

The Significance of Childhood

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The significance of childhood in humans is unique within the animal world. Animals rely primarily on instincts to survive. Their cognitive processes are very limited when compared to humans. Our cognitive processes greatly out-number our instinctual drives. Human babies take much longer to achieve physical independence than do other animal babies. The human brain is busy growing through the sensory information that it can collect, while other animal species are busy filling their need to survive by following their instincts. The long amount of time human infants spend being completely dependent is a critical part of the human experience. Human infants need to be nurtured, and held close to the bodies of their parents. This nurturing is the first step to unfolding the potential within this new human being.

A fundamental theory of Montessori teaching is that children are born with universal needs and tendencies, regardless of the region, race, gender, and place of birth. This is referred to as universality. A human is capable of learning all aspects of any culture that it may be born into, including their native language. In contrast, other animals lack the universality of humans. For example, a cat's behaviors and language will be the same, regardless of where they are born. This is a product of their instinctive nature. Humans acquire the culture that they are born into due to the work of their cognitive processes.

We have discussed four views of childhood. The first view is the historical view, within which children were viewed as pieces of property. They were to be available for the uses that their parents saw fit for them. Children were expected to be seen, but not heard. This set of beliefs, where children were perceived as little adults, tends to lead to

abuse, neglect, and child labor practices. The second view of childhood is referred to as the popular view. The popular view portrays children as helpless, cute, weak, and not able to learn. In this context, children are allowed to play freely because they are seen as incapable of functioning as independent beings. This view follows the thought that they should be left alone to act as children do, in a childish manner. A childish manner is a negative statement in this context as well, as the implication is that they are unable to function in any meaningful capacity. The third view is referred to as the enlightened view. In the enlightened view, children are looked upon as receivers that are ready to assimilate as much information as they can come into contact with. They are viewed as sponges, and given so much stimulation that they are unable to process it all. This view tends to not accept children playing as adequate, but suggests that children should be achieving a higher level of intellect that will be noticeable in the creative nature of their play. This view tends to lead to over-stimulation, which moves as such a fast pace that the child has no real opportunity to absorb that which is being experienced. If they don't have time to assimilate the information they are experiencing, then they are not learning. The fourth viewpoint is that of the Montessori philosophy.

The Montessori view of childhood is composed of four primary beliefs. The first of these beliefs is that the child recapitulates the path of humanity. Throughout their lives, children travel through the path of human evolution. While navigating this path, the child will rely on the three human gifts. The first of these gifts is that of the mobile hand. Children will acquire the gift of the mobile hand once they no longer need their hands to assist them in their travels. Upon learning to walk upright, a child's hands

become free for exploration of environment. It is the sensory input acquired through this exploration of the environment with their hands that constructs the inner understandings of their universe. Later in life, around the age of six, children develop the second gift of a conscious, reasoning mind. This reasoning mind is built upon the work of the absorbent mind in the previous (first) plane of development. The third gift is that of a higher form of love, stemming from the child being in close proximity to his/her mother. The direct contact that takes place between the mother and child is the key to this higher love. Young children are not able to experience that higher love if they are kept at a distance. Love is built through interaction, and interaction must be an intimately close, shared experience between mother and child. These three gifts of the hand, head and heart are the sources of the diversity in the world. Each child constructs their inner understanding of the universe from these experiences, which are unique to each individual child. This is the second in the Montessori viewpoint of childhood. Diversity stems from children being immersed into the culture that they are born into. The children construct themselves cognitively by interacting with the environment that they find themselves in. This speaks to the universality of children, as they are able to learn the all the aspects of their culture, including their “native language.” The third belief in the Montessori view on childhood is referred to as the great work of every child. The great work of every child is the key to becoming independent. Their work will lead them to the ability to manipulate language and mathematical applications. Acquiring independence is the key to developing into a fulfilled adult. If we do not strive for independent children, then we are creating dependent children by default. The fourth viewpoint is that

of the significance of childhood to humanity. Children are the key to the preservation and evolution of the culture that they are born into. Children are the ones that will preserve our culture by living what they have learned. Children are also responsible for the evolution of our culture. As they create inner understandings of their universe, they will form opinions and ideas of their own. This may lead to gradual changes in their culture over the course of time.

Adults have a responsibility to meet the physical needs that will allow the children to survive. There is also a responsibility to meet their spiritual needs as well. Children need love, safety, nutrition, the transmission of culture acquired by interacting with their environments, and the freedom and encouragement to reach their full potential in a rich and supportive environment. It is also the responsibility of the adult to stand back and allow the child to satisfy their own needs as the child develops the ability to do so. Obviously a three month old infant cannot prepare it's own food, so there are guidelines to allowing them to follow their own inclinations. The act of doing for a child, that which they are capable of doing themselves, is an act of disabling them. If the child is able to do a task, they should be allowed and encouraged to do it, without interruption. It is imperative to remember that the Montessori philosophy of education is that the purpose of education is to function as an aid for life. The acquisition of independence is going to provide children the opportunity to fulfill their lives, and to reach their full human potential.

References

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