

# Montessori From the Start: The Child at Home from Birth to Age Three

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## Abridged Discussion Guide

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### Chapter 1 “The Completion of the Human Being”

“Instead of the specific instructions of instincts, we are given propensities to certain actions. Although we are born naked and defenseless without a means for shelter and with no instinctual knowledge of what is safe for us to eat, through these propensities we have more than survived; our behavioral tendencies account for the development of all the varied civilizations throughout the ages from prehistoric peoples to the modern era of telecommunications.” (p. 14)

Montessori named these propensities “The Human Tendencies” (Exploration, Orientation, Order, Abstraction, Imagination, Manipulation, Exactness, Repetition, Control of Error, Perfection, Communication).

*-Do you see your baby or child exhibit any of these tendencies? Which ones do you see and how does he exhibit them?*

“Today, although some of us enjoy the greatest affluence the world has ever known, we find that developing a home environment that serves the human spirit, a home of beauty, order, and simplicity, remains a very challenging task.” (p. 18)

*-What work have you done in your own home environment to make it a restful and fulfilling place—for yourself and/or for your children? Why might this be challenging?*

“From such independent accomplishments come the child’s sense of self-mastery and resulting self-confidence.” (p. 20).

*-Have you observed your baby or child accomplish something independently that you (or he!) did not know he could do? What was it? How did he react afterwards?*

“It is the unique role of human beings as change agents in the universe that requires us to think before acting. If we are to help infants to healthy development of coordinated movement, we have to keep the goal of responsibility in action foremost in our minds. This means that we need to prepare an environment for the infant that will encourage action with purpose and with the possibility of consequences.” (p. 21)

*-How do you understand the concepts of “action with purpose” and “the possibility of consequences”? Have you thought of these concepts in relation to children before? If so, how young? What do you think of integrating these ideas into a very young child’s environment?*

“In the first weeks of life, the infant strives to maintain focus on a self-selected aspect of the environment. Eventually, sustained attention and repetition build neural structures within the brain that represent the knowledge gained. It is through this effort of concentration and control of attention that all learning takes place.” (p. 24)

*-Have you observed your baby or young child concentrating on a part of his environment? What is he doing or looking at when he exhibits this behavior? Have you done anything to support or encourage these moments?*

## Chapter 2 “Welcoming the Newborn”

### Newborn questions

“The first weeks are a period of rapid and crucial development; we cannot wait while precious time passes. Our task is to give opportunities for concentration in the first weeks of life.” (p. 26)

*-Have you ever considered that a newborn baby is capable of concentration? Have you ever observed this in a newborn? If so, what does it look like?*

“At first glance, such a room for the baby looks plain and simple, especially when we compare it to the brightly colored and decorated nurseries that we commonly see. But this plainer nursery has an atmosphere of calm that is missing in busier environments for babies. It is soothing and beautiful in its simplicity.” (p. 27)

*-Consider the nurseries you have seen from a baby’s point of view, rather than from the adult’s point of view. How do you think a baby would feel about and react to the elements you have observed? Why might a baby benefit from a different style bedroom from that which an adult might be inclined to design?*

“Let us describe what the room prepared for their new baby looks like... The room is thus carefully, if minimally, furnished to address the four areas of necessity for the infant: an area for sleeping, for changing, for nursing, and for activity.” (p. 27-28, read the paragraphs in their entirety)

*-When you read the description of this room, how did it sound to you? Was it appealing? Did it sound like a desirable environment for a baby? Why or why not?*

### Questions for all parents:

“When a child becomes deeply and constructively absorbed in a task, it is important to avoid drawing his attention to what the adults around him are thinking of what he is doing.” (p. 30)

*-Have you ever seen your child interrupted by an adult while he is absorbed in a task? What usually happens when he is interrupted? Does he go back to the work? Have you ever resisted the temptation to interrupt a concentrating baby or child? How did he end his “work” on his own?*

“Parents have to be both flexible and open-ended in their thinking and, at the same time, balance this environment of support with structure. Parents can protect their child’s concentration by maintaining a positive mood and spontaneous quality to family life, by not overly indulging their children or overly restricting them.” (p. 37-38)

