
ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The "Cosmic" Task of the Youngest Children – Direct, Anticipate or Respect? Experiences Working with Small Children

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The article derived from Grazia Honegger Fresco's years in close cooperation with Maria Montessori and Adele Costa Gnocchi. The author illustrates how small children from the moment they start using their hands and are standing unassisted on their own legs must act in their own way. The teacher must observe before acting and intervene as little as possible. Honegger Fresco follows the work of Montessori and Costa Gnocchi and she compares the findings with different fields of science, such as ethnology and neurology. As a result of her observations and experiences she points toward the relationship between a good childhood, and in the long term, human responsibility on Earth, using the concept "the Cosmic Task".

The method in this article is based on autoethnography, as the author shares her personal experience and reflections, both as a teacher and as an educator. The aim is to shed light on aspects regarding the needs of small children and to point at the essential role of adults, educators as well as parents. As Schiedi explains, autoethnography "extends its narrative horizon to a social, professional, organizational dimension of the self" (2016). During Honegger Fresco's career, she was primarily inspired by Maria Montessori's research about child development and children's needs and rights, and she had continuously deepened her understanding by studying other researchers in this field. Thus, the article will share her conviction that by serving the creative spirit of the youngest children we will build a better future for our planet.

Keywords: Maria Montessori; Adele Costa Gnocchi; day care; small children; Montessori materials; teachers role; Cosmic task; neuroscience

Introduction

It is important to recognize the important transformations and expressions of the self that emerge in the first years of every human beings' life. From ancient times, we have been led to believe that the first years in the life of a human being are of little significance. Instead the emphasis is placed on when children begin elementary school and when they, as adolescents go on to secondary school and later up to university. However, previous research in ethnography, psychology, neurology – from the beginning of the twentieth century until today – would suggest the opposite. Maria Montessori (1870–1952), in particular, had stressed the importance of the early years.

[S]ociety must heed the child, recognize his rights and provide for his needs. Once we have focused our attention and our studies on life itself, we may find that we are touching the secret of mankind, and into our hands will fall the knowledge of how it should be governed and how helped.

(Montessori, 1973, p.15)

In this article I will discuss that the way we act and communicate in the first years has an essential and very concrete part to play – completely observable – in the construction of the future adult's intellectual and physical abilities. I will try to illustrate in this, as the fruits of many years of work in the schools of Maria Montessori and Adele Costa Gnocchi, how every little one, boy or girl, from when the child is born until the point of being secure on two feet and capable with their hands – completely without knowing it – act as a milestone along the road of our species and the history of humanity. From the very beginning, this littlest one carries out their own special task that emerges with particular evidence in the second year of life. According to Montessori, children are capable of achieving their proper conquests independently and are actively learning from birth, that are, if their ability to concentrate is protected and they are allowed to work in their own unique way. Montessori (1989a, 1994, 2011) called it a "cosmic task". Humans have a responsibility towards the biosphere and the protection of all living species. An understanding of this task is not suddenly acquired in adulthood, rather, it must be built, step by step, from birth. This is done by respecting the child and promoting all their potential and independent growth. The way we act and communicate

with children in the early age plays a key role in the manual and intellectual abilities that the child will develop as an adult, for example, to learn how to interact with other people in a peaceful way.

I will cover the neonatal phase and the first months of the child's life, but as the "cosmic" task can easily be identified during the second year of life, the foci of this article will be on that period.

Setting the stage

Between the 1910s and the 1950s, Montessori did numerous studies that focused on the period from birth until the age of three of the "long human childhood". These studies were carried out at Scuola Assistenti all'Infanzia Montessori (AIM) in Rome, which focused on the innate capacities that children developed in this age span. The school was founded by Costa Gnocchi (1883–1967). Costa Gnocchi¹ had been a disciple of Montessori since 1909 and accompanied her to many conferences and courses. She had done experiments at a Casa dei Bambini, at an elementary school and even at a lower secondary school. Costa Gnocchi managed to influence others to devote more attention to the early developments (from birth) of children. In 1947, in cooperation with Montessori, Costa Gnocchi founded the Scuola Biennale AIM, which aimed to educate young women in the bio-psychic care of newborns and to help parents on how to read and how to respond to the child's non-verbal signals. The Scuola Biennale AIM offered a three-year program that combined theoretical studies with practical training. Certain parts of this three-year program focused on the newborns. There was also a two-year track that prepared the students to take care of slightly older children, either at home or at some educational institution. In 1958, the Scuola Biennale AIM was transformed into a state school. In this process, unfortunately, the institute lost its focus on the smallest children, which Montessori had put such emphasis on during the first ten years of the institute's existence. For this reason, Costa Gnocchi wanted to establish another institution, independent from state control, in order to conduct research on this age span and continue to give guidance to families regarding their smallest children. This idea was materialized in the form of the Centro Nascita Montessori (CNM),² which first opened its doors in 1960. Costa Gnocchi borrowed the name from the 7th Montessori Congress, which took place in Edinburgh in 1938. The theme of the congress was "Education as an Aid to Life". For Costa Gnocchi, who attended the congress, it was self-evident that this "aid" should be given right from birth. Therefore, as a motto for the CNM, she rephrased the name as "Education from Birth as an Aid to Life".³

This period from the 60's was, however, permeated by prejudices and critique of Montessori's ideas. The roots behind the difficulties to implement the new ideas were based on people's old prejudices, sometimes dating back to their own childhood which they had to overcome before they could begin to trust the children.

In order to have valid observations, it is necessary to allow the child to manifest himself. If we put a cage

around him, the bars in the bed and so on, his manifestations will be false. There is a need for a suitable environment so that the child can act naturally.

