

# THE POSITIVE PERSONALITY OF THE MONTESSORI ADOLESCENT

by Pat Ludick

*A theory paper that gives a universal portrait of the “noble adolescent” directly quotes from Montessori. Pat Ludick defines the adolescent as they search for their future roles in a changing world, seek a happy life, form a compatible and collaborative personality, learn humility, and become aware of the head-heart duality. The teacher’s role in the prepared adolescent environment is to bring out a stunning list of virtues. The Montessori educational syllabus shows how academic expectations are rooted in the character development that matures with meaningful socially oriented work, self-expression, and referencing to inner virtues. The more we see, the more bedazzling the adolescent’s moral and spiritual development will appear.*

I love the idea of a refresher course! Whether you are a parent, a practitioner, a head of school, or a professional who works with young people in any area of life, my sense is that mid-February denotes a time when we are probably breathing under water and in need of rejuvenation and revitalization in spirit. Understanding our work in a deeper way helps us to see our way forward; it really does. Hopefully by exploring this afternoon’s topic, where positivity and personality is wrapped in an adolescent package of mystery, we will be able to come up for air.

It is clear that becoming a fully developed human being is both a significant and a complex task. It is a slow process that is influenced by experiences and interactions within a community or

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many communities in which we learn, work, serve, and grow. Whether you find yourself in the first or second half of life, it is riveted with all kinds of questions, curious insights, and provocative considerations. During the first half of life, psychologists tell us that we are building the container

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(ego) that will eventually be emptied out generously in service during the second half of your life. Work with the adolescent seems to speed up that first-half/second-half process! Perhaps we come to see that serving our young people takes a generosity beyond comprehension, a magnanimity of spirit, which is my favorite mantra! We are cast into the realm of understanding life (often our own lives), of clarifying citizenship roles (often our own), of sorting spiritual and social dilemmas, of dealing with the grand mysteries of life on this planet and then embracing the wonder of human personality development, all on a daily basis. That being said, here we are: ready to reflect, ready to see what principles are at the heart of this important lifework, ready to be renewed in spirit and revitalized in understanding.

What I would like to do initially is to give you an outline of how we will move through this topic. I would like to establish a platform from Dr. Montessori's impressions regarding personality development, particularly at the adolescent level of formation. Next I would like to jump right into a critical area of the prepared environment by taking a penetrating look at the role of the adult guide as an integral part of the adolescent's formation process. My reason for this is simply that we can only see the positivity aspect of the adolescent personality if our lenses are polished and focused in the right direction and if we have done our own inner work. From those two reflections we will explore the positive personality of the Montessori adolescent within the context of a Montessori program, mindful of their characteristics, their corresponding needs, and the celebration of their capacity for life. Finally, I will share with you in a brief introductory manner, (for there are numerous workshops ahead this weekend), the guiding

support we have in our practice by way of the “Plan for Studies and Work” as found in “Montessori’s Vision Statement” in the appendices of *From Childhood to Adolescence*.

So, to set the stage, I will discuss the Montessori’s mindset; the practitioner, a role we play in this process of seeing the more-researched characteristics that guide our responses; and then the support we find in Montessori’s syllabus as we enable young people to become their best human selves.

### PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT

The study of personality requires that we understand what we mean by the terms *personality* and *development*. That is a little intimidating for me as I do not claim to be a psychologist. I have the work boots and the heart of a Montessori practitioner. To me, honoring the presence of the developing personality means being able to objectively view each adolescent as they are: a complicated wonder with paradoxical aspects galore. However, one must do so with the accepted fact that there is *so* much more than is evident. Montessori speaks to that when she suggests that to be a Montessori guide, one must possess a keen sense of imagination. One must honor the idea that nature is at work and we must have faith in its designs. I must accept their temperament, their natural gifts, their interests, their style of learning, their hurts, their experience in life thus far, and I must respond with fervor to their natural human tendencies as revealed at the third plane.

