all children as equals and make no distinction between them on the basis of background. We watch and value the





Courtesy of Tim Kahn

“child who is not yet there” and greet each child everyday as though it is the first day we are meeting them and not let past incidents color our view of the child.

All the children must feel unconditionally loved, welcomed, and accepted. Every child is born filled with love for the environment and for all in it, living and nonliving. When this love is reciprocated, it grows, and the child feels wanted and secure. Children who feel entirely secure and know that they are safe will abandon their defense mechanisms and reveal their true nature to us.

In an open environment, that is, one that is suitable to his age, a child’s psychic life should develop naturally and reveal its inner secret. Unless this principle is maintained, all later attempts at education will only lead one more deeply into an endless maze. (*The Secret of Childhood* 110)

### *Peace and Calm*

The children leave their bags and belongings in the cloakroom and only bring themselves into the Children’s House. The adult also needs to put away their belongings in a safe place. When we put away our belongings, we need to put away the psychological baggage that we have carried from home. Leave all of your problems

in your locker, leave behind your plans for the evening and your list of things to do that do not relate to school. This is not easy to do, but only once we have done this can we enter the Children's House and be totally present for the rest of the day.

In order for the environment to be peaceful and calm, the adults need to come in early and prepare the environment for the day. When adults come in at the last minute, the environment is not ready and we rush about. We get stressed and short-tempered and the children sense this and get agitated and anxious. The adults who come in early enough also find time to sit down for a few moments after they finish their preparation of the environment and plan the day. They even find time for a few quiet moments with their cup of tea just to calm themselves before the children come in.

### *Freedom and Limits*

The children must enjoy the freedom to work at their development and follow the guides given by nature: the human tendencies and the sensitive periods. We observe the children, and based on these observations we offer presentations (ideally more than one presentation per child), and then we leave the child free to choose. We also need to set simple limits: The children may do any actions that respect, care for, and show consideration to their environment, both living and nonliving. These limits are modeled by us and presented and practiced through the grace and courtesy activities.

A child's liberty should have as its limit the interests of the group to which he belongs....We should therefore prevent a child from doing anything which may offend or hurt others....But everything else, every act that can be useful in any way whatever, may be expressed. It should not only be permitted but it should also be observed by the teacher. This is essential. (*The Discovery of the Child* 50)

### *Independence*

If the children are to show physical independence, we must prepare the physical environment properly. We must see that everything is child-sized and materials are placed so that they are accessible to the child's eyes and hands, and plenty of presentations should be given. When the children are allowed freedom and clear limits

are set, we see the children slowly grow in independence. They are able to do things by themselves and for themselves.

The child seeks for independence by means of work; an independence of body and mind. Little he cares about the knowledge of others; he wants to acquire knowledge of his own, to have experience of the world, and to perceive it by his own unaided efforts. We must clearly understand that when we give the child freedom and independence, we are giving freedom to a worker already braced for action, who cannot live without working and being active.  
(*The Absorbent Mind* 83)

Our primary aim is to assist development in the child in such a manner that the child is not aware of receiving assistance. Mr. Swamy (who took over from Mr. Joosten as director of training in India) used to tell us that Maria Montessori would say, "The child should not feel the weight of the hand that was offering the help, the help should thus be offered as indirectly as possible." The best way and most indirect way to offer help is to offer it through the environment. By modifying the environment, or the community of children in the environment, higher levels of independence will gradually be seen.

