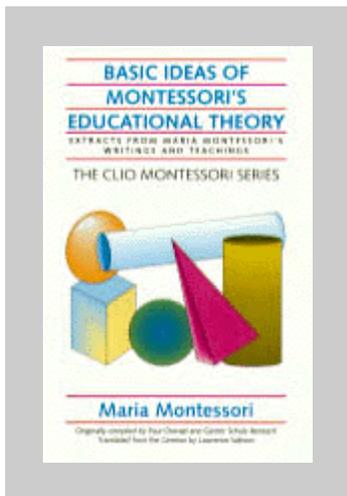




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BASIC IDEAS OF MONTESSORI'S EDUCATIONAL THEORY

EXTRACTS FROM MARIA MONTESSORI'S WRITINGS AND TEACHINGS
THE CLIO MONTESSORI SERIES

Maria Montessori

Compiled by Paul Oswald and Günter Schulz-Benesch
Translated from the German by Lawrence Salmon

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FORWARD TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

Prof. Dr. Schulz-Benesch

The publication of this compilation of the 'Basic Ideas of Montessori's Educational Theory' was initially motivated by the fact that Montessori's writings are scattered throughout her long lifetime, and are extant in several languages. Montessori's ideas and educational practice were inaccessible in many places, and a compilation of authentic passages aimed to make her work readily available. Since then, reprints of Montessori's earlier books have appeared in German, and now also in English, along with previously unpublished works from the Montessori legacy,¹ meeting the demand for greater reading matter.

The many reprints of this volume, however, are to be seen in the light of the main reason for its publication, which remains as before: the range of Montessori's output and a certain lack of order in her writings (many of which actually originated as lecture notes) suggest the need to allow the author herself to summarize her basic ideas on education in this limited space; an introduction to Montessori by Montessori, as it were.

Continuing international demand prompted us to make the thought and work of the great educationalist more readily accessible in this way, not only to readers with a special interest in Montessori, but to all those who are concerned with educational issues. Real-life illustration is provided by the reports by various authors dealing with practical work and the further development of Montessori's theory in the field of special education. The volume ends with a brief biography of this important Italian woman and cosmopolitan figure.

We share the belief of the Nobel Prize winner Nico Tinbergen 'that by decoding Montessori's slightly Victorian language and rephrasing it in modern idiom, one recognizes her unique genius, and we are convinced that her ideas deserve as close study as those of Darwin and Freud.'² Indeed, we would add that Montessori's continuing relevance has its roots in her shrewd observation of the phenomena of child behavior and at the same time in her understanding of the universal human significance of education: 'Today education is not so much interested in science as in humanity and civilization, which has only one fatherland, the world.' Thus wrote Montessori as early as 1909 in her first famous book.³

1 cf. M. Montessori, *The Child, Society and the World*, Oxford 1989.

2 E.A. Tinbergen//N. Tinbergen, *Early Childhood Autism; An Ethological Approach*, in: *Zeitschrift für Tierpsychologie*, supplement 10 (1972), p. 52

3 M. Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, Oxford 1988, p.5

THE FORGOTTEN FELLOW CITIZEN

The Child in Modern Society

1938 (1)

The child, who is the essence of a natural being, lives, on the face of it, alongside the adult, and depending on the parental home is subject to the most varied conditions. However, he will always remain alien to the social labour of the adult, for the social production process has no use for the