(Costa Gnocchi in Honegger Fresco, 2001, p.115)

Teachers needed to find a new interest in their work and begin to understand how complex and delicate this work is, even though it cannot always be detected by the naked eye. So much research and practical experience were thereby kept out of the public discourse. It was not until the late 1990's that the idea, albeit slowly, of a Montessori daycare⁴ began to gain traction in Italy, although often with adaptations and compromises to the original ideas. It often promoted a rigid imposition on the ways of acting by constantly seeking attention from the adults and there were frequent attempts to push the smallest children forward, not allowing them to fully live each stage, especially the first thirty months. The children were thereby put in a type of elementary school before they have even gone through the formative climate that characterizes the period from zero to six years. It is important to note that Montessori's main idea – to observe the child and follow them, not to stress to teach them something but rather to be at the service of their development and inventiveness – has thereby been neglected or put aside. There is a very delicate choice for the teacher to resolve the conflict between the unknowns coming from each child and the need for security which is typical of adults and between the multifaceted need to explore continuously in the early years and the adult's immobility.

My own experience and contribution to further development

In 1949–1950, having just graduated from AIM, I worked as a teacher in the "Scuoletta" of Palazzo Taverna, which was directed by Costa Gnocchi. There I followed a dozen children who were between fourteen and thirty months old. I organized some games, but I told myself that I needed to do more for these children. Therefore, I began to design different types of objects that each corresponded with different observable needs amongst the smallest children. The objects that I designed were variations of "inside- and outside-"activities, which corresponded to small children's passion for putting things into holes.

Inventing objects for small children

The first piece I built was a large dowel with rings. I made it by attaching the end of a broomstick to a wooden disk (six inches in diameter and three quarters of an inch thick). I put three wooden curtain rings on the dowel. The invention became a great success, the children (fourteen to sixteen months) carried it around and now and then they stopped, removed the ring and put them back again, each time with great care. This encouraged me to create other things such as simple wooden shapes cut out with a jigsaw and inspired by the Flat Wooden Insets,⁵ just one or two circles with large knobs for easy grasping. For the older children, thirty months and more, I made cardboard boxes that they could glue images on, which is so important in the development of speech. We also constructed a frame with just

three buttons on, a simple invention which was recently proposed to the children in the second year of a Montessori “Mother and Children”-center in Sochi (Russia).⁶ Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, one of Adele Costa Gnocchi’s students, Laura Benedettini Bolasco, designed, produced and sold many new types of materials. Some of these were even bought by Americans who had come to Rome to study the new methods for the youngest children. It was common practice thereafter in our training courses for 0–3 educators for the students to develop their own handcrafting abilities in order to respond to the needs of these youngest children. Inventing and creating educational materials is an excellent opportunity for adults to reflect on children’s motor development in this phase of life.

Since the 1990s, with the spread of the “nidi”, various manufacturers started to produce Montessori objects that were designed for the smallest children; smart games, that were beautiful to behold and much appreciated by the smallest children. However, the children in the second year did not only lose interest in our more modest home-made models, but also in the perfect ones made in a factory. Therefore, we started to ask ourselves why they lost interest. If we could find the answer to that question we could invent new ones that were more adapted for that age.

A change of direction

Already my first experience of the children that were in their second year, showed that their actions were repetitive but never mechanical. After a number of observations, I realized what was typical of a certain period in their development, the period that occurs right after the children have developed the ability to grasp an object, drop it, pick it up, shake it, and shake it in a container. For example, the spoon in the cup, which they had seen me use, but I did not know that would trigger them to try to do the same. After the children had learned a new thing by repeating it several times, they usually thought of similar activities that they also repeated several times. In the beginning, I had not reflected enough on the children’s capacity to invent, this had led me – as I wrote above – to create objects that facilitated one type of action. In a certain sense, however, they recognized them a priori. I understood that my homemade inventions directed the children too much. If the children were not shown in a

direct or evident way what to do with each object, they began to use them in many different ways. Sometimes they watched each other, but often the children began to play and experiment with the object in their own personal way. Each time, there was a binary rhythm in their actions: “in and out” with an object out of a box, then after a couple of days, they changed the order. This was true with all their actions; push and pull; fill and empty; etc. One example of this was “the key in the lock”-action. They used a small stick as a key, then they used it on the radiator, on the cabinet or on the apples that were just brought to them from the kitchen. Each variant of this activity was carried out for a long time, up to 30–40 minutes of careful concentration. When they changed from one variant of the action into another they took a long pause and moved around in the room, observing the other children, while they were continually looking for a new action to do.

One example of this, which was found in a family, was when Sam,⁷ 16 months, had found a flat wooden strip. He first began to put it between the empty spaces of a chair, then in the holes of a net, between the books in the shelf. After a while, Sam found a handful of coins and began to insert them between the DVDs and some others he put back into their vertical container. A few days later the parent found out that the DVD player had stopped, the technician revealed that the mysterious malfunction was due to the fact that the recorder was full of coins – all done by our innocent busy explorer (**Figure 1a, b, c**) who only follows his own internal command. It is evident that children are equipped with an “esprit mathématique”,⁸ just like Galileo, they are deeply absorbed in their explorations of the world through a game of trial and error, each time modifying their experiments after their own head. They learn a new action and after a while, they move to the next one. Therefore, to preserve and promote this innate ability to explore, it is better to make available objects and materials that are “unstructured” and not too direct.