There is a constant interaction between the individual and the environment. The use of things shapes man (the human being), and man (the human being) shapes things. This reciprocal sharing is a manifestation of man's (the human being's) love for his surroundings. Harmonious interaction, when it exists, as in the child, represents the normal relationship that should exist between the individual and his surroundings. And this relationship is one of love.  
(*Education and Peace* 57)

### *The Work Cycle*

The children must experience a complete work cycle, and each activity has its own cycle that the child must complete. Over the course of the day, the children also experience their own work cycles. They are able to work at their own individual pace and follow their own rhythm. Their work patterns evolve. Often the child will start with a simple activity and slowly build up to the major work of the day, an activity that leads to concentration. Once they emerge from the main work, some will do a simpler activity as though they are resting and ruminating on the finished work even. We try to pro-

vide the longest possible period for the children who choose their own work. The work cycle thus starts when the child arrives in the classroom and continues until lunch time. Older children will have another work cycle after lunch, often until it is time to go home. These uninterrupted work cycles enable children to experience a sense of unlimited time so that they do not feel rushed. There are small groups as when needed, but there is no fixed time set for the groups. Sometimes there may not be a group at all, or there may be times when a large group evolves naturally of its own volition.

### **Outcomes for the Child**

#### *Self-Discipline and Inner Discipline*

Children who live in a supportive environment are able to make independent choices. They are able to choose an activity and complete it and this will lead to the development of the will. Self-control and the ability to self-motivate will culminate in the achievement of self-discipline.

#### *Social Development*

Children spend their day as part of a mixed age group in a Montessori classroom, a developmental community. The younger



Courtesy of Tim Kahn

children look up to and admire the work of the older ones and are secure in the knowledge that they will one day be doing such activities themselves. The older children learn to be caring, considerate, and patient with the younger ones and to show patience and understanding. Understanding and respect evolve in the environment as they learn to respect each other's work and to wait for their turn.

There is only one specimen of each object, and if a piece is in use when another child wants it, the latter, if he is normalised, will wait for it to be released. Important social qualities derive from this. The child comes to see that he must respect the work of others, not because someone has said that he must, but because this is a reality that he meets in his daily experience. (*The Absorbent Mind* 203)

The children learn from each other and peer teaching occurs spontaneously. There is an atmosphere of co-operation that rules out competition and bullying does not exist. Although they work individually, the work that the children do still contributes to the community. For example, the child who cuts fruit to practice his cutting skills is contributing to the snack table, or the child who takes great pleasure in washing dishes provides clean dishes for the others to use. The children gradually grow in awareness of each other's needs and of the needs of the community. The children develop into strong individuals and are prepared to be responsible members of society.

Teachers who use direct methods cannot understand how social behaviour is fostered in a Montessori school. They think it offers scholastic material but not social material. They say 'If the child does everything on his own, what becomes of social life?' But what is social life if not the solving of social problems, behaving properly and pursuing aims acceptable to all? To them, social life consists in sitting side by side and hearing someone else talk: but that is just the opposite... The only social life that children get in ordinary schools is during playtime or on excursions. Ours live always in an active community. (*The Absorbent Mind* 204)

### *Normalization*

Children who are motivated from within make spontaneous choices that are based on spontaneous interests. They repeat activities with maximum effort and this leads to concentration, which is the first

step on the path to normalization. The child who has experienced the satisfaction of real activity, freely chosen and carried out with interest and joy, is a contented child. This will be a happy child who is at peace with him or herself and thus at peace with the world. The normalized child is helpful and considerate of others, confident, calm and holds a sense of dignity and self-worth. Normalization is a process, and when children find an environment that supports them and can continue to move along the path to normalization, the attitudes described become part of them. They grow into individuals who have a positive outlook on life, are optimistic, and have trust in their environment. When a child trusts that their environment will provide for their needs, they will care for and respect the environment. When a child trusts in themselves, they know that with sufficient effort they will succeed. They will not be afraid to make mistakes because they know that they can always work out a solution. A child who trusts others in their community are helpful and supportive and will be able to live in harmony with their world.

The child who has felt a strong love for his surroundings and for all living creatures, who has discovered joy and enthusiasm in work, gives us reason to hope that humanity can develop in a new direction. Our hope for peace in the future lies not in the formal knowledge the adult can pass on to the child, but in the normal development of the new human being. (*Education and Peace* 58)

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