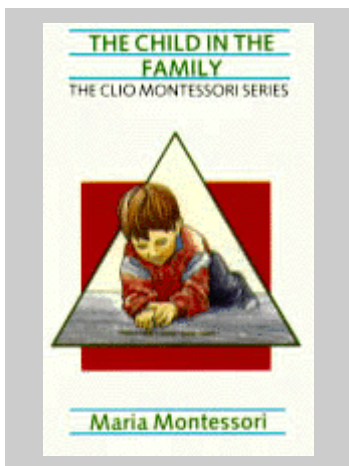




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From the Clío Montessori Series Summary:

"In *The Child In the Family*, which is aimed at teachers and parents alike, Maria Montessori discusses some of her basic principles of education and shows why it is so important for adults to "follow attentively all the spiritual expressions of the child". She stresses the importance of adult respect and support for "all reasonable forms of activity in which the child engages" and emphasizes the value of understanding rather than interfering with such activity."

THE CHILD IN THE FAMILY

THE CLIO MONTESSORI SERIES

Maria Montessori

TRANSLATED BY NANCY ROCKMORE CIRILLO

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THE BLANK PAGE

Our method -- which bears my name in order to distinguish it from other modern attempts to create new educational forms -- has led to the discovery of previously unobserved moral characteristics in children. Indeed, what emerged before us was the figure of a child yet to be discovered.

And it was because of our discoveries, and to further the understanding of children and to work for their defence and the recognition of their rights, that we were impelled to direct social action. Moreover, we were impelled to act because children are weak human beings who live among the strong; they are not understood, and their profound needs are unrecognised by adult society. Such a fact represents an abyss of unsuspected evils.

Children in our schools, which are places where they can work quietly, where their repressed spirits can expand and reveal themselves, demonstrated attitudes and modes of action remote from popular notions about childhood, and we were thus forced to reflect upon the gravity of the serious educational errors committed in the past, always upon the most delicate members of the human race.

Our children revealed to us a level of mind yet unexplored, and their activities manifested tendencies never dealt with by psychologists or educators. For instance, the children were never attracted to objects, such as toys, which were supposed to please them, nor were they interested in fairy tales. Instead, they all sought to free themselves from adults and to do everything by themselves, manifesting clearly the desire not to be helped unless such help was absolutely necessary. They were tranquil, absorbed and intensely interested in their work, achieving an amazing level of serenity.

Evidently, our students' natural spontaneity, which derives mysteriously from the child's inner life, had long been suppressed by the energetic and inopportune intervention of adults, who believe they can do everything better than children, substituting their own activities for those of the children and forcing them to submit their will and initiative to adult control.

We adults, in our interpretation and treatment of children, not only have erred in certain details of education, or in some imperfect forms of schooling, but have pursued a course of action which is wholly wrong. And our mistakes have now generated a new social and moral question. The dissension between children and adults has existed unchanged for centuries, but the young have now tipped the balance. It is this reversal that has impelled us to action, not only in the direction of educators, but toward all adults, especially parents.

The wide diffusion of our method has generated schools in every country and among people widely diverse in custom and culture. This testifies to the universality of the dissension between child and adult that oppresses the human being from the moment of his birth and is all the more dangerous in that it is unconscious. In presumably superior civilisations, such as our own, this dissension is exacerbated by the complexity of social custom and by the consequent separation of the child from the natural self and its freedom of action.

The child who lives in an environment created by adults lives in a world ill-adapted to his own needs, both physical and, even more important, psychic (the fulfilment of the latter needs enable him to develop intellectually and morally). The child is repressed by a more powerful adult who undercuts his will and constrains him to adapt to a hostile environment on the naïve assumption that by doing so he is developing the child socially. Almost all so-called educational activity is pervaded by a notion of direct -- and therefore violent -- adaptation by the child to the adult world. This adaptation is based upon an unquestioning obedience, which leads to the negation of the child's personality, a negation in which the child becomes the object of a justice that is no justice, of injury and punishment that no adult would tolerate.

