

THE Montessori METHOD

Traditionally, nursery education started at three years of age, when most children were able to be physically independent of adults. Emotionally, many three-year-olds are capable of leaving their prime carer for short periods of time too, and socially they are ready to engage with others. In many countries, children spend the years from three to six in nursery or kindergarten and then begin compulsory education, when they embark on a new developmental stage.

Montessori's own view of children's developmental stages broadly coincides with this perspective. She sees the first six years of life as a series of symbolic rebirths following three specific embryonic stages. The physical embryo culminates in birth after the nine months of gestation. The spiritual embryo spans from birth to around three; this is a period when, according to Montessori, the child's physical and psychological capacities unfold. Finally, during the social embryonic stage the social being emerges. It is during the latter that a child begins to absorb the social conventions and moirés of their culture; they are internalised and used in daily life. And this is when the child would enter the Montessori nursery. This approach broadly links with Piaget's pre-operational stage and Erikson's stage of initiative versus guilt.

The majority of three-year-olds are ready and curious to extend their social circles

beyond the family. For many children, nursery is the first opportunity to experience life beyond the home in a home-like environment. They are introduced to new routines and new parameters of behaviour where other children need to be considered and where the wellbeing of others and respect for the environment are nurtured. In other words – a new set of rules is introduced.

In Montessori nurseries, these social skills are nurtured by first establishing the child's individual routine and showing them how the classroom works. When ready, the child will find their own friends and will begin to engage in cooperative play. Children are not expected to share and be part of the group from day one. They begin by being encouraged to choose from activities displayed on open shelves in baskets or on trays. The child will play with the self-chosen activity for as long or as little a time as they wish – their individual interests and rhythms will be followed. They are also shown how to put the activity back on the shelf where they found it, and whilst returning it will be reminded that it needs to go back on the shelf so that another child can use it.

The vertical grouping of the classroom, where children between the ages of three to six play and work together, is another important element of this socialisation, as the older children are very positive role models whilst the younger ones really enjoy having



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practice throughout the early years by looking at the social development of three-year-old children...

their guidance and help. They are very keen to be like the older ones. Together they grow and develop in a respectful community of learners.

Learning together

As they settle and mature, the three-year-olds find special friends and will begin to play together, learn to share and cooperate. Courtesy and respectful behaviour are modelled by the adults and the older children. In practice this means...

- adults and peers are role models;
- children who are not ready to share are protected to play on their own. The teachers initially explain that this is absolutely fine but that the child needs to explain to others that they wish to play on their own. It also requires the adult to protect the 'rejected' child by distracting them and guiding them towards another activity. This approach may seem harsh, but if it is explained calmly and sensitively the children learn that verbal communication is a powerful tool and that everyone has the right to make a decision with whom, when and where to play;
- when ready to play with others, a child has the natural potential to share and cooperate, and capacity to contribute towards the social cohesion of the classroom;
- the freedoms of the classroom, which include choice and flow of movement, develop a sense of responsibility for one's actions and nurture self-discipline.

The challenges for Montessorians in this country today are in that most children join at the age of two and leave between four and five. Economic and political pressures have driven this shift despite the fact that many two-year-olds are not quite ready to be separated from their prime carers.

find out more

For more Montessori ideas on how to support young children in their third year of life, See Kathi Hughes' *Learning Together - What Montessori can offer your family* in the bookstore at montessori.org.uk

