

The First Months: Developing an Outlook for Life

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Long before neuroscience revealed that rapid brain development happens in the first years of a child's life in a way that never happens again, Dr. Montessori pointed out that it must be so. Simply look at how children learn to speak, walk, and understand so much of what is happening around them by their third birthday, and you realize that a very special kind of brain is at work.

Dr. Montessori wrote, "...the truth emerges that the child has a type of mind that absorbs knowledge, and thus instructs himself. This is easily proved by the child's acquisition of a language—a great intellectual feat. The child of two speaks the language of his parents, though no one has taught him" (*Education for a New World*).

Montessori proposed that children have a special ability to absorb new knowledge because there is an "inner teacher" that gives human beings the ability to teach themselves, guiding little children towards what they need to learn in order to survive and become a part of their human community. To respect and help this natural guide, adults need to pay attention to the environment they are providing for infants and young children, placing what is most useful for their development within easy reach. Next, we need to give infants and young children freedom to interact with the environment that we have thoughtfully prepared. This is an important aspect of the Montessori approach: every child is a unique individual who will carve a unique path for himself or herself. The freedom to make choices is imperative for this natural process to occur within each child.

"Education begins at birth," Dr. Montessori often said. This is true in the sense that we adults do not "teach" children; they teach themselves. When we adopt this perspective, parents can understand how important it is to consider the needs and sensitivities of their infants at home, from the very beginning. This is a natural desire for parents; our instinct is to protect, nurture, and marvel at our newborns and infants in their rapid, daily acquisitions. We can see before our eyes their seemingly magical abilities at work. We want to do everything we can to help them and to remove obstacles from their paths.

Preparing Your Home for a Newborn

"Scientific observation...has established that education is not what the teacher gives; education is a natural process spontaneously carried out by the human individual, and is acquired not by listening to words but by experiences upon the environment..." (Montessori, *Education for a New World*). Education, therefore, is *everything* that a child is learning in his or her life.

Providing an environment for infants to live in and to explore is the first thing parents do, even before their infant is born. Clearly, the first consideration is that infants have spiritual needs such as love, protection, and care. But in a physical sense, infants need four things: nourishment, hygiene, sleep, and movement. When setting up your home for your infant, think of these four areas as guidelines to help you organize your space. Your infant will need an area for:

- **nourishment**, which may be a nursing chair or wherever their mother's body is if she is the source of nourishment

- **hygiene**, to bathe them and change their diapers
- **sleeping**, which may be a floor bed or some other safe infant bed
- **movement**, which will be a flat, safe space on a floor mat or a blanket where they can roll, inch, and move.

For each of these areas, it is important to consider that your infant is developing every minute. Offering your eye contact, touching them gently, and speaking to them are natural ways to feed your infant's needs to develop and to communicate.

We will elaborate here on just one of these four areas for the purpose of this article: your infant's area for **movement**.

Movement: Things to Look At, Move Towards, and Grasp

Putting our infants on the floor, a rug, mat, or blanket—as much as we can and wherever we go—gives them the gift of being able to move and to interact with their surroundings. Doing this sends a powerful message: *You are the main participant in your life*. This mindset sets the stage both for you as a parent—as a supporter of your child's development—and for your child to develop independence, confidence, a realistic sense of him/herself, and response-ability: the ability to respond to one's surroundings.

Infants are people, too! In fact, they are arguably in the very most important stage of their lives; from the moment they are born, they are either sleeping or working on developing themselves. “Working” in this context, whether it is effortful or easy, can be thought of as a need and often a pleasure. Nature drives infants and children towards activities that are developmentally rewarding. Here is what we can give them to help:

Things to Look At

The least-developed sense when your infant is born is that of sight. Dr. Montessori and her collaborators designed mobiles that can be hung about one foot above newborns to offer something attractive to look at so that they can naturally work on developing their eyesight. These can be handmade if you are crafty and enjoy projects, but they are also available through MontiKids, an excellent on-line provider that sells high-quality Montessori materials and access to on-line demonstration videos and information. Montikids mobiles and materials for infants were designed under the advice and guidelines of an Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) trainer and are perfectly suited to developmental ages and stages. (They are also beautiful, durable, and meet US safety standards).