By development, I go back to the constructive stages of human growth, knowing that there are sensitivities (social and spiritual), and that there are unique characteristics evident at the third plane. There has been the experience of infancy and childhood, just as surely as there will be the experience of young adulthood and mature adulthood. Mario Montessori Jr. makes this argument in his book, *Education for Human Development*. He boldly states,

It is a mistake to think that development will happen of its own accord, or that the personality traits considered necessary for well-adjusted behavior within a community come into being only during adolescence. A long and indirect process of preparation is necessary before these

traits become manifest. Personal experiences during early childhood determine the role they play in the mature personality, as well as how they are expressed. (75)

We embrace life as a process rather than an event and that makes all the difference. We know that human personhood is at the core of all human structures, so it is not surprising that Dr. Montessori reminds us often of the importance of basing our work upon that premise. She is bent on social reform, we all know that. In the appendices of *From Childhood to Adolescence* as well in several of her lectures as collected in *Education and Peace*, she lays out the condition of society and then directs us to consider our guidance of the adolescent from that vantage point. She sees the influence and power of culture and how it forms our attitudes so deeply that we don't recognize them as chosen attitudes. It is an emotional seeing that is not easily overcome. There is something urgent in her repeated message. She makes the point over and over that we need to respond to the natural unfolding of the human being, to



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use that as our guide in education. In speaking of the need of the young person to understand their role as a man/woman/citizen, she shares a strong thought that certainly could have been lifted right out of this moment in our twenty-first century of life. She sees our role with adolescents as centered in the need to both protect and encourage the blossoming of their personalities and refers to them as “the human energy on which the future depends” (*From Childhood to Adolescence* xii).

If we must specify which of the social circumstances of our time that has the greatest effect on the problems we are considering, [that of educating the adolescent] we should say that it is the fact that the future seems insecure and full of unknown factors. The material world is in the process of rapid evolution and contains the dangers and uncertainties of a new adjustment. The world is partly in a state of disintegration and partly in a state of reconstruction. It is the alternation of progress and regression that produces this characteristic instability. The world is like a piece of land that is going through the vicissitudes of a settlement of the soil. Such being the condition of society, we ought to remember that there is one thing that education can take as a sure guide, and that is the personality of the children who are to be educated. (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 98)

From *Education and Peace* we read,

Education must concern itself not only with the protection of the personality but also with guiding man towards the treasures that will ensure him a happy life—the intelligence of humanity and a normal human personality. We must not waste even one ounce of this wealth; we must hoard it as the riches of this earth were hoarded in the past. Intelligence, a balanced personality, and the unity of all mankind as a single organism are man’s wealth. What is needed today is an education that will lead the human personality to recognize man’s grandeur.

What is the task confronting education? It is above all the task of mending breaches, filling in the gaps that are vast and serious. Its primary goals must be the realization of the values of the human personality and the development of mankind. (54)

These are just a few of Dr. Montessori's strong directives. I invite you yourself to pick up any piece of her literature and you will recognize the word *personality* woven again and again throughout her impressions of life, human development and the role of education.

**SEEING THE MORE: THE ROLE OF THE ADULT AS PART  
OF THE PREPARED ENVIRONMENT**

This topic is a challenging one even though it has been addressed and continues to be reflected upon over and over again as part of the formal training courses, as part of our personal efforts toward renewal and refreshment, and as part of our professional development. However, as I continue to serve young people in an adolescent community and as I work with teachers in workshops during our summer orientations, I know that it is in need of revisiting. Why? Because we are called constantly to recognize our need to go to the edges and discover what impact our interactions with these young personalities means to their development. We are constantly called to deal with paradox. In fact, every time we lean too far in any one direction, we will be slammed in the face with paradox.

Can I revisit my training and remember that moment when I was able to let go of our present culture, that chorus of voices all talking at once, and then center my attention upon the gift of life?

