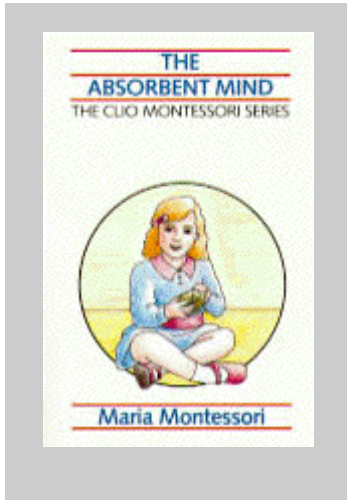




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"Based on lectures given by Dr. Montessori, [The Absorbent Mind](#) is an analysis of the physical and psychological aspects of a child's growth during the most significant period of life. During this period the child learns motor co-ordination, language, the making of social adjustments, the setting of work habits, and the beginning of routines that set patterns for life. Dr. Montessori illustrates the mental powers of children which enable them to construct all aspects of human personality."

THE ABSORBENT MIND

THE CLIO MONTESSORI SERIES
VOLUME ONE

Maria Montessori

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN
BY CLAUDE A. CLAREMONT

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INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST EDITION OF THE ABSORBENT MIND

The present volume is based on lectures given by Dr. Maria Montessori at Ahmedabad, during the first training course to be held after her internment in India, which lasted till the end of World War II. In it she illustrates the unique mental powers of the young child which enable him to construct and firmly establish within but a few years, without teachers, without any of the usual aids of education, nay, almost abandoned and often obstructed, all the characteristics of the human personality.

This achievement by a being born with great potentialities, yet so weak in body, so lacking in all the usual faculties of the mind that it may almost be called a zero, and which after no more than six years already surpasses all other species, is indeed one of the greatest mysteries of life.

In the present volume Dr. Montessori not only sheds the light of her penetrating insight, based on close observation and just evaluation, on the phenomena of this earliest and yet most decisive period of human life, but also indicates the responsibility of adult humanity toward it. She, indeed, gives a practical meaning to the now universally accepted necessity of 'education from birth'.

This can be given only when education becomes a 'help to life,' and transcends the narrow limits of teaching and of the direct transmission of knowledge or ideals from one mind to another. One of the best known principles of the Montessori method is the 'preparation of the environment.' At this stage of life, long before the child goes to school, this principle provides the key to an 'education from birth' and for the true 'cultivation' of the human individual from the very beginning.

This is a plea made on scientific grounds, but also it is a plea validated by the experiences of one who has witnessed and helped the manifestations of child nature all over the world, manifestations of mental and spiritual grandeur which form a startling contrast to the picture of mankind today, a mankind which, abandoned during its formative period, grows up as the greatest menace to its own survival.

MARIO MONTESSORI
Karachi, 1949

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

I should discredit myself if I were to hail this book as the most important (apart from Holy Script) ever to have appeared in human history. Yet, if I were asked to name one of greater moment to man's future welfare, I could not. 'We know,' says the authoress, 'how to find pearls in the shells of oysters, gold in the mountains and coal in the bowels of the earth, but we are unaware of the spiritual germs, the creative nebulae, that the child hides in himself when he enters this world to renew mankind.' Who can foresee the end of human progress once man-made science turns round upon itself to work its marvels on the human mind?

The first edition, which this one supersedes, was made from transcripts of the English version of Dr. Montessori's lectures, as they were translated sentence by sentence from her lectures delivered in

Italian. For the Italian public Dr. Montessori then wrote an almost independent, and fully revised, version in her native tongue. It is this Italian public Dr. Montessori re-translated into English, that is here presented, and those familiar with the first edition will not fail to notice various changes, additions and omissions. They are Dr. Montessori's own.

Her Italian is precise, condensed, scientific and popular, in the sense that it is never abstruse, vague, or ambiguous. Translating it has kept me in a fervor of admiration, wonder and honour for its style alone; for every nuance and turn of expression is exact and appropriate to the content. I have tried to do justice to these, and if a colloquialism has sometimes been chosen for clarity, I have at no point changed the sense, strengthened or weakened the emphasis, or altered the level of dramatic tension. The reader may rest assured that this is Dr. Montessori speaking, even though the words be mine.