child's activity. Indeed, we must bear in mind that the child has absolutely no possibility of sharing in the social labour of the adult. If we take as a symbol of manual labour that of a blacksmith pounding a massive anvil with his hammer, then we realize that the child would never be capable of such an effort. If on the other hand we envisage as a symbol of intellectual labour that of a scientist carrying out complicated research with the aid of highly sensitive instruments, we recognize that in this area also the child cannot be expected to contribute. And finally, if we think of a legal expert striving to improve the law, then we shall be left in no doubt that his place as well cannot be taken by the child. The child is entirely alien to this society of men, and his position might be characterized by the words of the Bible 'My Kingdom is not of this world.' He is therefore a being who lives entirely apart from the social order created by men, a stranger in the artificial world which man has constructed for himself alongside and away from nature. In the world into which he is born, the child is first and foremost an extra-social being, if by that we understand someone who is not able to adapt to human society, nor to take part in its productive labours or the rules of its organization, and who thus disturbs the established order. In fact, in all adult society the child is an outsider who invariably has a disruptive influence, even in his own home. His inability to adapt is aggravated by the fact that he is an active being, and unable to live without activity. Hence the need to oppose this activity, to force the child to restrain himself and not to cause any annoyance, to reduce him to passivity. So he is shut up in special rooms called playrooms and nurseries which, though not prisons like those provided for certain types of antisocial adult, are nevertheless something fairly similar. Or else he is banished to school, to that exile which adults reserve for children until they are able to live in the adult world without disrupting it. Only then can he be admitted to human society. First he must submit to the adult like someone with no civil rights, since from a social perspective he does not even exist. The adult is his lord and master, and the child remains subject to his orders, from which there is no appeal, and which are consequently considered a priori just. The small child appears from nowhere on the family scene, and the adult to him is big and powerful like a god, and is the only one who can provide for his vital needs. The adult is his creator, his providence, his master, his judge. Never has anyone been so completely and utterly dependent on another as the child is on the adult.

1938 (2)

Parents must openly and willingly confront the most burning social issue: the struggle for the recognition of the rights of the child. Much has been said in recent years about the rights of man, and especially about the rights of the worker. But now the time has come when we must speak of the social rights of the child. The labour question lays the foundations for social change, but mankind lives solely from human labour, and so the material existence of humanity as a whole was dependent on the solution to the problem. But if the labourer produces what man consumes; and is a creator of external objects; the child produces nothing less than mankind itself, and for that reason concern for his rights makes social transformation all the more urgent. It is unnecessary to point out that society should provide children with the fullest and most judicious care; for they after all are the ones from whom we hope for greater strength and greater opportunities for the people of tomorrow. The fact that the rights of the child have been forgotten and ignored, that the child has been mistreated, even destroyed, and that moreover his worth, power and nature have been misunderstood, should all give humanity serious food for thought.

1949 (3)

The field of child-life and child-education is one in which all have had experience right from the beginning of man's appearance on earth, and in which they continue to have experience. These experiences have had a long time to consolidate and to become universal. Unfortunately there are also modern branches of science or attempts at science, which have developed around the most superficial manifestations of child behaviour (actually around the 'effects' of outer circumstances) and these reached an easy compromise with those prejudices which every adult cherishes regarding the child. That is why the manifestations of child-life which we mentioned are not observed by people 'who have eyes and see' but by those already blinded by prejudice.

These prejudices are so universal that it is difficult to have them recognized as such. They are

confused and strengthened by the evidence of facts because all, or nearly all, see the child as he is commonly recognized, not the child as he is, still an unknown entity. In fact if one should tell an audience that in order to reform education many prejudices have to be overcome, the most progressive and unbiased among the listeners would think at once of prejudices relating to what has, or has not, to be taught and not of prejudices regarding the child himself. They think that it is a question of removing prejudices and errors from what is taught, so as not to transmit them to the younger generation. Some hold that the teaching of dogmatic religious conceptions should be avoided; others that teaching must abolish prejudice between the social classes; others again that certain formal habits no longer belonging to our society should be eliminated, and so on.

It seems, however, as yet inconceivable that there are prejudices which 'prevent' us from seeing the child from a point of view different from that which is usually taken of him.

Yet those who study child-psychology and education must take into account, not those social prejudices which bother modern educationalists so much but other prejudices; those which concern the child directly, his natural attributes and powers, the abnormal conditions of his life.