This adult attitude is so deeply rooted in the family that it is applied even to the child who is greatly loved. Furthermore, it is intensified in the school, which almost always methodically enforces direct and premature adaptation to the necessities of the adults environment. In the school, in fact, rigid

classwork and enforced discipline project the delicate world of childhood into a pernicious and alien atmosphere. Often the accord between the family and the school resolves itself into an alliance of the strong against the weak, whose timid and uncertain voices seem to find an audience. The child who seeks to be heard and is wounded by rejection often withdraws in a far more dangerous fashion than mere submission.

A more just and charitable approach toward the child would be to create an 'adaptive' environment different from the repressive one in which he operates and which has already formed his character. The implementation of any educational system ought to begin with the creation of an environment that protects the child from the difficult and dangerous obstacles that threaten him in the adult world. The shelter in the storm, the oasis in the desert, the place of spiritual rest ought to be created in the world precisely to assure the healthy development of the child.

No social problem is as universal as the oppression of the child. Historically, the oppressed -- slaves, the servant class and finally the workers -- were minority groups who sought their redemption through social change, often in open battle between the oppressed and their oppressors. The American Civil War was fought against the institution of slavery, the French Revolution against the ruling classes and modern revolutions to realise new economic forms. These are all examples of the formidable conflicts among groups of adults compelled to resort to violence to right their wrongs.

But the social problem of the child is not one of class, race or nation. The child who does not function socially is one who functions solely as an appendage of an adult. Those who oppress one part of humanity to the advantage of another succeed only in destroying social unity; to see this from the collective point of view, we need only glance down to see that among the suffering and oppressed there are also children. Almost all who care about children point out that it is the child who is the innocent victim of the wrongs that oppress the adult human beings. That appendage to the adult, weak and unable to speak for himself strikes to the heart and evokes a special note of compassion and particular need for charity. There has been much talk of miserable children and happy children, of the poor and the rich, of those who are abandoned and those who are loved. But such talk merely establishes the fact that the contrasts we see among adults are reflected and, indeed, formed in childhood and youth.

What is the child? He is a reproduction of the adult who possesses him as if he were a piece of property. No slave was ever so much the property of his master as the child is of the parent. No servant has ever had the limitless obedience of a child required of him. Never were the rights of man so disregarded as in the case of the child. No worker has ever blindly had to follow orders as must the child. At least the worker has his hours off and a place to go for compassionate response. No one has ever had to work like the child, who must submit to an adult who imposes hours of work and hours of play according to a rigid and arbitrary set of rules.

The child as a separate being has never existed socially. It has, therefore, always been desirable that children live in a house comfortable for adults, in which the mother cooks, the father works and the parents care for the children according to their abilities. Schools traditionally respect the family structure as far as possible. This was always considered the best arrangement that could be made for children.

The idea that the child is a personality separate from the adult never seemed to occur to anybody. Almost all moral and philosophical thought has been oriented toward the adult, and social questions about childhood itself have never been asked. The child as a separate entity, with different needs to satisfy in order to attain the highest ends of life, has never been taken into consideration. He is seen as a weak being supported by adults, never as a human being without rights oppressed by adults. The child as a human being who works, as a victim who suffers, as the best of companions, is still an unknown figure.

This is the figure about whom there exists a blank page in the history of mankind.

It is the blank page that we would like to fill.

THE NEWBORN CHILD

We understand civilisation as a means by which man may gradually adapt to his environment. If this is so, who experiences a more sudden and radical change in the environment than the new-born child? Furthermore, what provision does our civilisation make for the newborn child, for this being who, in the birth process, must undergo an adaptation worse than sudden, who literally passes from one existence to another?

There ought to be a page that precedes all the others in the history of civilised man. It should record what he has done to help the newborn child adapt himself to an alien environment. But there is none. The first page of the book of life has yet to be written because no one has attempted to discover the exigencies of new life.

Yet experience has revealed a terrible truth to us: we carry the wrongs of early infancy with us for the rest of our lives. The life of the embryo and the vicissitudes of childhood are decisive -- and surely this is universally recognised -- for the health of the adult and the future of the race. How is it possible that birth, that most difficult moment in man's entire life, has never been recognised as a crisis not only for the mother but for the child?