Besides such mobiles, we do not see any reason to expose your infants or young children to anything but what nature provides for their eyesight and brain development. The natural movements of leaves and branches in the wind, birds and insects at work, the stars or clouds in the sky far away, the glistening of water, the reflections in window glass, and the infinite shades of color all around us provide endless information for our infants and young children. All of this is useful for their foundation of understanding. Mobiles that move by the air currents in a room, or from being pushed into motion by your hand, give proper stimulation for the newborn's

developing eyes. Your calm and simple surroundings in your home and the movements, sounds, and sights of your daily life offer countless impressions for your infants. Because we do not know enough about the long-term effects of looking at screens for newborns and young children—and many studies suggest drawbacks—we do not recommend putting screens in front of your infants to entertain them. See our post on screen time for more information on this topic.

Mobiles are useful for eye development for the first few weeks, but as infants become more interested in moving and grasping, mobiles are no longer needed and can be moved to a higher location.

Picture books—and the interaction and language exposure that we give our infants when we read aloud to them—are some of the most valuable items in a child’s early life. There is a strong internal magnet, it appears, that draws infants and young children towards people who are speaking to them. We can feed this human need by reading aloud to our children daily and often. See *The Enchanted Hour* for more information on this vital topic.

Photographs and artwork also offer color, shapes, and images, of course. Keeping the home simple and uncluttered draws children’s attention towards the beautiful, thoughtfully chosen items that are present. “Keep it simple” is a good motto for setting up your home—and for raising young children. In our culture, we put a lot of pressure on ourselves to do everything, be everywhere, and excel, as parents. But it is far more important to be relaxed, at ease, and present with our infants and young children. So, when providing things to look at, tend towards the simplified approach, which will also help make your home safer when your infant begins moving around in it.

Things to Move Towards

In our infants’ first environments, we can thoughtfully provide encouragement for their development and movement by placing a few simple structures in place. The first is a **floor bed** or mat that our infants can roll, squirm, and scoot on. Placing a low **mirror** at the height of this surface provides something very interesting to look at, inspiring your infant to lift his or her head and build torso and neck muscles as they gaze at themselves, you, and other reflections in the mirror. An infant’s desire to push up and look at the mirror drives the integration of his structural muscles and his growing intelligence about the world around him. Like building blocks, each stage of physical development evolves into the next when we provide an environment that encourages such self-directed movement.

Infant **rattles** made of natural fibers such as wood, soft metal, or cloth can be placed a few inches away from your infant so that he/she works to reach for it and eventually scoot toward it. As his/her body strengthens through natural movements on this surface, supply some **rolling toys** that will encourage further pursuit.

Many household items, such as a wire whisk, a smooth wooden spoon from the kitchen, or a soft nail brush from the bathroom, can also be wonderful objects for your infant’s exploration. (Just check any item first to be sure they are clean and safe for your infant to put in his/her mouth.)

Keeping items on a **low shelf** in your infant's bedroom or in an area for their activity is a safe way to display them. As your infant begins to move across the room of his or her own accord, this shelf of a few items will be a great attractant. To avoid having too many items out at once, keep some in a bin in a closet and rotate them. A basket on the floor also makes an orderly and convenient location for a few toys down on your infant's level.

What's the Point, Right Now?

Why does it matter whether our infants scoot, crawl, or have the freedom to move in their first year? It is not some benchmark scorecard we are after here: *the physical capabilities of the body are important for their relevance to the child's mind and evolving sense of self*. Learning is directly linked to the connections and collaboration between the mind and the body. When an infant thinks a thought and their body can respond with movement, there is a feedback loop that refines and refines until more control and better precision of movement is achieved and more deliberate thought is carried out. This is a natural progression that occurs when our infants and young children are supported to explore, move, and think for themselves.

As they grow older, it is important to protect these times and spaces in our homes for our children to just think, explore, and "work" on things that nature drives them to do. It could be building with blocks, looking at picture books, drawing, or playing with toys. The independent play and the comfortable relationship with one's surroundings, when not being entertained by an adult or by screens, begins in this first year of life and continues as our children develop their unique personalities.

