

# *The Secret of Childhood*

## Dr. Maria Montessori

The forward step that has been made in the care of the child to-day is this: that account is taken not only of his physical life, but of his psychic life. It is now often repeated that education should begin from birth. Of course, the word 'education' must not be understood in the sense of teaching, but of assisting the psychological development of the child. pp. 27-28

There is an interplay between the individual, or rather between the spiritual embryo, and its environment, and by this interplay the individual forms himself, completes himself. p. 31

It was the Dutch scientist Hugo de Vries, who discovered the existence of sensitive periods in animal life, but we ourselves in our schools and by observing the life of children in their families, were the first to discover the sensitive periods of infancy, and to respond to them from the standpoint of education. These periods correspond to special sensibilities to be found in creatures in process development; they are transitory and confined to the acquisition of a determined characteristic. Once this characteristic has evolved, the corresponding sensibility disappears. Thus every characteristic is established by the help of an impulse, of a transient sensibility which lasts over a period of growth, that is, during the corresponding sensitive period. pp. 34-35

But there are other far more apparent proofs, which have a negative significance. We see them when some external circumstance opposes the child's inward, secret working, bringing violent disturbance and deformation and resulting in defects that will remain throughout life. If the baby has not been able to work in accordance with the guidance of its sensitive period, it has lost its chance of a natural conquest and has lost it forever. p. 39

Nature works without letting it be known, and we call the harmonious balance of combined energies health, normality. Health! It means triumph in every detail, the triumph of purpose over causes. pp. 40-41

The child's sensibility to order has two simultaneous aspects: the outer, which concerns relations between the parts of his environment, the inner, which gives him a sense of the parts of his body, their movements and position. p.55

It is well known how our pedagogy considers the environment so important as to make it the central point of the whole pedagogical approach, while we give to the child's sensorial activity a more fundamental and systematic consideration than any previous educational method. p. 59

The adult must recognize that he must take second place, endeavour all he can to understand the child, and to follow and help him in the development of his life. This should be the aim of mother and teacher. If the child's personality is to be helped to develop, since the child is the weaker, the adult with his stronger personality must hold himself in check, and, taking his lead from the child, feel proud if he can understand and follow him. p. 74

The hand is the delicate and structurally complicated organ that allows the mind to not only manifest itself, but to enter into special Relations with its environment. Man, we may say, takes possession of his environment by his hand and transforms it as his mind directs, thus fulfilling his mission on the great stage of the universe. p. 78

We must proceed from the known to the unknown. p. 117

So far we have a suitable environment, humility in the teacher, and scientific material. Here are the three external features of the method. p. 146

The first list shows us: individual work, repetition of the exercise, free choice, control of error, analysis of movements, silence exercises, good manner and social contacts, order in the environment, meticulous personal cleanliness, sense education, writing isolated from reading, writing prior to reading, reading without books, discipline in free activity. And then the second list: abolition of rewards and punishments, abolition of A.B.C., abolition of collective lessons, abolition of programmes and examinations, abolition of toys and greediness, abolition of a special high desk for the teacher. pp. 146-147

The battle is really won only when the child discovers something, some particular object, which arouses in him a deep and spontaneous interest. p. 153

At the origin of life, in the small child, errors are constantly being made, deforming the natural psychological type of man, and leading to an infinity of deviations. The singular fact that we note in child conversations is a psychological recovery, a return to normal conditions. The child who seems miraculous in his precocious intelligence, the hero who overcomes himself and his own grief, finding strength to live an new serenity, the rich child who prefers disciplined work to frivolities of life, are normal children. And that which was called conversion when it implied only the emergence of a surprising fact must, after the finding of wide experience, be reckoned a normalization. p. 157