

Porter Lecture - Maria Montessori, 1946

The child begins to walk steadily and without help at about 1 year and 3 months. This is a great moment for the mother also. Life becomes more difficult for her. She is faced with a real problem because now the child can move about the house whereas before he had to stay wherever he was put. At this age the child is already able to use his hands, he can take and move objects. Once I knew a child of less than a year who liked to dust with a duster and take stoppers out of bottles. His mother resented this and prevented him from doing it because among the bottles she had also a bottle of lovely perfume and in putting the stopper in and out of the bottle, the child might have spilt the perfume. I have seen one-year old children putting things away when they had finished with them. These types of activities are the sort of work which usually go unnoticed, but these are the sort of work which a very small child is able to do and loves to do. It is not generally seen because usually a child has only opportunities to handle toys. We should remember that the child has used and exercised his hands before he began to use his feet. He used his hands many months before he could walk. So at this age when he can walk, the hands can be educated if only they are given the right opportunities. As it was the case previously, women used to take their children in their lap, letting them play with their hair. If a nurse was educated to the real psychic care of children, she would know that they need to use their hands in several ways if they are to develop well. She would take into consideration the physiological fact that even 4-5 months old children can use their hands. I am studying this question since long and I am continually being surprised. I understand more and more how advanced and able small children can be. My experiences are not discouraging, on the contrary, each day gives me greater hope and belief in what children can do. Once they have learned to walk, they have conquered the great step in physical independence of ambulation. They can eat and walk; they can walk quickly and steadily. They are very different from the children who a short time before needed help in taking their first unsteady steps. Theirs was not independence because they relied on others for help. At the time they were fighters, but now they are victors; now they are really independent.

What do we do for these children who have made this great conquest? Today we make a square box, a playpen, and put them inside. Usually we just put one child in alone; if there are others in the family they are older and therefore no longer put in the playpen. This is the reward of the independence that the child has conquered, this is the amount of freedom we allow him. We cannot tell what children want. We cannot study their psychology under these conditions. The playpen helps the mother or nurse, it frees them from having to watch the child. When he needs to have fresh air or is taken out for a walk, he is kept in a pram; again, we cannot see what happens under natural conditions to this child who has conquered independence.

A friend of mine had a little girl and she wanted her to grow in freedom. One day the child walked away from her room and the friend came to me in great anxiety to know what she should do in the future. I said, 'Leave the child alone and watch what she does. Do not abandon her but watch from a distance; you can go to her if she needs help.' Later she told me that the child used to take a footstool and carry it around. Although she had many toys (her mother was rich), what gave the child real happiness was carrying this heavy footstool about. This sort of activity seems general to all children of that age, for this phenomenon has been observed and proven everywhere, so much so that American books on psychology describe it as a 'phase'. This phase continues for more or less a year and a half. Children need to carry

heavy things at this age. It is necessary for their development as if they were destined to become 'porters'. Perhaps the first work man did on this earth was to transport things from one place to another.