From the 1980s, the provincial administrations were responsible for educating the staff of the municipal daycare. In a series of fortunate circumstances, I was offered to participate in the education of the daycare staff in Varese, the city that I had just moved to from Rome. The group responsible for the education of the daycare employees mostly consisted of medical doctors and psychologists,

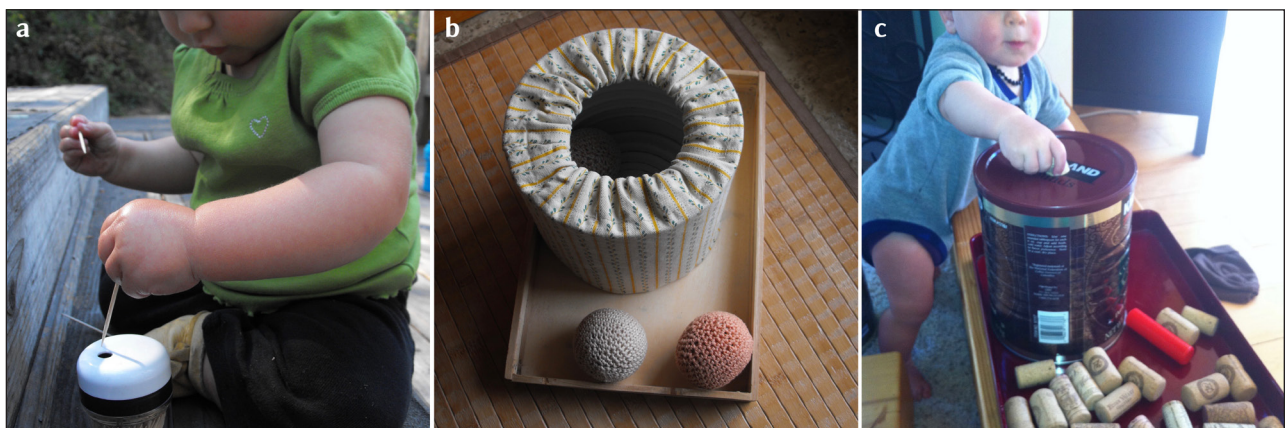


Figure 1: Busy explorer. Photo by Karin Slabaugh.

they were all very good at theoretical aspects but they were lacking in the more practical aspects. Following the example set by Costa Gnocchi, I avoided the lecture-style of teaching, instead, I encouraged questions and discussion and tried to make the topic more concrete and practically applicable. In the courses for teachers who would work with children between the age of 0–3, I focused on how to plan, compose and build,⁹ and how to respond to the needs of children. Much focus was also placed on how to stimulate an interest in simple but gratifying craft skills. Later on, this became a common practice in these courses because it is an excellent way to begin to reflect on the various expressions that occur through acts during this stage of children's development.

The first daycare that really understood the importance of observations and to respect the small children was the daycare Caronno Pertusella, near Saronno in Lombardy. In two years, through the strength and persuasions of the educators and with the help of a particularly agreeable councillor, they managed to transform Caronno Pertusella from a heavy ONMI¹⁰ structure into a pleasant place that put the needs of the children at the heart. Other day-nurseries in the Varese region also began to adhere to some of the examples, set-out by myself and the daycare in Saronno, by focusing on the Montessori-mode of observing the signals that are coming from the children. Together with some friends, I founded the Association, "Percorsi per Crescere".¹¹ In numerous municipal day-nurseries, our ideas began to gain traction but the process of change was however, slow.¹² Step by step, from the coordinator to the assistants and the cook, the winds of change were spreading, although it could take two or three years and sometimes even more.

Developing children's capacity to concentrate

In the late seventies, many day-nurseries began to use the so-called "basket of treasures", which worked for both children who were sitting alone and for children who were just starting to stand up. The basket of treasures was the brainchild of Elinor Goldschmied (1910–2009),¹³ the brilliant observer of the smallest children. Each object in their basket had its own "raison d'être", and it could be simple household objects that could be found at home.

Children in their second year feel a great urge to explore and discover for themselves the way objects behave in space as they manipulate them. They need a wide variety of objects with which to do this kind of experimentation, objects which are constantly new and interesting, and which certainly cannot be bought from a toy catalogue.

(Goldschmied & Jackson, 2004, p.119)

The heuristic rules¹⁴ were to gather a large collection of unstructured materials in the basket, and later on, these objects could be combined together and then rearranged. This procedure always fascinated the small children. However, we preferred, as was our usual practice, to give the small children even more freedom to explore and try to minimize the interference from the pedagogues. To reor-

ganize the objects in their original place (before lunch or at the end of the day) was sometimes a challenge but never a problem. Even from an early age, these children are starting to grasp that every object has its own place and should be returned there. This proves that even the smallest children have a biological need for order. Montessori has even spoken of a sensitive period of order (Montessori 1956, 1966).

All of the above-mentioned day-nurseries continued to experiment but in their own individual way. At the Germignaga, for example, they were particularly skilled in games with different types of wood, whereas the daycare in Saronno used an object from every day-life more frequently (sometimes the parents brought materials from their workplace). At another daycare in Cassano, the entire group of educators was committed to finding the type of materials that was best for children and used a constant order in the environment as their main source of developing a tranquil atmosphere. In Cardano, we witnessed how effective the use of unstructured materials can be and how they always approached the children with intense concentration and respect. Also in Rome, in the day-nurseries, which were managed by CNM, they began to emphasize the use of different types of materials.

One thing that Elinor Goldschmied recommended was that the child needs the stable presence of seeing the same educator. Just like the parents, the educator thereby becomes a clear reference point for the child. The importance of the children's need for a stable adult presence was also shared by another scholar, the Hungarian Emmi Pikler (1902–1984).¹⁵ Pikler was a pediatrician and had founded the Institute at via Lóczy in Budapest,¹⁶ which was an orphanage that ensured that children received a normal development similar to that it would have had in a family. Pikler had studied the motoric development of hundreds of children when they were being cared for by just one adult educator. In this case, one educator took care of three children, and was thereby very present – through words and actions – but at the same time gave the child total freedom to move and explore within a restricted protected area.

Our studies contradict the widespread opinion, seen also in many reports, that the adult's direct help is necessary for children to acquire the basic and transitory motor developmental skills and for being active in gross motor activities. The adult's support and teaching or help may hinder to a certain extent the continuous gross motor activities of children.