Dr. Montessori invited us to study our humanness and our role as educators in the light of perceiving the child as a gift, as a creature equipped with incredible natural powers and with a great destiny looming. If the child is nurtured by a prepared environment suiting his natural being, he would become a power for good, a change agent in our ailing and confused society. Do we still believe that? Do we see that same power in our adolescents, that there is something sacred at work? Do we believe that the human at the third plane of construction is poised to be a light in our world? Is our lens focused in the right direction so that we can hear and respond? Do we need to refresh our spirits and draw a larger brightness around our work? Do we see the charge that is ours by the very fact that we are not by vocation teachers of subjects, although skill and depth are very important,



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but rather good, consistent, and tolerant adult guides who must keep our students in touch with their own gifts and spirits? As guides who *love* them?

Montessori spoke of the condition wherein teachers must see the child, the adolescent.

The teachers must have the greatest respect for the young personality, realizing that in the soul of the adolescent great values are hidden, and that in the minds of these boys and girls there lies all our hope of future progress and the judgment of ourselves and our time. (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 112)

She invited us to be humble so that we could see the more positive characteristics within the formative personality. We must serve the developing human with all-out generosity. The adolescent expects us to work hard, to act morally, to be well-prepared, to listen and to process thoughtfully, and to do what is right when it is hard to do right. We must separate ourselves from what she names as judgments about the child, the adolescent, those stemming from pride and power. Radical grace is needed as we recognize being and goodness as the same thing.

When we took the personality of the child into account in and of itself and offered it full scope to develop in our schools—where we constructed an environment that answered the needs of his spiritual development—he revealed to us a personality entirely different from the one we had previously taken into consideration with traits exactly the opposite of those attributed to him by others. (*Education and Peace* 15)

Given that we are operating from this place of humble belief, what do we see as identifiable positive personality characteristics in adolescents and when do we see these revealed within our prepared environments? And then how do these personality traits instruct our practice?

Years ago, when we were just beginning Montessori work at the third plane, Larry Schaefer, from Lake Country School in Minnesota, delivered a moving and charming presentation in Chicago that was titled, “Dancing with the Adolescent.” How I love that analogy! In it he shared several meaningful observations that have endured over time and place. My thoughts will probably echo some of his revelations because they have proven to be constant and true to the personality of these emerging adults over time and place, in both urban and rural environments in my own experience.

#### THE POSITIVE CHARACTERISTICS

##### **The Montessori Adolescent Is Curious, Creative, and Original**

There is a freshness of thought and a joy in learning. Thanks to the work of the Children’s House and elementary workshops, Montessori adolescents arrive in our communities with a richness of view and an eagerness to explore. They are set for reality-based learning and application of all that has come before. They have a wide range of intellectual pursuits in spite of a somewhat low rate of sustainability in those pursuits, at least in young adolescents. How they love to ask the deep questions and to express themselves in polished and explosive ways. Mind you, the stage must be set. The conscience must be pricked with precise questions, but oh, are they able and strong little people when we provide an environment that respects their human tendencies: movement, activity, exploration, and work of the hands and head. They certainly prefer active rather

than passive learning experiences, particularly if those experiences connect with their world and themselves. They need lots of opportunities to integrate the arts within the content areas of science and humanities and mathematics, then these positive characteristic meets us head-on.

The value of the personality must have been nurtured by each individual through active efforts and positive experiences. (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 130)

### **They Are Authentic**

They know on some level that they are classic examples of paradox. Yet and not yet; Now and not now; Here and not here! Montessori's words that "they live in a state of expectation" ring true. They accept this in each other better than we can totally accept that part of their beings, and our own state of being for that matter. They live in the realm of sometime rather than time. Oh, what a curious place to be and yet how refreshing! Listen to a work from the pen of a Montessori adolescent as he grapples with the tensions within his heart and his head:

I, the heart, am a lover of all things, and open to all things.  
I, the head, only accept what I think is correct.  
I, the heart, use pure instincts to guide me.  
I, the head, organize my thoughts and let nothing distract me.  
I, the heart, am free of chains and bindings.  
Oh, Heart, I am not bound up or chained to my studies. I am just fixing a world that you have scrambled up.  
Oh, Head, I have embraced the world with love and emotion, and you should consider the same.  
Oh, Heart, I have learned knowledge, from mathematical algorithms to the accursed questions of life. I have loved these more than you ever could.  
Oh, Head, you give me anxiety and frustrate me down to my core. Why can't you stick your head in the clouds and see what I see?  
Oh, Heart, when shall you come down to earth and realize that knowledge is everything?  
Oh, Head. Love is a forever hungry beast that will never rest.