The crisis of the newborn lies in his total separation from a mother who, until then, has done everything for him. Separated from her and left to his own inadequate powers, he must instantly rely upon his own vital functions. Until this moment, he grew gently in a warm fluid created especially for him, protecting him from any imbalance or any drop in temperature, the least glimmer of light or the slightest sound.

Yet at birth he is ejected from this home to live in the air. Without the least transition, he is pushed from perfect repose to the exhausting world of being born. His body is crushed almost as if he had passed between two millstones, and he comes to us wounded, like a pilgrim who has journeyed from a distant land. But what do we do to receive him and help him? All attention is turned toward the mother, and the doctor gives the child a cursory examination merely to establish that he is alive and well. The parents contemplate him with profound joy, their egos being well satisfied by this beautiful child who realises their fondest hope: the adult has a child, and his presence unites the family in feelings of love.

But while the mother rests easily in the darkened room, who thinks to let the child, who is equally tired, rest quietly in a darkened room so that he can adapt himself little by little to his new environment? No one sees in the newborn child the human being who suffers. No one appreciates the sensitivity of a little body that has never before been handled, or of his reactions to innumerable physical impressions and to every unfamiliar touch.

They say that nature provides for its own and gives support when it is necessary. For the rest, every living being must overcome the same trials. But if civilisation has created in man a 'second nature', one that overrides the natural man and inhibits its free expression, then it might be interesting to see what happens among other animals. If we observe animals, we see that the female hides her young, keeps them from the light for a certain period of time and protects them with the warmth of her body. She guards them jealously and never permits other animals to come near or allows her young to be moved, or even looked at.

Yet for the newborn human being, neither nature nor civilisation makes any provision to alleviate the difficulty of adaptation. Some say that if the child survives it is enough; their only criterion for judging successful adaptation is that the child has not lost the power to live. The newborn child should be

allowed to remain in foetal position after birth, yet he is immediately dressed and, indeed, at one time he was swaddled, his fragile limbs restrained by force.

It used to be said that the healthy child would resist and adapt, for doesn't all of nature? Why, then, do we try to keep warm in the winter, and have soft blankets and comfortable chairs for easy and congenial living? Are we not stronger than the newborn child? Why don't we live free in the woods if we are so strong?

Death, like birth, is a law of nature, and one to which we must all submit. Why do we seek to ease that terrible moment of death in every possible way? Why, knowing that we cannot conquer death, do we at least want to render it less painful? Yet we never think to alleviate the suffering of birth.

There is in us, finally, a peculiar emptiness, a blindness we have built into our spirit and our civilisation. Something like the blind spot in the depths of the eye, this blind spot is in the depths of life.

We must come to a full understanding of the state of being of the newborn child. Only then will the absolute necessity of rendering easy his initiation into life become evident. The newborn child must become the object of knowledgeable care. Even holding him requires the utmost gentleness, and he should not be moved except with great tenderness. We must understand that in the first moment, and even in the first month, the child should be kept very quiet. The infant ought to be left naked, warmed only by the air in the room itself, not clothed or wrapped in blankets, for he has little body heat with which to resist temperature change and clothing is of little help.

I do not want to insist on this argument here because I know every woman will tell me that I am ignoring the customary ways of caring for the child in the different lands. To that charge I merely respond that I know all these various methods of child care because I have studied them in many different countries and have observed them with the deepest interest. And I have found these methods to be lacking in some respects. And, I must repeat, what is really lacking is the consciousness necessary to receive the newborn human in a worthwhile manner.

But if it is true that we do the best we can, what is progress if not seeing that which we did not see before and doing that which we have never done, reaching for new things because they appear to be perfect and complete?

The fact is that the child is not understood very well anywhere. This ignorance is a consequence of the subconscious apprehension and annoyance we manifest toward him from the very first moments of his life, an instinctive defensiveness about our possessions, even if they are worth nothing. Our attitude develops logically from these beginnings, and we are obsessed with fears that the child will destroy the daily order of our lives or disfigure and dirty our homes. Yet when we have a child in the home, not only do we deal with him by rushing to save our things from destruction and even by fleeing the house to save our peace of mind, but we also suppress the child's so-called caprices so that he does not become a slave to them and develops finally into a well-bred child.