

The Sensitive Periods

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“Man’s mind does not spring from nothing; it is built up on the foundations laid by the child in his sensitive periods” (Montessori, 2003, p.54). The absorbent mind and the sensitive periods are at work together, as the sensitive periods provide the absorbent mind with direction. The sensitive periods do this by focusing the child’s attention on one characteristic of his environment, creating the urge to reach out to the environment that the child resides in, and interact with it. The hand is the primary tool used to facilitate this exploration, and the senses provide stimulation and information, which the absorbent mind assimilates and accommodates.

So, what are the sensitive periods? Dr. Montessori (1972) states:

Sensitive periods are blocks of time in a child’s life when he is absorbed with one characteristic of his environment to the exclusion of all others. They appear in the individual as “an intense interest for repeating certain actions at length, for no obvious reason, until-because of this repetition-a fresh function suddenly appears with explosive force.” The superior interior vitality and joy the child exhibits during these periods result from his intense desire to make contact with his world. It is a love of environment that compels him to this contact. This love is not an emotional reaction, but an intellectual and spiritual desire (p. 32).

These times that are now referred to as sensitive periods were first recognized by Hugo de Vries in the animal kingdom, particularly insects. He recognized that within the world of metamorphic of insects, there are special periods that correspond with the essential developmental stages of insects. As de Vries was the first to formally recognize these sensitive periods in insects, Dr. Montessori recognized similar periods within the

development of children. She then applied the concept of the sensitive periods to her educational philosophies. This was a unique idea in her time, as children younger than the age of six were generally regarded as incapable of receiving an education. The concept of the sensitive periods set into motion a shift in the educational philosophies of educators toward the very young children that were previously overlooked by the educational community.

These sensitive periods have many characteristics. The sensitive periods are transitory in nature. Dr. Montessori points out that the sensitive periods “correspond to special sensibilities to be found in creatures in process of development; they are transitory and confined to the acquisition of a determined characteristic. Once this characteristic has evolved, the corresponding sensibility disappears” (2003, p. 34). This quote also speaks to the constructive nature of the sensitive periods. The fact that they are found only in “creatures in process of development” is an important aspect to remember, as it is a cognitive process and not an instinctual reaction. Another characteristic of sensitive periods is that they are universal to all children. This speaks to the ability of every child to assimilate the culture they are born into, including the customs, language, and acceptable behaviors practiced by the adults involved with the child. Another characteristic is the manifestation of the sensitive periods in the child, which can be recognized through detailed observation. The child will appear indifferent to the activities around him as a result of the heightened level of concentration present during these periods, fostered by the freedom he has to repeat his work until satisfied. The freedom to repeat is the key to developing concentration, and the absorbent mind is

working to create the child's intellect at the same time, assimilating all the sensory input that is being made available to it. There are sensitive periods at different times in a child's development, and the majority of them are observed in the first plane.

In the first plane of development, there are four observed sensitive periods; movement, sensory perception, order, and language. The freedom of movement is necessary because movement is one "of the child's great acquisitions. When newly born, he lives for months in his cot. Yet, see him not long after, and he is walking, moving about in his world, doing things. He busies himself, and is happy" (Montessori, 1995, p. 26). This busy child, developing his coordination of movement, is met in the Children's house with the practical life activities. This coordination of movement is developed through the repetition of movements, as the child sweeps the floor, washes a table, or pours grain into a cup. Sensory perception is another period of development that is observable in a child. The senses are often referred to within theory lectures as the "keys to the universe." In the womb, the child can hear voices, music, and his mother's heartbeat. At birth, with active senses, the child begins to absorb his environment. All the sensory input acquired by a child is imprinted into the child's mind, and provides the foundation for the adult they will become. The sensorial materials have been designed to refine the senses, movements, and intellect of the child. The period of order is referred to as the "first sensitive period to appear" (Lillard, 1972, p. 33). Order is not only a sensitive period, but also a need of the child as written by Dr. Montessori (2003):

Order-things in their place. It means a knowledge of the arrangement of objects in the child's surroundings, a recollection of the place where each belongs.

And this means that he can orient himself in his environment, possess it in all its details. We mentally possess an environment when we know it so as to find our way with our eyes shut, and find all we want within hands' reach. Such a place is essential for the tranquility and happiness of life" (p. 51).

Since the child is constructing himself through his environment, the need for order is apparent. Order leads to outer orientation, which leads to inner orientation. The fourth sensitive period is that of language. Dr. Montessori (1994) writes about the acquisition of language:

The child learns by himself; no one teaches him. It is the child who is capable of fixing the characteristics of the people, and the characteristics of the language. By studying the child carefully, we see that he possesses special powers with which he develops the characteristics of the adult he becomes (p.3).