*-When you reflect on your own nature, which comes more naturally to you: flexibility or structure? What do you do to balance the other side of yourself, the one that is not as strongly inherent in your personality? How does your spouse/partner fit into this balance?*

### Chapter 3 “Discovering the World”

“[Children under the age of six] are not capable of reason, abstract thinking, or imagination, so they cannot make conscious choices for their attention, based on intelligence. However, they have a unique ability to absorb the qualities of their environment just by being exposed to them.” (p. 40)

*-Montessori called this ability the “Absorbent Mind.” When you consider this ability of the young child, how does it make you consider her environment, both physical and emotional? What are the advantages and vulnerabilities of having this kind of mind?*

“Montessori called the child under six years old ‘a sensorial explorer’ and based her educational approach for the child’s early years upon the child’s learning through the senses.” (p. 41)

*-Consider the five senses (touch, smell, taste, hearing, and sight). What are the experiences the young baby has with these senses? What gives her varying experiences with each of the senses?*

“[E]verything that adults give to the young child for sensorial exploration should represent the real world. Young children’s experiences with the real world become the basis for their imagination and creative thought in the elementary school years, when they no longer possess an absorbent mind but a reasoning mind. Sensations that give no knowledge of the world to young children are useless to him.” (p. 41)

*-What are ways in which adults are tempted to give fantasy to young children? Why is exposure to fantasy unhelpful to them?*

“There is a reason novelty occupies a baby, and all too often we ignore it and use novelty to keep babies busy so that they are not unhappy and bothering us. Babies seek novelty to learn something previously not known by them about their world; as such it is a key characteristic and has a purpose.” (p. 45)

*-Have you ever considered the concept of novelty as a useful quality for development? What are ways that our culture has taken advantage of novelty and made it counterproductive for babies and children?*

“It is important now to take time to think about the organization of the home... Does it make sense? Is it ordered, simple, and functional? Is it beautiful? We want the baby to discover an orderly environment and thereby incorporate this order within her own mind.” (p. 47)

*-What are the areas of your own home where it is the most challenging to create order? Are there areas that are naturally organized? What are ways you have found that make it easier to have an orderly home?*

## Chapter 4 “The Hand and the Brain”

“In the child, it is the actions of the hand guided by the intellect that create a feedback loop of information by carrying out the new direction: the hand reports to the brain, the brain guides the hand by this new information, the hand discovers more information by carrying out the new direction, and reports again to the brain. This process is a continuous action of learning and development.” (p. 48)

*-When can you remember learning a concept in a hands-on way? Did using your hands help you understand and retain the concept? Do you think you learned more because you could use your hands?*

“[W]hen the skills of the hand and therefore information to the brain are not in a balanced relationship, the undeveloped hand holds the brain back.” (p. 50)

*-Have you ever engaged in an activity that you understood mentally, but were not physically prepared for? Can you relate to the concept of this disunity? If so, what did it feel like?*

“We need to be constantly aware of the infant’s capacities at each age and to think through the purpose for each object that we give to him.” (p. 54)

*-Where is your own baby in the development of his hand? What fine motor activities interest him most? What are some challenges you could provide for him to allow him to fully develop the stage where he is now?*

“Although parents sometimes find good commercially produced articles, the best source of developmental aids for your baby is very often your own ingenuity. Not only do items that you put together yourself have the advantage of being less expensive, they also require you to give thought and attention to the specific needs of your individual child and how a particular activity is going to match those needs.” (p. 56)

*-What are some activities you could put together in your own home that would meet different developmental needs of the hand and the brain (reflexive grasp, reaching and grasping intentionally, hand to hand transfer, purposeful release, pincer grip, hands together, wrist development)?*

“[The fifteen-month-old] is in an upright position; his brain is ready; his hands are freed for work; his human tendencies are urging him to contribute to the life of his home and family. He wants nothing so much as to ‘work’ alongside a loving adult in the home, or other appropriate setting, throughout the day, doing what Montessori called ‘the practical work of life.’” (p. 58)