By removing religious prejudice, it may perhaps be possible to understand better the greatness or significance of religions but not the natural personality of the child. By removing prejudices concerning social castes, it may be possible to intensify the understanding and harmony between the members of society, but it will not help to a better understanding of the child. If many formalities in our social relations are recognized to be futile, belonging to the past, we may witness a reform of social customs, but we will not understand the child any better.

All that seems to contribute to social progress among adults can, according to common opinion, leave the vital necessities of childhood aside. The adult has always seen only himself in society and in its progress. The child has remained outside society; an unknown quantity in the equation of life.

Hence a prejudice has found its way into the adult; the notion that the life of the child can be changed or improved only through teaching. This prejudice impedes the understanding of the fact that the child constructs himself, that he has a teacher within himself and this inner teacher also follows a programme and a technique of education, and that we adults by acknowledging this unknown teacher may enjoy the privilege and good fortune of becoming its assistants and faithful servants by helping it with our co-operation.

Many other prejudices are the logical consequences of this one. It is said that the mind of a child is empty; without a guide and without laws of its own. Adults, therefore, are supposed to have the great and complete responsibility of filling it, guiding and commanding it. It is believed that the child is naturally inclined towards a number of defects, towards decadence and inertia, that by nature it is blown hither and thither as a feather driven before the wind, and that adults, therefore, must stimulate and encourage him, correct and guide him all the time.

In the same way it is assumed in the physical order that the child cannot control his movements and is incapable of taking care of himself, and so the adult hurries to do everything for him without bothering to consider what the child can very well manage alone. The child is then said to be a heavy burden and a great responsibility as he requires this constant care. The attitude of the adult to the child is that he must 'create' in him a grown-up man and the intelligence, the socially useful activity, the character of this human being, who has entered his home, are all his work.

Then pride is born as an accompaniment to this anxiety and sense of responsibility. The child seen in this light owes infinite respect and gratitude to his creators, his saviours. If, instead, he rebels he must be corrected, must be brought into submission with the help of violence, if necessary. In order to be perfect, the child must then be perfectly passive and most rigorously obedient. He is a perfect parasite of his parents and as long as these assume the whole economical burden of his life, he must depend upon them absolutely. He is a 'child.' Even when he has grown up and has to shave regularly each morning before attending the University, he still remains dependent upon his father and teachers just as when he was still a child. He must go where his father wishes him to go, study often, as his

teachers and professors wish him to study. He will remain outside society even when he takes his degree and may be 26 years of age . . .

. . . The personality of the child has remained buried under the prejudices of order and justice. Though the adult has agitated very strongly in defence of his own rights, he has overlooked those of the child. He is not even aware of him. On this plane, life has continued to evolve and to complicate itself up to the present century.

From the complex whole of such conceptions arise the particular prejudices which impose themselves under the cloak of so praiseworthy an aim as the protections of, and respect for, the life of childhood.

The small child, for example, should not be let to do any form of work. He must be abandoned to a life of intellectual inertia. He should only play in a certain well-established way.

If, therefore, one day it is discovered that the child is a great worker, who can apply himself to his work with concentration, who can learn by himself, teach himself and who possesses discipline within himself, this seems to be like a fairy tale. It does not evoke surprise, it just appears utterly absurd.

No attention is paid to this reality, and hence no conclusion is reached to the effect that in this apparent contradiction may be hidden an error on the part of the adult. It is simply impossible, it cannot exist; or as it is said, it is not serious.

The greatest difficulty in the way of an attempt to give freedom to the child and to bring its powers to light does not lie in finding a form of education which realizes these aims. It lies rather in overcoming the prejudices which the adult has formed in his regard. That is why I said we must recognize, investigate and fight against 'the prejudices concerning the child' only, without touching the other prejudices which the adult may have formed regarding his own life.