CLAUDE A. CLAREMONT
September, 1958

1. THE CHILD'S PART IN WORLD RECONSTRUCTION

This book is one of the links in the unfolding chain of our thought, and of the movement to which we belong, for the defence of those great inner powers which children possess.

Today, while the world is in conflict, and many plans are afoot for its future reconstruction, education is widely regarded as one of the best means for bringing this about. For, no one disputes that mankind, from the mental point of view, is far below the level that civilization claims to have reached.

I, too, believe that humanity is still far from that stage of maturity needed for the realization of its aspirations, for the construction, that is, of a harmonious and peaceful society and the elimination of wars. Men are not yet ready to shape their own destinies; to control and direct world events, of which - instead, they become the victims.

But although education is recognized as one of the ways of raising mankind, it is nevertheless, still and only, thought of as an education of the mind. This it is proposed to train on the same lines as of old, without trying to draw upon any new vitalizing and constructive forces.

I do not doubt that philosophy and religion can bring to the task an immense contribution, but how numerous are the philosophers in this ultra-civilized world! How many have there not been in the past, and how many more will there not be in the future? Noble ideals and high standards we have always had. They form a great part of what we teach. Yet warfare and strife show no signs of abating. And if education is always to be conceived along the same antiquated lines of a mere transmission of knowledge, there is little to be hoped from it in the bettering of man's future. For what is the use of transmitting knowledge if the individual's total development lags behind? Instead, we must take into account a psychic entity, a social personality, a new world force, innumerable in the totality of its membership, which is at present hidden and ignored. If help and salvation are to come, they can only come from the children, for the children are the makers of men.

The child is endowed with unknown powers, which can guide us to a radiant future. If what we really want is a new world, then education must take as its aim the development of these hidden possibilities.

Our day has seen a great awakening of interest in the mental life of the newly born. Some psychologists have made special observations of the baby's growth from the first three hours after birth. Others, as a result of careful study, have come to the conclusion that the first two years are the most important in the whole span of human life.

The greatness of the human personality begins at the hour of birth. From this almost mystic affirmation there comes what may seem a strange conclusion: that education must start from birth. Strange, because, how, in a practical sense, can we educate a newborn babe, or even an infant during the first two years of his life? What lessons shall we give to this tiny being who understands nothing of what we say, and cannot even move his limbs? Or do we mean only hygiene, when we speak of this little one's education? Not at all. We mean far more than that.

During this early period, education must be understood as a help to the unfolding of the child's inborn psychic powers. This means that we cannot use the orthodox methods of teaching, which depend on talk.

It has been widely shown, by recent research that tiny children are gifted with a psychic nature peculiar to them. And this points out a new path to the educator. It is something out of the ordinary, something not hitherto recognized, yet something which vitally concerns mankind. The child's true constructive energy, a dynamic power, has remained unnoticed for thousands of years. Just as men have trodden the earth, and later hidden in its depths, so the men of our day make progress after progress in civilized life, without noticing the treasure that lie hidden in the psychic world of infancy.

From the earliest dawn of man's life on earth, these energies have been repressed and nullified. Not till today has any intuition of their existence begun to find expression. Only recently, for example, has Carrel written: 'The period of infancy is undoubtedly the richest. It should be utilized by education in every possible and conceivable way. The waste of this period of life can never be compensated. Instead of ignoring the early years, it is our duty to cultivate them with the utmost care.'* Today we are beginning to see the value of these ungathered fruits, more precious than gold, for they are man's own spirit.

The first two years of life open new horizons before us, for here we may see the laws of psychic construction hitherto unknown. It is the child himself who presents us with these revelations. He brings to our knowledge a kind of psychic life totally different from that of adults. Here is the new path! No longer is it for the professor to apply psychology to childhood, but it is for the children themselves to reveal their psychology to those who study them.

This may seem obscure, but it becomes clear as soon as we go more deeply into details. The child has a mind able to absorb knowledge. He has the power to teach himself. A single observation is enough to probe this. The child grows up speaking his parent's tongue, yet to grown-ups the learning of a language is a very great intellectual achievement. No one teaches the child, yet he comes to use nouns, verbs, and adjectives to perfection.