*-If you have a toddler, have you ever observed him imitating the work that is done in the home? What are some practical activities that a toddler can participate in around the home? How many steps do you think he is capable of in an activity?*

## Chapter 5 “Crawling to Coordination”

“Nature has not changed its plan for human childhood, which requires the constant presence, dedication, and, increasingly, wisdom of loving adults. Amidst so many choices of products that enable us not to be bothered by our children, parents need to think through very carefully which of them to bring into their lives, and why.” (p. 69—see list on p. 68 for examples)

*-When you consider the vast array of items our culture has made available to contain babies and toddlers so that we do not need to be “bothered by our children”, which items have you been most inclined to use? Why are they the most tempting for you, and when are you likely to use them? Can you think of other ways to occupy your children or restructure activities so as to reduce the time your baby or toddler has to spend with or in them?*

“We are not often conscious of a third obstacle that we place in the way of the children’s progress in movement and self-formation... We are referring to the inhibiting of the child’s initiative for movement by adults’ responses to her. From the first weeks, we constantly prop up the infant. Very soon we are sitting her up... Next, we pull her up to stand... Eventually we ‘walk’ her by holding onto her tiny hands high above her head... Potentially, the most damaging of all to her developing sense of self, we continue to sweep her up according to our own needs and whims and carry her about in our arms long after she is walking stably on her own.” (p. 71)

*-Why might it be damaging to a baby’s development to direct her into a position or movement she is not capable of on her own? Similarly, how might it affect her when we frequently carry her once she is capable of walking on her own?*

“Our goal as we prepare the infant’s environment for movement is not to rush her development so that we can have a baby that develops faster than others. Our purpose has to do with psychological rather than physical reasons and reflects our attitude toward the child... It should reflect the view that this infant is an individual who is going to grow and change and separate; this is not someone who will remain a baby forever, to be carried about and cared for by others. Our purpose then is to foster the child’s self-formation into an independent being.” (p. 73)

*-How is your attitude about your baby’s development affected when you consider her growth not in comparison to other babies, but in relationship to her own growth towards independence? In what ways does her activity take on new meaning when you consider that the goal of her development is to become a fully independent being?*

“This is the time—well in advance of her rapid crawling and complete mobility—to ‘baby proof’ the entire house.” (p. 78)

*-What baby proofing have you done in your own home? How did you decide what to make safe and what to leave available for your baby to explore?*

“This is the time [12-18 months] to begin the habit of a daily walk with your child. This walk should be a meandering one, one that follows the child’s mission, not the adult’s. The child stops to inspect everything... In our accomplishment-oriented lives, we lose sight of the joy and beauty of living in the moment and of savoring the details of life.” (p. 85)

*-When have you had the experience of slowing your own life to your child’s pace? What did you notice about the world during these times? How did you feel? How did your child respond to this period of time that was adjusted to her own pace?*

## Chapter 6 “Practical Life”

“The child needs items that are real and relate directly to the adult’s everyday activities. Montessori called these items the practical-life materials... Therefore, parents select from among their occupations the ones that ‘they have to do anyway in their everyday life,’ and by doing so, parents avoid the feeling of pressure to do even more for their child than they have hitherto been doing.” (pp. 93-94)

*-What are some activities you already do around the house that you could imagine including your child in? How might you modify the work to accommodate him?*

“The reason for following Montessori ideas and practices, then, is not to be a better mother or father or to have a better child, or even because as a parent you love your child so much. It is - because you respect your child and what he represents in the continuum of human life.” (p. 95)  
*How does this shift in motivation affect how you think about your approach to your child and his capabilities at home? What is the essence of this distinction?*

“Very young children cannot tell us directly that they are tired or bored or can no longer concentrate. They do so by getting silly or disintegrating into fantasy or becoming destructive. We need to be alert to these messages and help the child by responding promptly and firmly.” (p 103)

*-How does your child tell you that he is tired or bored or can no longer concentrate?*

“It is our collaborative approach to the practical-life exercises that enables children to let their human tendencies and desire to imitate us guide their energies. We are to be leaders rather than ‘pushers.’ We might say, ‘Oh, look, crumbs, I’m going to clean them up.’ Or ‘There is water on the floor here, let’s get a mop.’ Or to the fifteen-month-old who is bothering an older sibling: ‘This is Kristin’s work. You can push in your chair.’” (p. 113)

*-How are the above phrases examples of “leading” rather than “pushing”? Can you imagine a similar situation with your child where you could rephrase your language to be a collaborative leader rather than a pusher?*

“Most importantly, by making the child’s life meaningful to him as a member of his family in this challenging period from fifteen months to three years old, we have helped him to integrate his personality and develop a positive attitude toward himself.” (p. 114).