### **Montessori Adolescents Are Big Picture People**

It continues to amaze me that they really come to us with those seeds of Cosmic Education planted deeply in their beings.

They see the world in unique ways, with open arms and with ever opening minds. As their power to abstract increases, they tend to examine the world with that awareness; waiting, wondering, and realizing that there is more to see, more to understand, more to experience. They see themselves as members of a diverse human community. Their prejudices are relatively few as they thirst for justice, their innate understanding of interdependence is ripening with an invitation to deal with the harsh reality of a polarized and often ignorant citizenry. They see hope and they see solutions. They recognize the world as huge but amazingly accessible. They are connected with the natural world with an innate sense of advocacy and dedication.

### **They Are Compassionate and Forgiving**

Montessori adolescents can be guided to embrace that important virtue of empathy, especially with their peers. They are forgiving of adults, if adults place themselves in that humble place of asking for forgiveness. They long for justice and order. Just a few weeks ago, as part of the study of world views, the students composed *This I believe* statements as part of the third period of their journey into some understanding of world religions. As each young person voluntarily came to the lectern to read their statements, honesty, genuine compassion, and pure trust filled the little community room. One spoke of the pain of her parents' divorce, but now she had come to love her stepmother; another of his close call to death as a ten-year-old and of his mother's vigilance during that time; another of his struggle with faith for he felt he was purely a scientist and wished to stay that way; another of her feeling of abandonment due to her mother's absence as a high powered CEO. "I know you all think I am really sure of myself and that I have everything, but guess what, I am not. I am confused and long for a stable simple family life." The revelations continued. However, what I noticed was that each struggled to see what they had learned about life through their pain. They looked at each other with love and awe and total understanding. Tears were flowing in response to the hon-

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est sharing within the group; it was more than touching. It was a genuine community response as compassion was poured out freely. They were embracing each other's pain while proclaiming themselves victorious over their own life's struggles.

### **They Have High Expectations of Themselves**

There is that beautiful element of idealism, and their expectations are high of the adults who surround them. Having absorbed the honored culture of work in a Montessori primary and elementary environment, they compete with themselves in unique ways. Remember, they are pointing us toward an enlightened society. They are telling us that it is possible to stretch, that they must follow their tendencies toward developing their innate potential. Conversations with parents often show us such characteristics. The parent feels that the student is burdened with studies or work of the home or even manual work, but then says that her daughter is driven and says repeatedly that she loves what she is doing and wants to push forward because she can. The parent worries but the adolescent persists. Their self-evaluations always indicate that they are hard on themselves. There is something deeply embedded that drives them toward full development, perhaps self-perfection.

### **They Value the Gift of Independence and of Choice**

They are coming to understand the implications that freedom and responsibility bring and are willing to learn what duty is all about. They need to test this out. They still rely on significant adults for advice in making major decisions; it is all the more important to be in the wings when those times evolve. They need to make mistakes and to sort those occurrences out. They need to determine what went right and where did it go wrong? Why? You see this when they make their own guidelines for behavior, when they work on topics of conscious choice based on interest, when they organize the community as it reaches out to others. When they take on the dynamics involved in a small business venture and when they sort out social issues in a council meeting, the process is very meaningful. They are also concerned with major societal issues as their own personal value systems develop. This calls for a lot of processing and critical thinking opportunities.

