

Making “Sense” out of Montessori

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Montessori is the only educational system that makes “sense” because it is the only education that starts off where your child starts - in the world of the senses. Our babies are born into a sensory world – they taste, they hear, they feel. They spend the first months of their lives wrapped in these senses. They begin to focus. Their eyes begin to take in their world. Their ears become attuned to your voice. They know what it is to be wet, to be dry, to be held, to be hungry, to be satisfied. Their senses are being refined day by day. Their hands grasp, their mouth tastes. They delight in the world they are discovering. Their minds are absorbing, categorizing, defining. There is a long period of intellectual foundational input before there are any external demonstrations of intellectual development. All the pressure to succeed in the world does not create the foundation. If our children can count to twenty or know their ABC’s before they are three it is a random demonstrations of facts. The solid academic foundation is built on the building blocks of the senses.

Twenty five hundred years ago the Greek philosophers observed that, “There is nothing in the mind that is not first in the hand.” The beginning of intellectual development begins with the senses. The senses are alive and operative long before the intellect can explain itself. Dr. Montessori understood the intrinsic value of “sensitive periods” when it is possible to acquire immeasurable gains (literally unconsciously) in language, in orderliness, in understanding because the senses are totally alive and receptive. It is the intellect receiving sense messages rather than intellectual messages that creates this great educational method.

One of the first senses developed is the sense of order. The Montessori environment (where everything has its own special place) creates a sense of internal order, well-being and security in your child. The environment, where things are consistent, orderly, color-coded and logical is perceived by the sensory organs before it is perceived intellectually by the conscious mind. Every sense is addressed in a logical progression by the sensorial materials. As adults we look at it as blocks and colors and strange apparatus that we perceive as “simple and obvious” but to the child every experience is new and exciting and adds to the foundation of their intellectual building blocks. And they come to this through their senses – literally “coming to their senses”.

The long progression through practical life and the sensorial materials is the preparation for the intellectual explosion that occurs in Montessori children. The sensorial education includes the sense of sight in the visual discrimination of dimension. The “famous” Pink Tower (which I swear looks just like building blocks) is the beginning of this intellectual marathon. The red rods, knobless cylinders and all of the other apparatus are tools to enhance this visual discrimination of dimension and space, a skill needed for so many venues in life – like driving. (There’s a scary thought for when your three year old turns sixteen!)

The Montessori classroom continues to train and refine the senses in the discrimination of color. The beauty of life and art (and the ability to appreciate, name and produce) starts with a sense of color – all presented in the environment.

The “Stereognostic Sense” (my spell checker won’t even accept this two dollar word – which means, “The perception of the form of an object by means of touch.”) is covered extensively in a Montessori classroom. All of the triangles, rectangles, polygons and geometric shapes give entry for the child to the shapes of the world. He not only sees them, but touches them and internalizes (not just memorizes) their qualities and descriptions. And then we get to the botany cabinet where your child is introduced to the variety of nature’s shapes.

The tactile sense is a refinement of the ability to receive perceptions through touch. The rough and smooth boards, the touch tablets and the fabric box all contribute to the foundational building blocks.

The auditory sense with the sound boxes and the bells and other musical apparatus tunes and refines the ear - an important sense skill for listening and for learning other languages.

The thermic sense (dealing with heat) is addressed by the thermic bottles and thermic tablets. The olfactory sense (sense of smell) and taste and the baric sense (dealing with weight) is addressed and enhanced.

Just like walking and feeling your way through a dark room, your child literally senses her way through the educational world until the lights get turned on and the conscious intellect begins to build the structure of her mind and thoughts. “There is nothing in the mind that is not first in the hands.” The senses are the building block of all future academic achievement.

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