This struggle against prejudices is the social question of the child which must accompany the renewal of its education. It is, in other words, imperative to prepare a positive and well-defined route leading to this goal. If the prejudices concerning the child are directly and exclusively aimed at, a reform of the adult will accompany it step by step because an obstacle in the adult will have been removed. This reform of the adult is of enormous importance for society as a whole. It represents the reawakening of a part of human consciousness which has been covering itself progressively with layer upon layer of impediments. Moreover, without this awakening, all other social questions become obscure and the problems raised by them insoluble. 'Consciousness' has been dimmed, not in some adults only, but in all adults; because all have dealings with children. As their consciousness is dimmed regarding the child, so they also act unconsciously. On this point they do not use their powers of reflexion, their intelligence which leads them to make progress in other fields. There is in them, as we already mentioned, a blind spot, similar to that on the retina of the eye. The child, that unknown being, that only apparently human being, sometimes considered almost as a matrimonial accident, who opens a road of sacrifices and duties, does not in himself arouse either awe or admiration.

Let me describe a psychological complex. Suppose that in nature the child appeared to be a divine miracle, of the sort men feel in the presence of the image of the Child Jesus, which inspires artists and poets and represents the hope of redemption for all mankind, an august figure at whose feet the kings of the East and West devoutly place their gifts. The child Jesus is also, however, amid the religious worship paid to Him, a real child, a newly-born babe without consciousness. Almost all parents feel similar lofty sentiments at the birth of their child, who is idealized by the strength of their love. Later, however, as this child grows up, he begins to be a nuisance. Almost remorsefully they begin to defend themselves against him. They are happy when he is asleep and try to make him sleep as long as possible. Those who can, hand their child over to the care of a nurse and, taking courage, instruct her to keep him away from them as much as possible. If this unknown and incomprehensible being, acting in obedience to unconscious urges, does not submit, he is punished, fought against, and being weak and defenceless both intellectually and physically, he must bear all. In the adult's soul there occurs a 'conflict' because he does love the child. At first this conflict causes pain and remorse.

Later, however, the psychic mechanism at play between the conscious and the subconscious in man reaches a form of adaptation. As Freud would say, there occurs a fugue. The subconscious prevails, i.e. it suggests, 'What you do is not in order to defend yourself against the child, it is a duty you perform in his regard. It is a necessary good. You must even act bravely because you are educating the child. You are striving to build up goodness in him.' When this comfort is obtained, the natural feelings of admiration and love are effectively buried . . .

1946 (4)

It must be that there is something lacking in the treatment of children everywhere and of every age. We must take a new element into consideration. Perhaps man's behaviour has changed in this complicated world, perhaps he disregards something fundamental and family life is different and the children are the first victims of this disregard. We must consider children from this point of view. Moral and social education are so closely related that we must have some new contribution for moral hygiene. It is evident that these children suffer. It is evident too that modern psychology is not sufficient. All the things we have had up to date for moral education have not been enough. The facts prove it. The question of moral education is not as simple as it was before. Some other element must be added to correlate with the present form of society which is different from what it was formerly. Moral and mental hygiene especially must be developed in order to protect children. The relationship between the family, the teacher and the children must be harmonious because the school environment plays a larger part than it did before. Both the teacher and the parents must have the help of psychic knowledge that was not known before . . .

Goodwill alone is not enough. Today we need a positive contribution towards the betterment of the human soul. There must be a mental and moral hygiene towards which family, school and city all make a contribution. This will be the progress of civilization.

The progress and the growth of the individual are very important. Progress is the care of the psyche of the individual in relationship to the environment. It is not a question of doing something for the individual first and then something for society, for it is in society that the root lies. We must see the individual in his place in society because no individual can develop without the influence of society . . .

Sources: (1) Kinder sind anders, p. 267-268; (2) Ibid, p. 290-291; (3) The Formation of Man, p. 44-50; (4) The Child, Society and the World, p. 74-75.

CHILDREN ARE DIFFERENT

The Discovery of the Spirit (The Polarization of Attention)

1916 (1)

The organization of psychological life begins with the characteristic phenomenon of attention.

My experimental work with little children from three to six years old has been, in fact, a practical contribution to research which has for its aim the discovery of the treatment required by the soul of the child, a treatment analogous to that which hygiene prescribes for its body.