(Pikler, 1972, p.308)

An important revelation brought to light by the work of Goldschmied and Pikler is that the close relationship between adult and child should be guided by a conscious and rigorously prepared adult. This preparation should focus on the intellectual protection and 'nurturing' of the child. This is true for all the hours of the day when the child is awake when the child is exploring with their hands or moving its body, it is all about a child that is capable. Regarding the very first years of a child's life, Montessori

(1998) speaks of the importance of continuity in sensory and affective experiences and she emphasizes a thousand ways of non-direct intervention by the adult. For me and my colleagues at CNM Percorsi, and the coordinators and directors of most attentive day-nurseries, we have gained tremendously from the contributions of Goldschmied and Pikler. In particular, how they highlight the importance of developing children's capacity to concentrate, and this cannot be enforced by adults.

Our experiences from working with the "heuristic" material were that it had a positive effect on the restless, bored, and aggressive children. Being able to do a repetitive action and later doing a variant of the same action according to their own time-table gave them a sense of satisfaction and was like a consolation. After a few weeks, the interaction these children had with other children became more peaceful and with less conflict. They also showed signs of a prolonged attention-span and their ability to concentrate on one task improved. They began to enjoy being alone at the table and after a while, they let go of some comfort objects (pacifier, safety-blanket, or puppet). They did, however, continue to use the comfort object at home, mostly because the adults used them at the slightest hint of conflict. Gradually they began to show that they could create different variants of the material/games and they were already quieter. Each of them did it in their own individual and original way compared to the other children in the group: slipping themselves into corners, under a table or in a box. They started to touch everything in an explorative way, creating what the adults would describe as a mess was for them a vital way of thinking and acting. However, they did this with great concentration and after it was done they showed signs of satisfaction.

Vagabond explorations

I want to call this phase of inexhaustible research in continuous movement when the small child goes everywhere – seemingly without thought or purpose – for vagabond explorations (*vagabondaggio esplorativo*). This phase of vagabond explorations expresses the great formative energy of the small child that will eventually develop into full autonomy as an adult.

I began to make less and less structured material available (and at no cost): cardboard tubes of various diameters and lengths; Bakelite or wooden rings (from curtains); large corks and curlers; small pine cones, shells or big walnuts; easy-to-open boxes, coffee cans with perforated lids; handbags, sacks, baskets etc. Together with my colleagues and friends, we made an interesting collection of objects. The objects – from 6 to 10 at most – were assembled each time in a suitable container after they had been used, to avoid that the exercise was duplicated the next time. Some unpainted wooden blocks that had been donated by a carpenter would be placed on a little tray; tongue depressors in a little basket and some small dowels in shoeboxes. We offered pieces of tubing of varying diameters and varying lengths of three to five inches to see if the children were interested in inserting one tube into another, which they invariably were. We would put out a small cloth bag with

five or six horse chestnuts and a bowl next to it, and just as soon as we put it out, a child would come up and take out the chestnuts, put them in the bowl, return them to the bag and so on. We put several small pieces of fabric in a basket.

Every day upon his arrival, Claudio, a 23-month old boy that was often moody and sulky, would use these fabric pieces to wrap up some plastic animals from another basket. He would always choose the predators, the lion, the crocodile and the dinosaur, and would do the same thing every day. He would put them in a line on the shelf and not let anyone touch them. Only at the end of the morning would he remove the pieces of cloth and let the other children play with these animals. He did this for a month, every day, and then one day he stopped doing this.

It is not always easy for an adult to explain the profound motivations of the child's behaviors, but a keen educator knows that her principal task is to follow the child and observe him, without intervening, and never to prohibit a behavior except for obviously a concern for his safety.

Over the years, it became clear to me that the objects which were preassembled and had a beautiful design, for example, the box that resembled a drawer that had a ball which could be inserted into the box or the large pearls that moved alongside a metal wire from which they could not be removed, did not fully fill the explanatory impulse of the small children. The purpose of, for example, the box and the ball, was too limited and did not offer sufficient variations for the children's imagination. The box rather offered a monotone and even mechanical action. For this reason, the child soon lost interest. It is symptomatic of the small children's intellectual and curious soul that they are constantly seeking for a new thing to explore. A drawer box or toy that had wooden beads on a curvy metal rod attached to a wooden base,¹⁷ can be of interest in the first phase of exploration but when they begin to experiment with the object in novel ways, more is needed to stimulate their explorative interest. For example, Sara, 10 months old, began to test in how many different ways a small plate can be balanced on her finger or Giulio, 20 months old, who started to explore what type of material – water, corn-meal or seeds – can fit into an empty container. Children who arrive at the daycare that are around Sara and Giulio's age – ten to twenty months – are, in other words, starting to leave more structured games behind them and instead embark on more individual explorations. However, in some cases, the children move in the opposite direction and the reassuring repetitiveness of the games develop their attention span, rectifying their actions when necessary (innate ability to self-test) and learn to fully respect the games other children play. In observing the children, it is of absolute necessity that there is a shared reflection amongst the adults regarding the environment and organization where the children explore. The educators must, therefore, give the children ample space and a significant sample of different objects to explore (**Figure 2a, b, c**), among which the structured materials are a minimal part. Sometimes you hear educators complaining that the children are making a mess. This is true, especially when they are small. However, as educators, we must have patience



Figure 2: Objects to explore. Photo by Margherita Vertolomo.

and put the misplaced and abandoned objects back in their right place, because the children are observing the educators when they are tidying up after them. And step by step, if it is done in an affectionate and pleasant way, the children that are around 20 months old will begin to help the educators tidy up. The fact that the children begin to help to put the objects back into their right place is something we are used to as educators, but the parents are always surprised and amazed by this. It is not uncommon, for example in the already mentioned examples from Valentina, that two children tacitly invent a game together, creating a binary rhythm that is both calm and intensive at the same time. I stress “tacit” here because at this stage the children cannot communicate with words yet. A very interesting example of an integration between two three-year-old children was captured on photo by Margherita Vertolomo, coordinator of the Nido del Cedro, CNM, Rome.¹⁸ The boy Roberto had a cardboard tube in his hands, the girl Susanna approaches and explores the tube together with Roberto, then she inserts some nuts into the tube, Roberto observes as the nuts go through the tube and fall out on the other side, he hears the noise and collects them and continues to insert them at the top of the tube again. The two children alternate this action and there is a harmony between them, they share a sort of wordless project. Other children come and go, but the shared project of Roberto and Susanna continues. After a while, they try to replace the nuts with some wires, but the wires do not seem to give them the same satisfaction, so they go back to the nuts. When we had objects of different sizes and length – large and small boxes, long and short; cylinders of various sizes, wide-mouthed bottles and curlers, shells, buttons, woody fruits collected in the woods, twigs etc. – the children often played together, even children of different ages.