To follow a child in his language development is a study of the greatest interest, and all those who have devoted themselves to it agree that the use of words, of names, the first elements of language, falls at a fixed period in the child's life, as if a precise timekeeper were superintending this part of his activity. The child seems to follow a severe programme imposed by nature, so faithfully and punctually as to improve upon that of any old-time school, however well organized. Still following this programme, the child proceeds to learn all the irregularities and grammatical constructions of his language with impeccable diligence.

There is, so to speak, in every child a painstaking teacher, so skillful that he obtains identical results in all children in all parts of the world. The only language men ever speak perfectly is the one they learn in babyhood, when no one can teach them anything! Not only this, but if at a later age the child has to learn another language, no expert help will enable him to speak it with the same perfection as he does his first.

So there must be a special psychic force at work, helping the little child to develop. And this not only for language; for at two he can recognize all the persons and things around him. If we consider this, it becomes ever clearer that the child does an impressive work of inner formation. All that we ourselves

are has been made by the child, by the child we were in the first two years of our lives. Not only has the child to recognize what he sees about him, and to understand and adapt himself to our way of life, but also, while still unteachable, he has to build up in himself all those complex formations that will become our intelligence, the foundation for our religious feelings and of our particular national and social sentiments. It is as if nature had safeguarded each child from the influence of adult reasoning so as to give priority to the inner teacher who animates him. He has the chance to build up a complete psychic structure, before the intelligence of grownups can reach his spirit and produce changes in it.

By the age of three, the child has already laid down the foundations of his personality as a human being, and only then does he need the help of special scholastic influences. So great are the conquests he has made that one may well say: the child who goes to school at three is already a little man. Psychologists have often affirmed that if our own adult ability be compared with the child's, we should need sixty years of hard work to what he does in three; and this they have expressed in the words just used: 'At three the child is already a man.' Yet he is still far from having exhausted this strange power that he possesses of absorption from his surroundings.

In our first schools the children used to enter when three years old. No one could teach them because they were not receptive; yet they offered us amazing revelations of the greatness of the human soul. Ours was a house for children, rather than a real school. We had prepared a place for children where a diffused culture could be assimilated from the environment, without any need for direct instruction. The children who came were from the humblest social levels, and their parents were illiterate. Yet these children learned to read and write before they were five, and no one had given them any lessons. If visitors asked them, 'Who taught you to write?' they often answered with astonishment: 'Taught me? No one has taught me!'

At that time it seemed miraculous that children of four and a half should be able to write, and that they should have learned without the feeling of having been taught.

The press began to speak of 'culture acquired spontaneously.' Psychologists wondered if these children were somehow different from others, and we ourselves puzzled over it for a long time. Only after repeated experiments did we conclude with certainty that all children are endowed with this capacity to 'absorb' culture. If this be true, we then argued, if culture can be acquired without effort, let us provide the children with other elements of culture. And then we saw them 'absorb' far more than reading and writing: botany, zoology, mathematics, geography, and with the same ease, spontaneously and without getting tired.

And so we discovered that education is not something which the teacher does, but that it is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being. It is not acquired by listening to words, but in virtue of experiences in which the child acts on his environment. The teacher's task is not to talk, but to prepare and arrange a series of motives for cultural activity in a special environment made for the child.

My experiments, conducted in many different countries, have now been going on for forty years, and as the children grew up parents kept asking me to extend my methods to the later ages. We then found that individual activity is the one factor that stimulates and produces development, and that this is not more true for the little ones of preschool age than it is for the junior, middle, and upper school children.

A new figure had arisen to greet our eyes. Not just a school, or an educational method, but MAN himself: MAN whose true nature is shown in his capacity for free development, whose greatness became visible directly mental oppression ceased to bear upon him, to limit his inner work and weigh down his spirit.

Therefore I hold that any reform of education must be based on the personality of man. Man himself must become the center of education and we must never forget that man does not develop only at the university, but begins his mental growth at birth, and pursues it with the greatest intensity during

the first three years of his life. To this period, more than to any other, it is imperative to give active care. If we follow these rules, the child, instead of being a burden, shows himself to us as the greatest and most consoling of nature's wonders! We find ourselves confronted by a being no longer to be thought of as helpless, like a receptive void waiting to be filled with our wisdom; but one whose dignity increases in the measure to which we see in him the builder of our own minds; one guided by his inward teacher, who labours indefatigably in joy and happinesses, following a precise timetable, at the work of constructing that greatest marvel of the Universe, the human being. We teachers can only help the work going on, as servants wait upon a master. We then become witnesses to the development of the human soul; the emergence of the New Man, who will no longer be the victim of events but, thanks to his clarity of vision, will become able to direct and to mould the future of mankind.