I think, therefore, that it is essential to record the fundamental fact which led me to define my method.

I was making my first essays in applying the principles and part of the material I had used for many years previously in the education of deficient children, to the normal children of the San Lorenzo quarter in Rome, when I happened to notice a little girl of about three years old deeply absorbed in a set of solid insets, removing the wooden cylinders from their respective holes and replacing them. The expression on the child's face was one of such concentrated attention that it seemed to me an extraordinary manifestation; up to this time none of the children had ever shown such fixity of interest in an object; and my belief in the characteristic instability of attention in young children who

flit incessantly from one thing to another, made me peculiarly alive to the phenomenon.

I watched the child intently without disturbing her at first, and began to count how many times she repeated the exercise; then, seeing that she was continuing for a long time, I picked up the little arm-chair in which she was seated, and placed chair and child upon the table; the little creature hastily caught up her case of insets, laid it across the arms of her chair, and gathering the cylinders into her lap, set to work again. Then I called upon all the children to sing; they sang, but the little girl continued undisturbed, repeating her exercise even after the short song had come to an end. I counted forty-four repetitions; when at last she ceased, it was quite independently of any surrounding stimuli which might have distracted her, and she looked round with a satisfied air, almost as if awaking from a refreshing nap.

I think my never-to-be-forgotten impression was that experienced by one who has made a discovery.

This phenomenon gradually became common among the children: it may therefore be recorded as a constant reaction occurring in connection with certain external conditions, which may be determined. And each time that such a polarization of attention took place, the child began to be completely transformed, to become calmer, more intelligent, and more expansive; it showed extraordinary spiritual qualities, recalling the phenomena of a higher consciousness, such as those of conversion.

It was as if in a saturated solution, a point of crystallization had formed, round which the whole chaotic and fluctuating mass united, producing a crystal of wonderful forms. Thus, when the phenomenon of the polarization of attention had taken place, all that was disorderly and fluctuating in the consciousness of the child seemed to be organizing itself into a spiritual creation, the surprising characteristics of which are reproduced in every individual.

It made one think of the life of man which may remain diffused among a multiplicity of things, in an inferior state of chaos, until some special thing attracts it intensely and fixes it; and then man is revealed unto himself, he feels that he has begun to live.

This spiritual phenomenon which may co-involve the entire consciousness of the adult, is therefore only one of the constant elements of the phenomena of 'internal formation.' It occurs as the normal beginning of the inner life of children, and accompanies its development in such a manner as to become accessible to research, as an experimental fact.

It was thus that the soul of the child gave its revelations, and under their guidance a method exemplifying spiritual liberty was evolved.

The story of this initiatory episode soon spread throughout the world, and at first it seemed like the story of a miracle. Then by degrees, as experiments were made among the most diverse races, the simple and evident principles of this spiritual 'treatment' were manifested.

Psychical development is organized by the aid of external stimuli, which may be determined experimentally.

The contribution I have made to the education of young children tends, in fact, to specify by means of the revelations due to experiment, the form of liberty in internal development.

It would not be possible to conceive liberty of development, if by its very nature the child were not capable of a spontaneous organic development, if the tendency to develop his energies (expansion of latent powers), the conquest of the means necessary to a harmonious innate development, did not already exist. In order to expand, the child, left at liberty to exercise his activities, ought to find in his surrounding something organized in direct relation to his internal organization which is developing itself by natural laws, just as the free insect finds in the form and qualities of flowers a direct correspondence between form and sustenance. The insect is undoubtedly free when, seeking the nectar which nourishes it, it is in reality helping the reproduction of the plant. There is nothing more marvelous in Nature than the correspondence between the organs of these two orders of beings

destined to such a providential co-operation.

The secret of the free development of the child consists, therefore, in organizing for him the means necessary for his internal nourishment, means corresponding to a primitive impulse of the child, comparable to that which makes the newborn infant capable of sucking milk from the breast, which by its external form and elaborated sustenance, corresponds perfectly to the requirements of the infant.