The alphabet of human labor

The repeated binary actions discussed above – in and out; open and close; fill and empty; go up and down (**Figure 3**); pulling and pushing; put apart and put together – is of the greatest interest for the children from the moment they are able to move. These actions refine the senses and are the first step towards more abstract activities. This phase, according to me, forms the basis of the complex actions that human beings are able to perform. It is the alpha and omega of human labor. We are “homo faber”,¹⁹ from the first year of our lives. No one suddenly receives their



Figure 3: Go up and down. Photo by Karin Slabaugh.

sharp senses and manual skills in adulthood without having been unconsciously prepared for this since childhood. Perhaps we have never noticed it, but many of the actions we do as adults are rooted in behavior that we have experimented with since childhood.²⁰ Recent ethnological studies have illustrated how this mechanism – which moves beyond simple imitation – is observable in different species, especially amongst primates. It probably began in ancient times when the humans formed the first words and continued to explore and invent different tools and art forms until the present day.

No sensory material at the Nest (0–3)

On the basis of the observations made above, other colleagues and I strongly disagree with the many daycares that say that they use Montessori’s method just because they have some sensorial materials at their “nest”. In fact, these types of sensorial materials should be used at a later stage. It is true that, for example, Cylinder Blocks could be of good use in “inside and outside”-explorations. However, the same type of exploration can be achieved without using Cylinder Blocks or other sensory materials. The function of these types of materials is to make the child discover by using and exploring objects of different sizes and shapes, to explore similarities and differences between different objects. The children that are around two or three years old are not ready for this. We must be cautious against any anticipation as children do not need it. Instead, we should be waiting for them to reveal that they are ready to do something else. This can be seen, for

example, in following the natural evolution of their experiences, when they spontaneously begin to make pairs or piles of similar objects, or to put rows with twigs, leaves, shells in order – from the largest to the smallest. When they do this, they manifest an entirely new interest and this change should be met by the educator adequately.

The Montessori daycare

The daycare for the smallest children is not a watered down "Casa dei Bambini".²¹ Some teacher presentations at the Casa dei Bambini are devoted to tasks related to "practical life" or the protection of the environment or the care of other people. Some presentations involve water, which is a material that fascinates many children. But before the child can wash a plate or handkerchief in water, they must go through a phase when they explore all the things they can do with water; to grasp the water coming out of the tap; see what floats and what sinks; explore the foam that is formed by a soap in water; to put things inside and then outside a bucket of water etc. Only when all this interest is exhausted, the children can begin to wash a doll, a plate or a dirty container. A similar activity of discovery is the one with sand, earth or clay, long before activities of cultivation and watering of plants are undertaken. The same can be said of activities that are related to cooking or how to behave during lunch or snack-time. Before the children, who are three years old or more, can participate in cooking activities – that are often complex – they must have a matured security with these activities which is something they start to acquire when they are even younger. Amongst many educators working with children between the ages of 0 and 3, there is an idea that they should be preparing them for the next step (3 to 6). Since the little ones are not "yet" ready for the complex activities that will be offered, they are convinced that they must be trained in advance in order to be prepared to respond to the challenges that will come. Montessori always stressed the need to observe and respond moment by moment to the silent requests of the children, and this opinion was shared by the Jewish-Polish doctor and educator Janus Korczak.

You say:

–Dealings with children are tiresome.

You're right.

You say:

–Because we have to lower ourselves to their intellect.

Lower, stoop, bend, crouch down.

–You are mistaken.

It isn't that which is so tiring. But because we have to reach up to their feelings. Reach up, stretch, stand on our tip-toes. As not to offend.

(Korczak, 1992, p.3)

Korczak (1992) recommended parents and teachers of the importance of the here and now of each child, to be respected without being held back or pushed. The experiences that children get right now can be a preparation for future tasks, but they should not be the basic criterion for deciding a priori what activities should be part of the

curriculum. The most important thing is that children are free to play and make their own choices in an environment that stimulates just this, without direct intervention by the adult. Obviously within reasonable limits: no material can be taken away from a partner or thrown at someone. This can happen at the beginning (new environment, the first distance from the parent and the like), but then it does not occur if the general climate is quiet, adults acting calm and not expressing judgments, preferences or comparisons. If the children have the feeling that they have free access to objects, they do not have to be introduced to the objects by the educators or adults. Because if this is not the case, as Elinor Goldschmied has said, there is a risk that the educators and adults "steal" the experience from the children. When the educators or adults are teaching the children to do this or that they are depriving them of the pleasures of discovery, and this pleasure of discovery is the only thing that leads a child around the age of three to achieve intensive concentration. Montessori has a famous example of this at the beginning of chapter three of her book *The advanced Montessori method* (1995).²²

When it comes to opening and closing a tap, to bring a plate or to use a knife to slice a banana, the educators should do this slowly in front of the child, then they have to put the trust in the power of observation and "absorption" of every detail of the objects and actions that the small child possesses (Honegger fresco, 2011). Not surprisingly, Montessori spoke of "the absorbent mind", an intuition today fully confirmed by the discovery of mirror neurons (Ferrari, & Rizzolatti, 2015).