2. EDUCATION FOR LIFE

In order to clarify at the outset what we mean by education for life starting from birth, it will be necessary to go more fully into details. One of the world's national leaders, it was Gandhi, announced not long ago that education must become coextensive with life, and not only this, but he said that the central point of education must be the defence of life. This is the first time that any social and spiritual leader has said such a thing. On the other hand, science has not only declared this to be necessary, but has been proving, ever since the beginning of our century, that the extension of education throughout life could be made a practical success. Nevertheless, no ministry of public instruction has adopted the idea.

The education of our day is rich in methods, aims and social ends, but one must still say that it takes no account of life itself. Among all the many methods officially used in different countries, no one proposes to help the individual from birth and to protect his development. Education, as today conceived, is something separated both from biological and social life. All who enter the educational world tend to be cut off from society. University students are required to obey the rules of the college to which they belong, and to follow in unison the programme of studies laid down by the authorities. But, up till quite recently, it could be said that the university took not the slightest interest in the conditions of their physical or social life. If a student were underfed, or if defects in sight or hearing diminished his aptitude, he merely received lower marks. It is true that physical defects have now begun to receive attention, but only from the hygienic standpoint. No one yet asks whether the student's mind may not be threatened, or even damaged, by defective and unsuitable educational methods. The movement for New Education, so ardently championed by Claparede, undertook an inquiry into the number of subjects in the curriculum, and tried to reduce these so as to diminish mental fatigue. But this does not touch the problem of how pupils can acquire the riches of culture without becoming tired. In most state controlled systems, what matters is that the programme shall be fulfilled. If the spirit of an undergraduate reacts to social injustice, or to political questions concerning deeply felt truths, the order of authority goes out that young people must avoid politics and concentrate on their studies. What happens then is that young people leave the university with their minds so shackled and sacrificed that they have lost all power of individuation and can no longer judge the problems of the age in which they live.

Scholastic machinery is as estranged from social life as if this and all its problems were outside its compass. The world of education is like an island where people, cut off from the world, are prepared for life by exclusion from it. Supposing it happens that a university student becomes infected by tuberculosis and dies of it. Curious and saddening, is it not, that the university, the social milieu in which he lives - having ignored him while ill, should suddenly and unexpectedly make its appearance, in the form of a representative, at his funeral? There are graduates so nervous that when they pass out into the world, they are useless to themselves, and a burden to their families and friends. Nonetheless, the academic body is not expected to take cognizance of this: an aloofness amply justified by the regulations which forbid it to take any interest in psychological cases, and only allow it to organize studies and hold examinations. Those who pass are awarded a diploma or degree. That, in

our day, is the loftiest summit reached by institutional education. Meanwhile, research workers investigating social problems are discovering that university graduates and school licentiates are not prepared for life, and not only this, but their capacity for engaging usefully in social work has been diminished. Statistics reveal a striking increase in the number of insane persons, of criminals, and of those whom their neighbours regard as 'queer.' Sociologists call upon the school to remedy these evils, but the school is a world apart, a world shut off from such problems. It is an institution of too ancient a lineage to alter its traditions from within. Only a pressure from outside can change, renovate, and find remedies for the faults that mar education at every level, just as they bear all too heavily on the lives of those subjected to it.

What about the period from birth to the sixth or seventh year? The school, properly so-called, takes no interest in this. Therefore, it is called preschool, meaning outside the range of official instruction. And what, indeed, could little newborn babies do in school? Wherever institutions have sprung up for the preschool child, they seldom depend on the central scholastic authority. They are controlled by unofficial associations, or have private managements which often pursue philanthropic ends. An interest in protecting the psychic life of babies, as a social problem, does not exist. Besides, society proclaims that young children belong to the home and not to the state.