It is in the satisfaction of this primitive impulse, this internal hunger, that the child's personality begins to organize itself and reveal its characteristics; just as the newborn infant, in nourishing itself, organizes its body and its natural movements.

We must not therefore set ourselves the educational problem of seeking means whereby to organize the internal personality of the child and develop his characteristics; the sole problem is that of offering the child the necessary nourishment.

It is by this means that the child develops an organized and complex activity which, while it responds to a primitive impulse, exercises the intelligence and develops qualities we consider lofty, and which we supposed were foreign to the nature of the young child, such as patience and perseverance in work, and in the moral order, obedience, gentleness, affection, politeness, serenity; qualities we are accustomed to divide into different categories, and as to which, hitherto, we have cherished the illusion that it was our task to develop them gradually by our direct interposition, although in practice we have never known by what means to do so successfully.

In order that the phenomenon should come to pass it is necessary that the spontaneous development of the child should be accorded perfect liberty; that is to say, that its calm and peaceful expansion should not be disturbed by the intervention of an untimely and disturbing influence; just as the body of the new-born infant should be left in peace to assimilate its nourishment and grow properly.

In such an attitude ought we to await the miracles of the inner life, its expansions and also its unforeseen and surprising explosions; just as the intelligent mother, only giving her baby nourishment and rest, contemplates it seeing it grow, and awaits the manifestations of nature: the first tooth, the first word, and finally the action by which the baby will one day rise to his feet and walk.

But to ensure the psychical phenomena of growth, we must prepare the 'environment' in a definite manner, and from this environment offer the child the external means directly necessary for him.

This is the positive fact which my experiment has rendered concrete. Hitherto the liberty of the child has been vaguely discussed; no clearly defined limit has been established between liberty and abandonment. We were told: 'Liberty has its limits,' 'Liberty must be properly understood.' But a special method indicating 'how liberty should be interpreted, and what is the intuitive quid which ought to co-exist with it,' has not been determined.

The establishment of such a method should open up a new path to all education.

1923 (2)

. . . If the child found his area of activity correspondent to his inner needs, he would reveal to us even more that is necessary for his development. He seeks rapport with the type of human beings who surround him, and he finds it.

But there are individual inner needs, for which, while the child has buried himself in his own special work, there must be complete solitude and a separation from everything and everyone. No one can help us to achieve the intimate isolation by which we find our secret worlds, so mysterious, rich and full. If others intervene, it is destroyed. This degree of thought, which we attain by freeing ourselves from the external world, must be fed by the inner spirit, and our surroundings cannot influence us in any way other than to leave us in peace.

Great, or exceptional men exhibit the ability to achieve this degree of profound thought, and it is their source of inner strength. There are great men who, from this power of thought, have derived the

faculty of influencing masses of people with a quiet thoughtfulness and infinite benevolence. There are men who, after a prolonged absence from the world of affairs, feel obliged to resolve the great problems of mankind while with infinite patience they support the weaknesses and imperfections of their peers, who have themselves succumbed to hatred and aggression. Furthermore, we see that there exists a strict relationship between manual labour and deep concentration of the spirit. At first glance these might appear to be opposed, but they are profoundly compatible, for the one is the source of the other. The life of the spirit prepares the dynamic power for daily life, and, on its side, daily life encourages thought by means of ordinary work. The physical energy expended is continually renewed through the spirit, giving rise to a continual interrelationship. The man who understands himself clearly responds to the necessities of his inner life exactly as the body responds to physical necessities such as hunger and sleep. The mind that does not respond to its own spiritual necessities runs the same risks as the body that no longer responds to hunger pangs or the need to rest.

But because we find in children this power of thought, this immersion of the spirit within itself, it is clear that this quality is not peculiar to exceptional or particularly gifted people, but it is a universal human trait preserved in only a few people in their maturity.