*-How does helping your child engage in practical-life activities develop his positive attitude toward himself? What is the alternative during this time period? Why might this matter?*

## Chapter 7 “Personal Care”

“For children to develop confidence in their own abilities, they have to be helped to care for themselves independently just as soon as they are able. The parents’ role is to begin working for this goal within the first few weeks of their child’s life.” (p. 117)

*-Do you believe that the ability to take care of oneself is related to confidence? Why or why not? Have you ever imagined that this might start when a baby is a few weeks old?*

“[W]e need to find a suitable piece of furniture for the baby’s new experience of sitting to eat solid food and to drink fluids from a glass. Montessori designed the weaning table and chair... for this purpose. Both table and chair are sturdy and heavy with the seat of the chair low and wide, with legs spaced far apart for stabilization. The chair has arms so that the child is held securely within it.” (p. 138)

*-Have you ever seen a baby being fed in a weaning chair? What are potential challenges and benefits that you can imagine from using a weaning chair and table? Can you envision how it encourages a child’s independence?*

“When we dress young children, we want to choose clothing that allows them to move comfortably, that is appropriate to the occasion, and that allows them to dress themselves just as soon as they are able.” (p. 147)

*-What qualities in clothing would make it easier for a child to dress herself? What qualities in clothing create extra challenges for a child to dress herself?*

“The child’s Sensitive Period of interest in toileting occurs between twelve and eighteen months of age. Your child may indicate this interest in obvious or in more subtle ways. It is important to keep in mind that like all Sensitive Periods this interest is a temporary phenomenon. If it is missed, learning to use the toilet becomes a remedial endeavor. Unfortunately, as in other areas of the child’s developing capacities, the child is often ready for the adult’s help in toileting before the adult is prepared to give it.” (p. 153)

*-Why do you think adults are reluctant to begin toileting at twelve to eighteen months? Why is it important, from a practical as well as from the perspective of a child’s dignity, to take advantage of this time frame? What are ways a parent can find support in tackling this endeavor at an earlier stage than has become the cultural norm?*

“With most personal grooming activities, you need to alternate turns with your child. After your child makes her attempt, say, ‘Now it is my turn,’ without mentioning that her turn did not quite do the job. At times you will need to put your hand on your child’s hand to guide the action to be taken.” (p. 158)

*-Why is this approach a respectful one for a child? How does it stand in contrast to more adult-led grooming and care? How does it encourage independence? How else might you collaborate during activities of self-care?*

## Chapter 8 “Language and Intelligence”

“Interestingly, the amount and quality of the infant’s babbling correlates with the amount of attention that parents give to him. If parents respond by listening and imitating, the baby babbles more. Equally, a lack of parental response leads to less babbling. Dialogue then is clearly essential from the beginning. As parents, we need to talk and wait for our babies to respond, whether we are bathing, nursing, or dressing them.” (p. 165)

*-Have you ever held a “conversation” with a baby? How often have you considered pausing to wait for his response? Do you notice how the quality of his engagement increases when you allow for a dialogue?*

“In addition to the books freely accessible to your child, keep a supply of books of good literature and beautiful illustrations... These are books for you to read out loud to your child each evening before bed or at a special time during the day.” (p. 173)

*-When do you read to your child? What do you do to make sure this happens regularly? What are the challenges you have with this activity? How might having multiple children make this more challenging? What are some solutions you have found to overcome these challenges?*

“Just as in music, we want to introduce the infant to the best of our cultural heritage, so in helping the child develop this appreciation, it is important not to bombard the baby with too many artistic images, even as we limit the number of books available to him and do not keep music constantly playing in the background.” (p. 181)