To give a long-term example of how this might evolve, when our sixteen-year-old son fixed the tv cabinet door for me the other day, which was rigged with wires in a complex mechanism, I watched and thought, "I'm not sure he would have developed the patience, curiosity, problem-solving skills, or dexterity to figure out how to do that without so many hours of just exploring on his own as a child." I myself certainly could not figure out how to fix these sliding cabinet doors. But as a child, our son was always tinkering and building, creating and thinking. I'm grateful we raised our children with lots of free time to explore their surroundings, seeing now how it pays off in their life skills and traits as young adults.

It's not just that our son could fix something that was broken; it's that he has these skills of problem solving, curiosity, and responsibility that will transfer to every aspect of his adult life. He consciously feels capable, just as an infant can unconsciously feel capable. This young man feels curious, and he can direct his hands to do what his mind is thinking, which are tendencies that began in his first year of life. In a gradual progression, our children develop these natural traits, following some internal "teacher" that we cannot see, all the way into adulthood. By not replacing these natural drives with our own adult desires to control or dictate, and by not obstructing them by keeping our infants in carriers or cribs when they ought to be moving about, we allow this natural process to unfold in our children.

With this in mind, I encourage you to notice how much time each day your infant is spending strapped into a car seat, stroller, or carrier; these items, which are necessary for safety and convenience, fix our children's bodies in one position. When you make an effort to carry your

baby in your arms or put them on the ground wherever possible, you are promoting their physical and intellectual development. You are encouraging them to use their structural torso muscles and to become actively engaged with their surroundings. Ultimately, you are helping them to develop confidence in their own abilities and a positive outlook for life.

Providing limits, boundaries, and routines is also, of course, an important aspect of our parenting, which balances with the freedoms we are emphasizing in this article. For a discussion on providing order and routines, see our post on developing inner order.

Being the Parent of Newborns and Young Children is Important Work

Dr. Montessori spoke and wrote about child development and her positive educational approach from the early 1900s to the 1950s, through the two World Wars. She expressed the idea that children have within them innate abilities that—if nurtured and supported—help our children to grow up with confidence in themselves and a developed ability to work in harmony with their surroundings and each other. This was something Dr. Montessori referred to often at the conclusion of her talks. In a lecture from 1946, she ended by saying, “Human teachers can only help the great work that is being done, [inside the children as they teach themselves] as servants help the master. Doing so, [adults] will be witnesses to the unfolding of the human soul and to the rising of [individuals] who will not be the victim of events, but will have the clarity of vision to direct and shape the future of human society” (*Education for a New World*).

When you help your infants and young children at home and it is exhausting and demanding work, remember that your task is a special one! You are helping your children to get the best start in life—and to lay down the foundations of their characters—as people who realize their own abilities, feel respected for what they can do, and, therefore, feel empowered to affect their surroundings and other people, with respect. Your children absorb this way of interacting and this way of being from the attitude you treat them with in these early years. Do not worry about “teaching” your little children facts or feats; your task is to prepare a suitable environment for them to learn in, be a model and a source of love and language for them, and respect that they have in them an inner teacher that directs their development naturally. As a parent, you are the provider and the protector of this very special process.

A word about pacifiers: After the first weeks when a crying infant may benefit from the comfort of a pacifier, it is wise to dispose of them so that your infant uses all their mouth muscles and shares the sounds and expressions of communicating with others around them. Most speech pathologists will point out that many children who use pacifiers past their purpose develop habits of speaking and tongue motions that are not helpful in developing clear speech. Because communication is so integral to one’s developing personality and connection with others, we want to prioritize the healthy and natural progression of speech. In addition, having a pacifier in one’s mouth hides the expressions of smiling and lip motions that expressive infants are practicing when trying to communicate with us. Just as we want to give our children freedom to develop their abilities to move, we want to remove obstacles and allow freedom for their speech development as well.

Recommended Reading:

Montessori From the Start: The Child at Home, from Birth to Age Three by Paula Polk Lillard and Lynn Lillard Jessen

The Enchanted Hour: The Miraculous Power of Reading Aloud in the Age of Distraction by Meghan Cox Gurdon

Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child: A Step-by-Step Program for a Good Night's Sleep by Marc Weissbluth, M.D.