If we consider these flickering powers of concentration in children, we must move to a different area than that considered in the discussion of useful work. An object that is not in the least useful will attract the immediate attention of a child. He will occupy himself with it and manipulate it in every possible way. Often his manipulations will not be very orderly; often he will destroy what he began the moment before and will have to begin at the beginning again. These movements will be repeated so many times that the task does not appear to be performed with particular enthusiasm, but we are viewing a special phenomenon . . .

. . . When the children had completed an absorbing bit of work, they appeared rested and deeply pleased. It almost seemed as if a road had opened up within their souls that led to all their latent powers, revealing the better part of themselves. They exhibited a great affability to everyone, put themselves out to help others and seemed full of good will. Then it would happen that one of them would quietly approach the teacher and whisper to her, as if confiding a great secret, 'I'm a good boy!'

This observation has already been found valuable by others, but it is particularly useful to me. I took what happened within the children to be a law, and this made it possible for me to resolve completely the problem of education. It was clear to me that the concept of order and the development of character, of the intellectual and emotional life, must derive from this veiled source. Thereafter, I set out to find experimental objects that would make this concentration possible, and carefully worked out an environment that would present the most favourable external conditions for this concentration. And that is how my method began.

Certainly here lies the key to all pedagogy: to learn to recognize precious moments of concentration.

1946 (3)

When we speak about freedom in education we mean freedom for the creative energy which is the urge of life towards the development of the individual. This is not a casual energy like the energy of a bomb that explodes. It has a guiding principle, a very fine, but unconscious directive, the aim of which is to develop a normal person. When we speak of free children we are thinking of this energy which must be free in order to construct these children well. We must aid this purpose. When we do, we find that the children return to this urgent energy and become normal and when this happens all deviations cease.

This phenomenon comes from the conditions of life and so the cure for difficult children must be to prepare a free life for them, and provide an environment because the environment is part of life and life cannot exist without it. This is an indirect preparation. In the right environment normality comes naturally, by itself. You must realize that you do not get very naughty children transformed suddenly when they are put in the right environment. Each child has his own special form of naughtiness, each child is different and so each child reacts differently. So one day a child will concentrate on a piece of

work and after this we will find that he has changed. But your eye must be trained to observe this phenomenon when it happens. We do not generally notice things like this, especially those on the spiritual side. I cannot give you spectacles to see with. When a child concentrates his character is changed. It is as though he had taken off a mask. Suppose you have a class of 30 children who are all disorderly and inattentive except two, who are normal. The teacher must be able to recognize the difference in these children. It is not so easy to see the difference because acts of destruction and disorderliness are so much more noticeable than normal behaviour. The teacher sees the defects. Again, a teacher does not interfere when a child is destroying a piece of material, because she thinks this may be a moment of concentration. People who begin to study biology must study things under a microscope, but until their eyes have been trained they cannot see anything. So the eyes of the teacher must be trained. A sensitivity must be developed in the teacher in order to recognize this ephemeral phenomenon of concentration when it does occur . . .

1946 (4)

The work of the teacher is to guide the children to normalization, to concentration. She is like the sheepdog who goes after the sheep when they stray, who conducts all the sheep inside. The teacher has two tasks: to lead the children to concentration and to help them in their development afterwards. The fundamental help in development, especially with little children of three years of age, is not to interfere. Interference stops activity and stops concentration. But do not apply the rule of non-interference when the children are still the prey of all their different naughtinesses. Don't let them climb on the windows, the furniture, etc. You must interfere at this stage. At this stage the teacher must be a policeman. The policeman has to defend the honest citizens from the disturbers. She must not only not interfere when a child is concentrating, she must also see that he is not disturbed. Do what you like with the rest of your class, anything you have learnt during your training or anything that your common sense dictates, it is not important because this stage is not important . . . and after a time something will come from the hidden soul of the child and he will become concentrated and have a new life. He will become normalized.

Sources: (1) The Advanced Montessori Method I, p. 53-57; (2) The Child in the Family, p. 30-32; (3) The Child, Society and the World, p. 12-13; (4) Ibid., p. 16-17.