While they can be problem makers, (a bit tangled at times in social situations that tend to go awry—always dramatically), they are also talented problem solvers. With their increased capacity for logical thought and their gradually developing critical thinking skills, they can take on the multi-dimensional facets of living on earth, of being human. They have a capacity for seeing through the frosted glass of world problems. Often Thomas Merton's words come to my mind when I deal with that darkness: "We live in a world of organized despair." I wonder how the adolescent will rebound. While we are a bit soured by what we see again and again in our own human experience, they are not influenced in that way. Just last week a student came to me to explain that a waitress in a restaurant was rude to her when she and her friends came to eat after their Irish dancing class. As she approached their table with menus in hand and a smirk on her face, she sarcastically said, "Hmm, I suppose you and your friends just want water." Mary told me it stung for a moment but then she explained politely that she and her friends came for a nice meal and would enjoy seeing a menu. She overlooked the remark with maturity and moved forward. When I pressed her on the situation she said that she knew she could teach the waitress by way of her respectful comment. She said that perhaps some teenagers in town did that stunt and that she and her friends needed to set the situation straight! This was seemingly such a little experience from a little girl who at the seventh level would barely speak. However, for her it was a milestone. It was a rite of passage, let alone the seed of mission!

### **They Are Content With Creative Tensions**

They are aware of the tensions that surround the human experience and can accept these tensions once they are empowered as non-dualistic thinkers and once they have a sense of a stable community in which they can talk out their theories. Perhaps this is more defined in the older adolescent but I see it in its early form at the younger adolescent level. We visited a Buddhist temple, a Jewish temple, and a mosque as part of our studies of world views. The adolescents' reflections were so insightful as they took in the hard questions of understanding diverse and complex views. It was not unsettling for them; it was as if they knew those tensions all along! I am convinced that they are much more open to paradox than most

adults as long as they can process experiences in a safe and respectful way within a community of learners. As we concentrate on issues of war and peace, the same situation seems to prevail.

Now, I must say that those positive personality traits just don't happen. The prepared environments we create and maintain within our vibrant communities enable those attributes to be revealed over and over again. We create places where the human tendencies are respected and honored as personal drives that begin as personal and innate and end up as energies that drive the community forward.

Community, a safe and recognizable place of belonging, enables the positive characteristics to unfold and to be recognized and eventually valorized. Mario Montessori Jr. boldly states in *Education for Human Development*, that "Man cannot be understood as an individual. It is only in a community that he becomes human and that his potentialities can be recognized" (38). The function of community is to sustain us in our weaknesses, model for us the ultimate of our ideals, carry us to the next level of spiritual growth even when we are unaware that we need it, and give us a strength beyond ourselves with which to attain it. Communal life should be a well-articulated code of ethics, grace and courtesy, with a place for the little voices as well as the big voices to be honored. The adults should gather with youth and listen with loving hearts and patient spirits, where silence is respected, where order is exacted, and where problems are seen as opportunities. Community is a place where we come to make life work together! Within an authentic community we live our way into a new way of thinking. We are bound in relationships that call us to a new way of relating, of working, of vision making. We don't pull out when the picture seems dreary. We celebrate the small successes and the opportunity to grow.

### **Meaningful Work**

Meaningful work is a value, a respected culture, established in their earlier Montessori years. It is another venue where we see the positive attributes revealed and flourishing, especially in a collaborative setting. Work on the land, work in the area of their small business, work in places within the local community of adults, work with elders, and work that serves others in need. Work that is col-



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laborative and even risky. Work that calls them to deep research and challenging intellectual activity. Work that responds to their natural gifts. (It has been speculated that the closer we are in touch with the strength of our gifts, the less likely we are drawn into negativity and conflict.) Work that is real and hard and tiring! Work that stretches their experience of life! Yes, again, the culture of work created in the Children’s House and in the elementary workshops takes on new importance. It enables engagement and peace and well-being on so many levels. How many times have we heard the adage: *work normalizes!* Indeed, it does just that!

Then there is the “Program for Work and Study” as found in the appendices. As the adolescents experience the many facets of active learning within this framework, they are combining the work of the learning community with the respected ethic for work itself. The Montessori adolescent really exhibits a desire to be challenged, to cultivate habits of the mind that will lead her forward into an intelligent adulthood. There is a conscientiousness and a desire for competency that is evident. Even conventional studies reveal this attribute as blossoming during the teenage years (Santrock 10). Those

studies affirm Montessori's belief in specialists for this age, stating that adolescents need access to positive social contexts and competent people in the community. We may see it as a greater sense of duty, one they wish to assume with credibility. It feels to me as if they are waiting for the naming rights to their best selves all around!