Sensitive periods in action

All of this focus on what these young ones do caused us to reflect on the timing of certain phases of child development, but there are, in fact, big differences from one child to another. To give an example, in Pido's daycare, two children arrived at the same time after spending 13 months with their mothers. One of the children, Sandro, could already walk with good confidence while Dino still crawled and made no attempts to stand up. Dino's mother asked worryingly after comparing Dino with Sandro if "he has to be able to walk?". The educator calmly reassured her and explained to her the importance of respecting each child's own development, which is all healthy in their own way. As an educator, we often have to reassure parents and explain that it is useless to make comparisons. Each child develops in their own time, due to different factors. Once again, it is not good to push the child by, for example, putting them on the ground too soon or being in the crawling-phase, depriving them of the amount of time that they really need. And when the child starts to cling or stand up – driven by a powerful internal thrust – it is important not to stop the child because of fear that they might fall and not to immediately put the shoes on.

Another important aspect to consider is connected to the two parallel sensory periods²³ of movement and language. There is no connection between being an early crawler or walker and having an early developed language proficiency. On the contrary, children who very early on start making "mmmm-sounds" and are able to say "mum"

already around the age of six months, often proceed more slowly in regard to their motor skill. It almost appears as a child cannot use the same energy to develop simultaneously in different areas of development. Of course, this is only a hypothesis that would require further observations and studies. However, in the case of Sandro and Dino, this was the case. One thing that is certain is that every child has their own pace of development and that the claim of "development leaps" – which in fact disavows it – often ends up creating insecurities that might become permanent. The freedom to move, without being restricted by material things like fences or high chairs is in direct correlation with good posture and healthy muscular development.

"Every useless help is an obstacle to the child's development"

Adele Costa Gnocchi always recommended her pupils to adhere to Maria Montessori's idea that the educator should continuously observe what task the children are able to do themselves; take a biscuit out of a box; put the spoon in the pot; put on the sock on their own feet etc. When the children do these things by themselves the educator should only facilitate, wait patiently and encourage the child without pushing them. By doing this, the child will develop a straight posture and fluency in their movements that will have a direct influence on their mental and emotional developments. When all the aid is as indirect as possible the result is that the child develops a sense of inner calm and self-confidence. The sensitive period in the development of language also requires adequate attention. A problem that has emerged during the last ten years or so is that children are cared for by a larger number of different people, even from the first months of their lives. In other words, the children, from a very young age, will meet different babysitters – who all come from different backgrounds – and at the daycare, the educators rotate during the day in a way that resembles a pediatric ward. What effect does this have on the children? According to my observations, the initial period between mother and child – that spontaneous dialogue that creates such a strong bond between them and is so vital in the future development of the child – has gone missing. And all the different people that pass in and out of the young child's life are not interested in the child – illustrated in the way they communicate with them – in the same way as a mother or if just one educator was entrusted with the care of the child. This phenomenon is not new, and it is related to larger societal changes in the job market. However, a constantly changing vocal landscape prevent children from absorbing the sounds of a language in a certain way. Of course, the children adapt themselves to this, given the fact that their internal thrust of verbal absorption is very strong. However, this still results in a sense of uncertainty, a poorer vocabulary, language delays, and an extremely approximate syntax. All of these negative side effects can be seen when the children reach school level. These issues should be placed at the center of attention amongst the daycare that is opened for children between the age of zero and three. Therefore, the development of a well-

articulated language that is rich in its nuances is another important pillar in the well-being of the individual and for their ability to communicate.

Recognizing the sensitive period of order

Since 1947, we have been working hard to find out how to best satisfy the children's need for activity. At the same time, as we were looking for that answer we have also observed how children reject any sudden change when it comes to people or the environment. This indicates that there is a sensitive period in a child's development related to order and stability. Montessori first described this sensitive period in her book *Il Bambino in Famiglia* (1936),²⁴ a masterpiece not sufficiently appreciated compared to her other books, even in the Montessori community. For us at the AIM, during the end of the war and with the lack of other books on the topic, this book functioned as an invaluable guide. In this book, Montessori describes, amongst other things, how a child at the age of one starts to cry when the mother takes off her cloak and then calms down when she puts it on again; the child that is looking at some sand on the floor begins to cry when it is swept up; and the child that start to cry when their bathing routine is changed. In the same book, Montessori writes that this is an unconscious instinct that begins to manifest itself during the child's first year and reaches its peak around the age of two: the child needs to build his own mind, to see that things are always in the same place and always used as it always has been. Often in our lives, we are forced to adapt to sudden changes and these changes have a big effect on all of us. However, for children that are in this sensitive period, these changes become a great disturbance. It is therefore important to be attentive that children at this age react strongly to these changes. This is of vital importance if we do not want to hurt our children.

To give some examples: Mira, 12 months, sees her father enter the room with a new broom that he has just bought at the market. The father puts the broom against the bed and greets his daughter affectionately, but she burst into tears and rejects his greeting saying: "Potto, potto". When Mira's father removes the broom from the room she becomes calm and reassured, she smiles at her dad and embraces him happily. It becomes clear that at a certain age this reaction is biological and cannot be solved by reasoning. These changes are simple instinctive and unacceptable to the children at this age.

When I was working at the Scuoletta, I had prepared two aprons with different colors, one in green and the other in one pink but both had the same flower pattern. The first day that I wore the apron in a different color, the younger children looked at me with a strange expression, almost as if they did not recognize me. One of the older boys told me to throw it away because it was ugly. I will never forget this incident, in my opinion, it is therefore of great importance that educators that are working with children aged between 0 and 3 are aware of the sensitive periods of children and value the children's need for continuity. This is achieved by minimizing changes and the changes that are needed to be made should be introduced slowly and in small doses, giving the child time to accept the new situation without

feeling lost or abandoned. Children are both conservative and curious at the same time, so it is important that children are not rushed, which they are often nowadays.

A friend told me about her 18-month old nephew who always had difficulties to sleep during the first night when they went on holidays. He cried and was restless. The parents brought him to their bed and consoled him, but when he woke up later he looked at his parents as if he did not recognize them. In the end, he solved the problem himself by taking his pillow into the shower cabin – almost similar to the shower cabin at home – and fell asleep there.

