

The Absorbent Mind

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“The greatness of the human personality begins at the hour of birth” (Montessori, 1995, p. 4). The first plane, referred to as the absorbent mind, begins within a child at birth, and continues through the age of six. This period of the absorbent mind is considered within the Montessori philosophy as the most vital period of development in the child. The period of the absorbent mind is where the child is learning from his environment, unconsciously at first, later consciously, and undergoing transformations that are both psychological and physical. “Impressions do not merely enter his mind; they form it. They incarnate themselves in him. The child creates his own “mental muscles,” using for this what he finds in the world around him. We have named this type of mentality, *The Absorbent Mind*” (Montessori, 1995, p.26).

During this period known as the absorbent mind, the child will build his inner understandings of the universe through three powers. These powers are the *horme*, *mneme*, and the absorbent mind. During the first three years of life, the child will construct meaning through these powers at an unconscious level, which is why the first sub-plane is referred to as a period of construction. All three of these powers work together, constructing the human child that will grow into an adult. During the second sub-plane, from age four to six, these powers will unfold into the conscious powers that will fuel the child's development of a reasoning mind. Therefore, the second sub-plane will be referred to as a period of consolidation, as the child is working to crystallize his understanding of the universe, creating his unique personality.

During the first three years of life, or the first sub-plane, the *horme* is an unconscious power or force that creates within the child a natural desire to explore. The

tools used by the child for exploring are his senses, of which Montessori recognizes ten. The primary tool of this exploration is the hand, which will allow for the manipulation of the objects within the child's environment. The hormone actively urges the child to seek out and initiate interactions within his environment, leading to the development of outer orientation. As the child develops, the hormone will make a change in "its type, appearing in the individual as an intense interest for repeating certain actions at length, for no obvious reason" (Montessori, 1995, p. 95). We know that the repetition of exercises allows the child to concentrate, and that concentration leads to the refinement of intellect.

As the child is busy exploring during the first three years of life, the mneme is imprinting experiences into the child's unconscious memory. Montessori (1995) explains the mneme clearly:

Every personal trait absorbed by the child becomes fixed forever, and, even if reasons later disclaims it, something of it remains in the subconscious mind. For nothing that is formed in infancy can ever be wholly eradicated. The "Mneme" not only creates the individual's special characteristics, but keeps them alive in him. What the child had absorbed, remains, a final ingredient of his personality. And the same thing happens with his limbs and organs, so that every grown-up person has an individuality indelibly stamped upon him in this early period of life (p. 65).

The third unconscious power that the child uses to build his personality is the absorbent mind. The child is absorbing everything that he interacts with in his environment, including language, feelings, attitudes, and all other aspects of the culture that the child has been born into. The behaviors of the adults within that environment are

also absorbed. These behaviors include values, morals, religious beliefs, manners, and any other activities that the child witnesses the adults engaging in. The child is building his understanding of the universe, and actively creating his personality. One key require to the child's development is a prepared environment. Immersed in a rich, free, and active environment the child will explore actively, creating impressions in his mind, and absorbing everything that his senses interact with. By the time the child reaches the age of three, he will be transitioning from the first sub-plane to the second sub-plane.

This transition is marked by the transformation of the absorbent mind from an unconscious seeker of sensorial input to a conscious seeker of information. Entering the Children's House at approximately three years of age, the child has a subconscious mind that is full of impressions, but they are unorganized or unrefined. The child seeks to "catalog and classify them so that he can have them under his immediate and absolute control" (Montessori, 1972, p.100). This is the work of the absorbent mind in the second sub-plane. The mind is to take all of the stored impressions accumulated over throughout the first years of life, and organize them into useful information and accessible information. During this time, hormone is changing as well. The hormone is being developed, and while it "rises to the level of consciousness, and thereafter it goes on developing, stage by stage, till it comes under the control of the conscious will. So, the hormone does not turn into will, however, it comes under the control of the will upon its conscious development.

So then, what is the primary function of the absorbent mind? It seems that the primary function of the absorbent mind is to build the child's primary mind fabric and

incarnate the child's personality. This incarnation occurs through the powers of the *horme*, *mneme*, and the absorbent mind working together to gather information through the senses, imprint or remember the experiences created through the interactions of the child with his environment, and to construct an inner meaning of his universe by absorbing, organizing, and classifying all of his experiential conquests.