The Montessori Syllabus responds to the development of the construction of the personality in an explicit and implicit manner. Its design provides us with a venue where we can indeed recognize the Montessori adolescent in both profound and beautifully simple ways. It aligns with their characteristics and developmental needs so we are gifted with a path. We are so fortunate as teachers to have this plan for it sharpens our awareness and invites us to active implementation. Several of the presenters will be speaking to the specifics of these guidelines during this weekend but allow me to mention briefly a few apparent connections to personality development.

### **Personal Expression**

When the adolescent, younger or older, has the opportunity to access the prepared specialist in a small peer group setting and is free to express himself through the arts (language, music, photography, movement, cooking, and the like), you will see engagement, joy, and a new self-awareness revealed. For some students, that is the key that unlocks the self. "The human personality must be given a chance to realize every one of its capabilities" (*Education and Peace* 131).

### **Psychic Formation**

We gave a lot of time last February to the development of personality through this area of the educational syllabus. It is through these areas of focus that the collective experiences of the mind and spirit pave the way for conscience personality development: a conscience that is educated to deal with that world of disintegration and reconstruction mentioned earlier.

In the fierce battle for civil life, a man must have a strong character and quick wits as well as courage; he must be strengthened in his principles by moral training and he must also have practical ability in order to face the difficulties of life." (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 99)

The issue of adaptability looms. The adolescent becomes the skater, pushing both right and left. She will eventually get to where she desires to go for the balance of freedom and responsibility reigns. At the same time, we as informed adults are challenged to ask the hard questions about life, about social responsibility, about world citizenship. We need to skate right along with them, fearless and eager to learn ourselves.

### **Preparation for Adult Life**

Oh the richness and the positive glimmers of hope we receive when this section of the syllabus is unpacked within our prepared environments for learning. Activity, depth, breadth, and reflection are woven into this beautiful work. The human story is one that captivates the adolescent and enables us to introduce her to noble figures and diverse personalities of the past. The outrageous and the strong, the weak and the powerful are all poised to teach us about the human condition. The sciences come alive through occupations and real life investigations about problem-solving strategies that instruct and aid in our understanding of nature and supranature. Scientists and their searches for truth, the use of technology and its effect upon change, all of these revelations inspire and call out to the adolescent for insights, discourse, and problem-solving.

Finally, I would like to share a portion of the third appendices with you. I feel that it puts some proper closing thoughts upon all that we have tried to recognize as part of the unfolding personality of our teenagers from a positive perspective. It seems to combine the human with the divine, the earthling with the heavenly creature, the flesh with the deep spirit, and the yet with the not yet.

In the final pages of *From Childhood to Adolescence*, Montessori asks us to consider a strong analogy between Christ as an adolescent, which is quite curious and bold of her, I think. She speaks simply and beautifully of this human story that serves as an allegory on so many levels.

Then comes the epoch of adolescence, an epoch of inner revelations and social sensibilities. Christ as a boy, forgetful of his family, is heard to discuss with the doctors. He does not talk as a pupil but as a teacher, dazzling by the flashes of his light. (134)

Dazzling by flashes of his light! Then she suggests, he returns to his family, his community, to carry on with practical life and to continue his humble formation process. The light is there. It will be revealed in a variety of ways but it is there! It will come and go. It will blind us and yet light the way. It will allow us to stumble through the darkness and weariness on life's journey.

I wish for all of us to be dazzled by our adolescents—really dazzled. They have secrets we are yet to discover and their personalities are indeed flashes of light that ultimately can warm and enlighten us and the world. It is our work to see more by providing prepared environments that reflect protection and understanding and clear expectations, all the while teaching responsible citizenship. We must look lovingly but honestly at ourselves, polishing our lenses, changing what must be changed within our hearts, and adjusting the art of our practice accordingly. We must guard and guide the places that enable community life to flourish. This is the most important aspect of our presence with the adolescent, and it never provides much of a plateau upon which to rest. With all of these elements in place, the noble adolescent will emerge and dazzle and delight and question and argue and take on life with energy!

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