Sensitive of changes from the first days of life

This phenomenon became more relevant when I began to observe similar reactions amongst children of a very early age. The protest of newborns was almost always related to the rejection of the mother's breast, as in the following cases: Bruno, eight days old, despite being hungry did not want to breastfeed and cried instead. Maybe the mother had used a different scent after her shower? To test this hypothesis the mother took a new shower and immediately afterwards Bruno took the breast. Clara, ten days old, refused to breastfeed because her mother had just put on nail polish, after removing the nail polish and carefully washing her hands Clara, took the breast. Anna, six days old, had just arrived home from the maternity ward and had just breastfed. Anna looked tired and sleepy so her mother puts her in the cradle and in order to get her to sleep raised a blue hood over the cradle. Anna began to cry when the blue hood was raised, we later understood that she was used to the white hood of the clinic and reacted strongly to the change to a darker hood. At the AIM we have documented many observations that are related to children reactions to what appears to be minimal changes. When I read the observations by Françoise Dolto, who had tried to console many newborns who did not have any family members near them at the hospital, by putting something the mother had worn in their beds, or, Aidan MacFarlane's research on newborns' ability to recognize the smell of their mother's breast, I got further confirmation of the hypothesis. It emphasized that newborns are very delicate and need the maximum possible amount of stability. The argument often raised against this is the sentiment that it is better for the children to

get used to change from the beginning. However, according to our experiences, small children cannot "get used to" the stress caused by sudden changes. For the sake of their well-being, they need stability. At an older age, however, changes become more acceptable – within certain limits – and even interesting for the child. If one is able to adhere to these needs of the child – simply by upholding the status quo as much as possible – the child will develop "a secure base"²⁵ built on trust and mutual understanding.

If a child is later separated from the mother, the separation must be gradual. It is important that they are in the care of a stable educator that is active with regard to bodily care (food, sleep, washing and changing of diapers), those activities that most strongly remind the child of their mother. If children are left at the daycare for longer hours than a factory worker, without any attention to their vital needs, it greatly affects their "secure base". Therefore, the daycare must be organized to meet the needs of children and all this starts with the preparation by a well-prepared educator who has the ability to look at things from the children's point of view.

In our daycare, the children show great interest in the different variations of activities like putting things inside and outside (Figure 4a, b, c), to move from one vessel to another, to pour and fill; to empty with an instrument (hands or a spoon), transferring large seeds such as walnuts or corks or pieces of wood (if they still bring objects to the mouth), then corn flour, small seeds, and sand. Each material is separated from the others with suitable containers that the child can easily transport to the place the child prefers. As an example, a teacher followed eight children in a daycare called "Percorsi per Crescere" in Calcinat del Pesce (Varese) and she said: "I had prepared an insert activity: a box with some colored sticks to be inserted into a perforated tablet, and what did they do? They put them in the holes in the lid of the aquarium of the water turtles, which we have in the hall. I put them back in the right place again but some of them put them there again. What do you do? I let them do it. At the end of the day, I let the children bring them back to the box so they could do it again the next day. This happened. After a while, they stopped doing this" and she continued: "We got a little wooden, very stylized, pickup truck, and the children immediately understood what it was. Fifteen months old

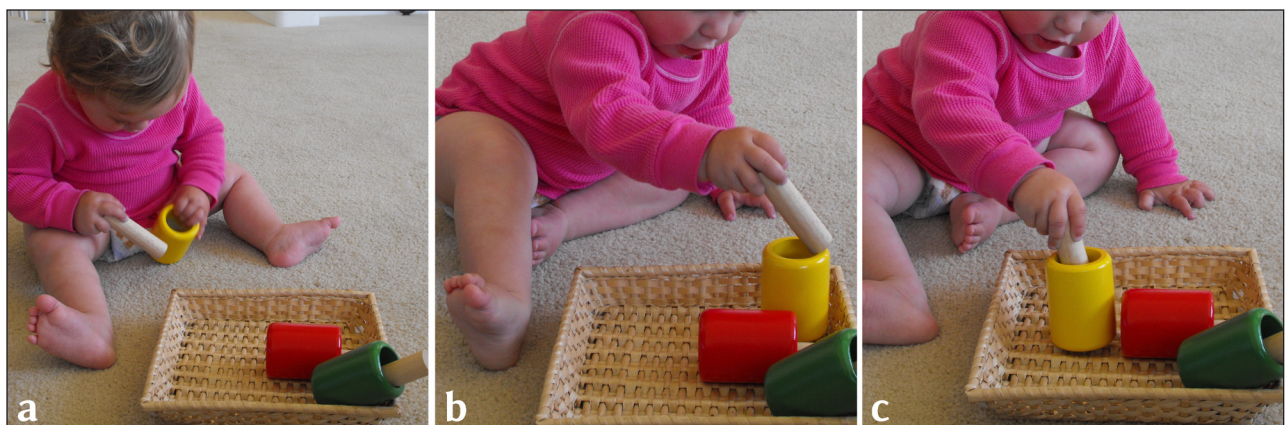


Figure 4: Putting things inside and outside. Photo by Karin Slabaugh.

Renato. wanted to get a bean from the rack and put in on the truck. After a little while, sixteen months old Tiziana collected a bean from the ground and also put it on the truck next to the other bean and for a long period they played together moving the car and the truck back and forth, alternating – which amazed me – and without saying a word, since they have very few".

It is very important to validate what seems to be apparently insignificant childish actions because these seemingly childish actions are in fact a prelude to more complex activities. Even the smallest children get bored sometimes. It is said that children during their first year become unbearable as soon as they reach the upright position. This is because they are prevented from exploring the objects they find in the house. This obstruction makes the child feel disappointment and concern because their initiatives are not understood by the adults. This situation makes the child feel irritated and insecure and these feelings manifest themselves through tears, aggressive gestures, and difficulties to concentrate, which are very difficult to mend. Often the children are "drugged" with pacifiers and lose their curiosity and independence. So, this is a very important reflection.

