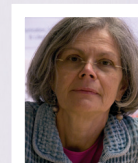


# NATURE & NURTURE



**Barbara Isaacs**

begins a new series on Maria Montessori's Human Tendencies...

Montessori's perspective of human development is very much linked with her personal story. As one of the first women to qualify as a medical doctor from the University of Rome, in the early 1890s, her interest in human biology was the motivation behind her studies. She understood physiology and used this knowledge to focus on the importance of physical development as the driving force in the early years.

She also studied the brain, and was aware of the need to activate as many brain connections as possible in the first six years of life, a period she called the Absorbent Mind, and to establish them through opportunities for sensory exploration, problem solving, repetition and communication. For her, activity, particularly manipulation of the hand, was the key to establishing 'pathways to the brain'. In other words, Montessori advocated that young children have a phenomenal capacity to learn - providing the learning is based on doing.

## Natural tendencies

According to Montessori, we are born with certain human tendencies: qualities that make us unique within the animal kingdom, characteristics that are pre-determined. However, how these characteristics develop depends on the conditions of our lives - our society, culture and religion as well as education, financial standing and the personal attitudes of our parents, families, friends and communities. In a nutshell, Montessori recognised that nature and nurture are constant partners of human development.

She explained that the Human Tendencies manifested themselves in sensitive periods, unique windows of opportunity when children develop certain skills and interests driven by the 'hormic impulse' - an inner drive that is present particularly during the first years of life. She noted that the sensitive periods are transitory and if not nurtured during the first six years of life, will disappear.

The learning of skills and attitudes that develop during these sensitive periods will never be as easily or naturally acquired as during the early years. For example, second language is simply absorbed during this period, as are certain physical skills such as walking, running and eye-hand coordination. Parents and practitioners see the force with which the sensitive periods unfold in their daily negotiations with toddlers; for example, when their child begins to walk and

repeatedly insist on climbing up the stairs or on turning on the television or demands the reading of the same book over and over. According to Montessori, these irrational behaviours are the necessary repetitions the child needs in order to develop certain skills and should be supported and encouraged.

Montessori recognised six key sensitive periods: order, small objects, movement, language, refinements of the senses and social aspects. There are others and they vary from child to child - for example, sensitivity to movement. Each one of the key sensitive periods can be linked with a Human Tendency; in the next few issues I will explore these connections and give examples of how they can be supported at nursery.

## Social individuals

To begin, I would like to touch upon the link between the Human Tendency for gregariousness and sensitive period for social aspects, because the main aim of nursery education has always been the socialisation of the child. This Tendency is unique to human beings. We are born social individuals - this is evident in the curiosity babies show in each other and the way toddlers will be drawn to older children.

The Human Tendency for gregariousness is directly linked with the sensitive period for social aspects, which emerges around the age of three, when children are usually naturally ready to spend time away from the prime carer. It is evident in their personal independence: most children of this age are able to feed themselves, are self-sufficient in personal hygiene, can dress themselves, and are able to express their needs, wishes and interests.

According to Erikson the child's autonomy is established between one and three years of age, and the stage of initiative is ready to flourish. This can be observed in the way children at nursery take on the social conventions of the setting - for example, eating lunch, getting ready for the garden, waiting to take turns, and being respectful and polite to each other. Children also form their first friendships with their peers, and their teachers and key persons become important adults in their lives - when meaningful secondary attachments are formed. All these aspects of the socialisation process demonstrate that the child is ready to embrace wider community and become part of a new social unit.



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