The acquisition of language begins before birth, as the child can hear the voices of those nearest him, and these impressions are stored on an unconscious level. The child continues to develop his language skills through interactions with the other people in his environment. Hearing sounds, watching the physical motions of speaking, making sounds, discovering communication through speaking and the meaningful nature of words, symbols, letters, writing and reading are all aspects of language acquisition. The unconscious learning our native language is very powerful, and the sensitive period for language feeds the absorbent mind with the foundations required to master that language. Learning a second language later in life is a conscious undertaking, and requires

considerable effort to learn the intricate nature of a new language, allowing a person to speak it fluently.

The second and third planes also have sensitive periods. The periods of imagination, reason, and moral development have been identified as being quite powerful. The work of the absorbent mind in the first plane of development, as the child has shifted from unconscious to conscious learning, has been preparing the child for these periods of reason and imagination that appear in the second plane. The child is also in a period where he seeks peer acceptance, which will lead to the development of morality. The child has learned morality at home and school, but now will engage in peer groups that will simulate real communities, which may be referred to as “micro-communities.” This peer group will help shape the child’s sense of justice and morality, and have a large impact on how a child sees himself.

If the child navigates these sensitive periods successfully, there may be several positive manifestations available to observe. The child will have developed a strong sense of concentration, through the repetition of exercises. The child will be happy and health, going about his day with an internal joy and love of life. The child will be engage in tremendous amounts of activity, and move with purpose from one activity to the next. The child will be peaceful, and able to be actively involved in listening, without distraction. The healthy child will exhibit these wonderful qualities as they work toward normalization, however, there are negative manifestations as well.

Negative manifestations occur as a result of deviations within the child. Children become deviated “because, above all they have lost their object and work in emptiness,

vagueness and chaos. The mind should have built itself up through experiences of movement flees into fantasy. Such fugitive minds begin by seeking and not finding” (Montessori, 2003, p. 160). This mention of seeking and not finding is directly linked to an environment that is in a state of disorder. The belief is that the healthy child is constructing himself through an organized, orderly environment. Therefore, the child constructing himself in an environment devoid of order will not develop the necessary orientation to be successful in his self construction. Dr. Montessori (2003) states that “If the child is denied this environment of psychic life, everything in him is weakened, deviated and shut away. He becomes an impenetrable, enigmatic being, empty, incapable, naughty, bored, cut off from society” (p.169). Other negative manifestations that may occur are possessiveness, fear, jealousy, insecurity, lying, and dependence on his caregivers. These many signs of a child struggling to construct himself are important behaviors that can be observed, and therefore addressed properly. If these manifestations are left unchecked, the child, now a man will engage in self destructive behaviors, addictions, and facilitate the coming of his own death. Again, Dr. Montessori (2003) makes this point clearly by stating that “all psychic deviation sets man on the road to death and makes him active in destroying his own life, and that this terrible tendency already shows itself in a faint and almost imperceptible form in early infancy” (p. 185). The key here seems to be that as the child is busy constructing himself, he will unconsciously show those that are able to observe his behavior effectively, whether he is on the natural path of development or is being hindered by obstacles. If there are signs of

obstacles, the next step is removing them to open the “floodgates” of knowledge that the child needs to construct himself properly. This is the task of the adult.

The adult, functioning as an important part of the child’s environment, has many responsibilities with regard to the child. First is the case of the adult at home. The child has many needs, some being order in the environment, the freedom to explore, sensorial experiences, extensive exposure to language, and love. The adult is responsible to facilitate these needs by providing an orderly environment, full of rich materials appropriate for the child’s development. The child needs to be free to explore, and when encountering something of value, should be shown how to properly handle the delicate item. A defensive posture, and removal of the item will only have a negative impact on the child. Love is the most important key to the healthy development of the child at home. Love begins at home, with the child’s family. Love is also needed once the child leaves the home, and enters the school setting. Here is another arena where the adult has great responsibility to provide order, communication, sensory education, a responsive environment, and love. This love is not exactly the same as that provided by the family, but is still very important. This love is that of maintaining the child’s value as a person, and the child’s feelings of love towards his environment, part of which is the adult. If the adult fails to meet the needs of the child, then deviations will be the result. The adult is there to facilitate the child, as his guide to the construction of his being. If the adult is too prominent a figure, leading the child instead of being led, the adult now becomes an obstacle to development. This case of the adult as an obstacle is parallel to the chaos of a disorderly environment, the lack of sensory stimulation due to the restriction of

movement, and the deprivation of an infant that is not surrounded by language and culture.

Dr. Montessori (2003) states of the child, “the adult is his creator, his providence, his master, the dispenser of punishments; no one can be so utterly and wholly dependent on another as the child is on the adult” (p. 200). If the sensitive periods are guide the child to fulfillment, the adult must meet the needs of the child, and when needed, step aside so that the child is able to continue his construction. The sensitive periods are periods of great power of concentration, and if they are fostered with love and order, the natural path of the child will be realized.

References

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