*-Why does this matter for a baby? What are some of the options we might resist when we think about making only the finest art and music available for the young child? What are ways we can offer these experiences to our children in our homes?*

“The development of character involves self-discipline and often sacrifice of one’s own desires for the good of self and others... However, parents today are more likely to say their primary wish for their children is that they be happy. In pursuit of this goal they indulge their children, often unconsciously, to a degree that is startling to previous generations [often by buying excess toys]. All parents need to remember that true happiness comes through having character and discipline, and living a life of meaningful contribution—not by having and doing whatever you wish.” (p. 187)

*-Does having what you want when you want it create happiness? Is it an enduring happiness? What do you think creates true happiness? How does considering the concept of happiness in this light affect some of the day to day decisions you make for your child? When you reflect on this concept of happiness, how might it alter your answer to the question, “What is my primary wish for my children?”?*

“What kind of toys can parents select for their young child that are going to serve as an aid, rather than an obstacle, to his best development? We want any object that we give to the child under the age of three for independent play to enhance our ultimate goal: connection with others and an understanding of his world. We want, then, to avoid toys that represent the fantasy of an adult’s mind, instead of building the creative capacities of the child’s mind.” (p. 188)

*-What are some examples of toys that represent the fantasy of an adult’s mind? What are the best toys for building creativity in a child’s mind? Does a child need colorful, plastic, exciting toys to encourage their creativity? Why or why not?*

## Chapter 9 “The Developing Will”

“Next, let us consider the prepared environment. We know that the child is nourished and made secure by the order of things. Therefore, we need to prepare an environment for the child that demonstrates order and structure in action. Experiences of order in human life create expectations in the infant that, in turn, she can use to build order within her mind and to assist her in developing her will... ‘What, when, and where’ provide the opportunities for these expectations.” (p. 203)

*-How does your child’s environment demonstrate order and structure in action? How do you create your child’s routine and how do you keep to it? What are the challenges in keeping up a routine? What are some other examples of ways you establish order in her environment?*

“This is a long process of self-formation for the child. Parents need to take care not to delay it unwittingly by a lack of conviction and firmness. ‘No’ must mean no every time... Children who encounter conviction and firmness in their parents’ setting of limits become people of character who understand life’s limitations and responsibilities. In the words of a Montessori trainer of teachers, the adult’s role is to ‘teach the children limits with love or the world will teach them without it.’” (p. 205)

*-How comfortable are you with saying no to your child? Is this something you struggle with? How does your child protest when you establish limits? When are you most likely to end up giving in? What do you think about the idea that you need to establish limits with love or the world will establish them without love?*

“[T]he essential point is to allow no combativeness in tone during such an encounter [instructing a young child to do something they need to do]. If we add a challenging note to our voices, an emotional response is touched off in the child and overwhelms whatever willpower she has managed to develop.” (p. 213)

*-What do you notice about how your child reacts when you tell them to do something calmly, versus with emotion? When is it harder for you to keep emotion out of your instructions? Do you have any techniques for keeping your “combative tone” in check when emotions are rising?*

“[W]e can think of obedience as coming in three stages. From twelve to eighteen months old, the child understands but cannot carry through without a good deal of adult help. From eighteen months to three years old, she can understand the adult’s request and can sometimes obey without help. At about three years old, the child reaches the level of development where she can consistently obey, but may still choose not to.” (p. 214)

*-How does knowing about the stages of obedience affect what you would expect from a child at these ages? What are some examples of how your expectations, engagement, and responses might be different at the different stages?*

“For much of the time, however, because the child is unformed, the parent must substitute his own energy and will for those of the child. For this role, the adult must have the confidence necessary for good leadership. The parent can use a gentle voice when saying ‘I will help you’ to the child. However, everything in the adult’s manner and tone must leave no doubt as to the outcome of each situation. The adult’s words and actions, as a part of the structure of the child’s environment, are as real as its physical elements; they must reflect authority.” (p. 218)

*-How do you feel about acting as a leader? Do you think you have authority with your child? If not, or in the times you do not, why are you not comfortable using authority?*