In order to make all of this happen, we must look at the many characteristics of the absorbent mind. Incarnation has been discussed, and is seen as the creation or construction of a new human being. This incarnation is a "rebirth" of humanity. The absorbent mind is universal, as is pointed out by Montessori in the *Absorbent Mind* (1995):

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 outside world about him; he who molds it into the man of the future (p.16).

Another characteristic of the absorbent mind is its non-discriminatory nature. The absorbent mind takes in any information available to it, regardless of content. In this way, the child may learn violence or kindness, giving or taking, love or hate, English or Hindi, or any other behavior or concept the child bears witness to. The absorbent mind is also global and instantaneous, taking in all aspects of life, again without discrimination, instantly. The absorbent mind doesn't need to understand what it is

taking in, only to imprint the experience into the child's subconscious mind. The absorbent mind also grows in periods, referred to as sensitive periods of which there are four; language, order, sense perception, and movement.

As a point of analogy, Jeri Miller-Grant (2007) used the case of a sea sponge to compare to the absorbent mind. A sea sponge takes nourishment from the sea, as the water flows around it. The sponge takes in the water, absorbing the nutrients that it requires to sustain life, and lets the water flow away. In this fashion, the absorbent mind absorbs what it requires from its environment, maintaining the characteristics described previously. Another analogy brought up by Grant-Miller (2007) was that of a 35 mm camera. The objects focused within the scope of the camera are imprinted onto a film, which, at the appropriate time is developed for further use. The absorbent mind also creates these impressions of that which is within the child's scope. The information is stored by the mneme, and then brought back when needed on a conscious level, so that it may be processed and organized.

The concept of spiritual energy is of significance within the absorbent mind. This spiritual energy stems from the love within the child. Through interactions, the child's spirit is aroused by his feelings and a point of interest held by something in the environment. This interest is followed by movement coupled with the unique interests inherent to the individual child. "Then we see a unique phenomenon-the child begins to repeat the exercises, with deep concentration. When he has finished the child seems different-he seems happier, more satisfied, serene and rested" (Montessori, 1994, p.197).

Spiritual energy is built in this fashion, and is a key part of the inner workings of the absorbent mind. The organized environment, full of meaningful, functional, and beautiful items what is what draws the attention of the child, allowing this spiritual energy to unfold; through the child's love of meaningful work.

During the period of the absorbent mind, the child undergoes many changes or adaptations that are essential for survival. The child feels a need to become a part of his family, and later his community and society. This need, driven by the hormone, is a part of the universality of children, and key to the evolution of the species. The child is a link in the chain of evolution. The human race is recreated or reborn with every new child, and that new child will form his identity in the period referred to as the absorbent mind. The culture the child absorbs will be assimilated, examined, and either carried on or altered as the child sees fit. In this way, the future of the human race depends entirely on the incarnation of the new child. The child can adapt to the language, customs, religious beliefs, morals, and all other facets of the culture that the child is born into. This is an affirmation of the universality of children, as they construct themselves through the absorbent mind. This also speaks to the consciousness of the human race. A fish will has adaptations that allow it to survive in its environment like gills, scales, and fins. The fish will not adapt to the land if removed from the water.

The absorption of language is of particular interest as Montessori (1995) points out:

How does it happen that the child learns to speak? We say that he is blessed with hearing and listens to human voices. But, even admitting this, we must still ask how it is

that, among the thousands of sounds and noises that surround him, he hears, and if it be true that he only learns the language of human beings, then it must be that the sounds of human speech make on him a deeper impression than any other sounds. These impressions must be so strong, and cause such an intensity of emotion-so deep an enthusiasm as to set in motion invisible fibers of his body, fibers which start vibrating in the effort to reproduce those sounds” (p. 24).

The first language absorbed by the child is the language that the child will think in throughout his life, and master without a large amount of conscious effort. This is in contrast to the plight of the adult, attempting the acquisition of a second language. This requires great effort, and all learning will be built off of the understanding of the adult’s native language.

In conclusion, to unleash the powers of the absorbent mind, we must understand that each child is born into the world with a distinct personality, and need love, companionship, and an engaging environment to grow to their full potential. The true power of the absorbent mind may be held in the words of every child that has uttered the phrase “help me to do it myself,” as the child seeks knowledge and independence, we as the teachers need to remember to facilitate that learning, not be an obstacle to it.



### References

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