The new importance now being given to the first years of life, has not yet extended to any suggestion for making practical provision for this. All that anyone thinks of, so far, is that home life could be improved, in the sense that a training for motherhood is now held to be necessary. But the home is not a part of the school; it belongs to society. So, in effect, the human personality, or the care of it, is broken up. On one side is the home which belongs to society, but which lives in isolation from society, and is neglected or ignored by it; on the other is the school, also shut off from society; and finally, the university. There is no unity of conception, no social solicitude for life as such; there are only fragments which ignore one another by turns and which appeal successfully or alternatively, to the school, the home, or the university, the latter being looked upon as just another kind of school for the final part of the educational period. Even the new social sciences, which perceive the evils of this isolation, sciences like sociology and social psychology, are always outside the school. Hence, there exists no true system of help for the development of life. The concept of education as such a help is not new to science, as I say, but it still has no status or place in social organization. And this is the next step which civilization must urgently take. The path for it has already been charted. Criticism shows easily the errors of our present situation. Various workers have made clear what remedies are needed in all the phases of life. So all is ready; we have only to build. The various contributions for science are like stones from the quarry already squared for placing in the building. All we have to do is to find people ready to put them together and so erect the new structure which civilization so badly needs.

The concept of an education centered upon the care of the living being alters all previous ideas. Resting no longer on a curriculum, or a timetable, education must conform to the facts of human life. In the light of this conviction, the education of the newly born becomes suddenly of the first importance. It is quite true that the newborn infant cannot do anything; that we cannot teach him in the ordinary sense. He can only be an object of observation, of a study which we must undertake to find out his vital needs. This is just the kind of observation that we ourselves have been doing. It has a purpose. Its object is to find out what are the laws of life, for if we want to help life, the first condition of success is that we shall know the laws which govern it. Yet it is not enough merely to know them, for if we stopped there we should remain exclusively in the field of psychology. We should never go further and become educators.

The knowledge of the little child's mental development has to become widely diffused, for only then will education be able to speak with a new voice, and say to the world with authority: 'The laws of life are such and such. They cannot be ignored. You must act in conformity with them, for they proclaim the rights of man which are universal and common to all.'

If society holds it necessary to make education compulsory, this means that education has to be given in a practical fashion, and if we are now agreed that education begins at birth, then it becomes vitally necessary for everyone to know the laws of development. Instead of education remaining aloof and

ignored by society, it must acquire the authority to rule over society. Social machinery must be adapted to the inherent necessities of the new conception that life is to be protected. All are called upon to help. Fathers and mothers must should their responsibilities; and if the home fails for lack of means, then it is required of society not only to give the needed instruction but also the support necessary for bringing up the children. If education signifies a protection of the individual, if society recognizes as necessary to the child's development things that the family cannot provide, then it is society's duty to provide those things. The state must never abandon the child.

Education will thus become obliged to act authoritatively upon the society form which it was formally excluded. If it is evident that society should exert a beneficent control over human individuals, and if it is also true that education is to be regarded as a help to life, then this control will never be restrictive and oppressive, but it must take the form of physical and psychic help. This means that society's first step must be to allocate a higher proportion of its wealth to education.

The needs of the child during his years of growth have been studied and the results of these studies have been published. Now, it is for society as a whole to take over conscientiously the responsibility of education, while education in its turn will liberally compensate society by the benefits resulting from its progress. Education, so conceived, no longer matters only to children and their parents, but also to the state and to international relationships. It becomes a stimulus to every part of the social body, a stimulus to the greatest of social improvements. Is there anything more immovable, stagnant, and indifferent than the education of today? When a country has to economize, education is sure to be the first victim. If we ask a statesman for his views on education, he will say it is no concern of his, that he has left his children's upbringing to his wife, who in turn has entrusted it to a school. In the days to come it will be absolutely impossible for a statesman to give such an answer, or to show such indifference.

What are we to conclude from the reports of psychologists who have studied children from their earliest days? All are agreed that with proper care and help the child has it in him to grow to greater strength, to attain a better mental balance and a more energetic character. Instead of leaving everything to chance, the child's growth at this time should be a matter for scientific care and attention. This means that something more is needed than mere physical hygiene. Just as the latter wards off injuries to his body, so we need mental hygiene to protect his mind and soul from harm.