Based on my continuous and long observation conducted at the AIM, the importance of activating the child becomes evident. But when should one begin to activate the child? The answer is right from birth, from the first sensory discoveries and gradually with more complex actions. This is evident to everyone who has observed this. From the gestures of looking at each other's hands and the first active movement of the fingers at the age of about four months to put some balls in and out of a box at the age of fourteen months, are all signs of the same thing – to discover the function and fabric of things.

Conclusion

The present text is the report of findings that have come about in the course of around sixty years of work, starting from observations and care in childbirth, newborns in the family and at the clinic, children in their first months of life and in the early years – work and guidance in daycare and nursery as well as adult education in Montessori courses. Further experiences have been made by me together with a group of men and women gathered in the association "Percorsi per Crescere" in the city of Varese. In the wake of Montessori and Costa Gnocchi, we have followed the approach more scientific than philosophical – of observing before acting, of intervening as little as possible, looking at every human being as unique and unrepeatable, full of personal resources, each time different.

In short, the aspects – which we constantly find out about human development in the first three years and which are generally completely ignored – are:

- Choice of the object with the mouth, ears, eyes, before they can do it with their hands.
- Spontaneous repetition of each action.
- At the same time a strong concentration, a very precocious phenomenon inborn and not a consequence of subsequent learning.

- Extreme need, from birth, of a continuity and stability of sensory experiences.
- Great creativity in exploratory research in the phase of approximately around 12–30 months of age.

Behavior never valued before, it seemed to us as the alphabet of human activities is those that can make men and women responsible for the welfare of the planet. Because in this respect Montessori has defined the humans as cosmic agents, the question is: when does it start? Our answer is, on the basis of what has been described here, there is a period of preparation for individual and social development from an early age.

Notes

¹ For further reading about the work of Costa Gnocchi see Honegger Fresco (2001, 2018).

² Il CNM is still active with its head office at via A. Burri 39, 00173 Roma, segreteria@centronascitamontessori.it. It administrates some Roman daycare and directs the 0–6 training.

³ Mario Montessori Sr. served as Honorary President of the CNM and the senator and pedagogue Salvatore Valitutti was selected as the center's first president. Elena Gianini Belotti, who would later write the seminal book *Dalla parte delle bambine* (2013), was the first director of the center.

⁴ Daycare is a translation from the Italian word "Nido".

⁵ Commonly referred to as the Geometric Cabinet, and historically called Geometric Insets in Wood, or Cabinet of Wooden Insets and Frames (translator's footnote).

⁶ Quaderno Montessori (2011), p.6.

⁷ All the names of children are invented by the author and do not correspond to the children's real names.

⁸ Montessori was inspired by the term from Blaise Pascal, (French philosopher and mathematician from 1600), who had explored the *l'esprit géométrique*. The term was based on his own observations, that the human mind from the early years has a logical-mathematical ability.

⁹ The modality of learning which I had experienced and experimented several times in CEMEA (Centri di Esercitazione ai Metodi dell'Educazione Attiva) organized by the Florentine group from 1954 to the nineties, is an excellent example of freedom, creativity and group life.

¹⁰ L'ONMI (Opera Nazionale Maternità Infanzia) The ONMI (National Childhood Maternity Work) fascist organization, in aid of the "popular class", a survivor of the war, for which the care of children 0–3 years concerned exclusively the sanitary sector.

¹¹ Now called the ONLUS Cooperative.

¹² Daycare in Sondrio, Vergiate, Gallarate, Varese città, Busto Arsizio, Germignaga, Cassano Magnago, Legnano, Sondrio, Cardano al Campo, Campagnola a Bergamo and other places.

¹³ For further reading see Elinor Goldschmied & Peter Elfer (2012); Elinor Goldschmied & Sonia Jackson, (2004).

- ¹⁴ For further information see Anita M. Hughes (2010).
- ¹⁵ Emmi Pikler's observations are spread through her books in Hungarian, German, Russian, French, Italian, English, etc; the effective paintings made by Klara Pap and numerous videos in Budapest. For further reading see David Myriam & Appell Geneviève (2008); Emmi Pikler (1968); Emmi Pikler, (1979).
- ¹⁶ *Lóczy ou le maternage insolite* was the title of the book by Myriam David and Geneviève Appell who in 1973 for the Emme Editions made known in Italy that extraordinary pedagogical experience, hitherto hidden by "the Iron Curtain". See David Myriam & Appell Geneviève (2008).
- ¹⁷ The commercial games do not respect, for obvious market reasons, any taxonomy. They are usually made of plastic and have multiple entry holes with various geometric shapes. Also in the material for the little ones for which the constant principle of all the sensory material should be kept in mind: the isolation of quality. In this case one difficulty at a time rather than various together from the beginning.
- ¹⁸ The "nido" does not exist today. See "Il Quaderno Montessori" A. XXVII, n.107, (2010).
- ¹⁹ "Man the maker".
- ²⁰ See Giacomo Rizzolatti on mirror neurons and the research by Barbara Rogoff (1993, 2001) about how small children learn together with caregivers and teachers.
- ²¹ "watered down", was an ironic comment from Vincenza Fretta, a Montessori friend from New York.
- ²² In Italian *L'Autoeducazione* (1916).
- ²³ Sensitive periods have long been identified in many animal species. Montessori was the first to discover its existence in human beings. This merit was recognized by one of the most distinguished ethologists of the twentieth century, the already mentioned Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1975).
- ²⁴ The book already appeared in Vienna in 1923 as *Das Kind in der Familie* the English edition, *The child in the family* (1989b).
- ²⁵ A concept from John Bowlby, ethologist, psychoanalyst, and the founder of the theory of attachment. See Van der Horst, Frank (2011).

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Competing Interests

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed externally and the process was anonymous. The final decision was made by the Editor in Chief.

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