Science has made other discoveries about these first days. The infant in arms has far greater mental energies than are usually imagined. At birth he is nothing, psychologically speaking. And not only in his mind, for at birth he is incapable of coordinated movement. With his almost useless limbs there is nothing he can do. Nor can he talk, even if he sees what is going on about him. Yet, with the passing of time, the child walks and talks and goes from one achievement to another, till a man is formed in all the grandeur of his bodily and mental gifts. And this opens the door to an imperious truth; the child is not an inert being who owes everything he can do to us, as if he were an empty vessel that we have to fill. No, it is the child who makes the man, and no man exists who was not made by the child who once he was.

The great constructive energies of the child, of which we have already said so much, and which scientists are now impelled to study, have hitherto been concealed beneath an accumulation of ideas concerning motherhood. We used to say it was the mother who formed the child; for it is she who teaches him to walk, talk and so on. But none of this is really done by the mother. It is an achievement of the child. What the mother brings forth is the baby, but it is the baby who produces the man. Should the mother die, the baby still grows up and completes his work of making the man. An Indian baby taken to America, and placed in the care of Americans, learns to speak English and not Hindi. So his language does not come from the mother, but it is the child who takes in the language, just as he takes in the habits and customs of the people among whom he happens to be living. There is nothing hereditary, therefore, in any of these acquisitions. It is the child who absorbs material from the world about him; he who moulds it into the man of the future.

To recognize this great work of the child does not mean to diminish the parents' authority. Once they can persuade themselves not to be themselves the builders, but merely to act as collaborators in the

building process, they become much better able to carry out their real duties; and then, in the light of a wider vision, their help becomes truly valuable. The child can only build well if this help is given in a suitable way. Thus, the authority of parents does not come from a dignity standing on its own feet, but it comes from the help they are able to give their children. The truly great authority and dignity of parents rests solely upon this.

But let us think of the child's place in society from another point of view.

The picture of the labourer, extolled by Marxist theory, has now become a part of the modern conscience. He is seen as the producer of wealth and well-being, an essential partner in the great work of civilized living. Society has come to recognize his moral and economic value, and to accord to him the means and conditions needed for his work, as a matter of right.

Suppose we carry this idea over to the child. He, too, is a toiler, and the aim of his work is to make a man. The parents, it is true, provide the means essential to his life and creative activity, but the social problem in his regard is even more important, for the fruits of his labour are not just material things, but he is fashioning humanity itself, and not just a race, a caste, or a social group, but the whole of mankind. Seen in this way, the conclusion is irresistible that society must heed the child, recognize his rights and provide for his needs. Once we have focused our attention and our studies on life itself, we may find that we are touching the secret of mankind, and into our hands will fall the knowledge of how it should be governed and how helped. We, also, when we speak of education are proclaiming a revolution, one in which everything we know today will be transformed. I think of this as the final revolution; not a revolution of violence, still less of bloodshed, but one from which violence is wholly excluded, for the little child's psychic productivity is stricken to death by the barest shadow of violence.

What has to be defended is the construction of human normality. Have not all our efforts been aimed at removing obstacles from the child's path of development, and at keeping away the dangers and misunderstandings that everywhere threaten it?

This is education, understood as a help to life; an education from birth, which feeds a peaceful revolution and unites all in a common aim, attracting them as to a single centre. Mothers, fathers, politicians; all must combine in their respect and help for this delicate work of formation, which the little child carries on in the depth of a profound psychological mystery, under the tutelage of an inner guide. This is the bright new hope for mankind. Not reconstruction, but help for the constructive work that the human soul is called upon to do, and to bring to fruition; a work of formation which brings out the immense potentialities with which children, the sons of men, are endowed.

Dr. Alexis Carrel, *L'Homme cet Inconnu*, Paris 1947 (p. 222), 1st Edition 1935. English editions from 1935, and in Pelican Books, 1948, (A.181). The above translation is from Dr. Montessori's Italian version of the original French in which she read it.

* Only in a few countries after the last war have attempts been made to improve this situation. In Holland, for example, there are now sanatoria for students. [Another exception is that of the tutorial system which has long been in use in British residential colleges of the older universities. But these are more like 'boarding schools' with a corresponding loss of individual freedom. Translator.]