

Parents & A

Clare Healy Walls and **Barbara Isaacs** answer your questions on the idea of free choice in a Montessori classroom and pregnancy and child birth.

Q I am a Montessori teacher currently pregnant with my first child and wondering if you could recommend any books which offer good advice on pregnancy, birth and breast feeding. My knowledge and experience with children is from 3 to 6 years.

In her writings Montessori recommended a quiet environment immediately after birth, a point which was developed by Frederic Leboyer, and later Michel Odent in the middle of the twentieth century. Following on from their work it is now common practice to protect the birth environment, reducing sudden noises and bright lights. You should ask at your maternity hospital about their policy on this. A baby has come from a protected, warm, quiet, dark, weightless womb and the shock of a bright noisy world may cause a type of withdrawal.

Modern research on bonding has also backed up Dr. Montessori's call for the mother and baby to be very close in days after birth. She recommended that the mother and baby take a cue from herd animals and withdraw during the early days. Visitors should be limited reducing the amount of disturbance for the baby. The mother has been through labour but the baby has been through birth. One of the tasks of the father should be to protect this special bonding time.

Dr. Silvana Montanaro has developed Montessori's work for children under 3 years. She talks about a symbiotic period of about six weeks during which mother and baby need each other as the mother gradually returns to normal, and the baby becomes accustomed to this new world of

sensations, a new way of eating and eliminating, and so on.

Dr. Montanaro also explains how breastfeeding is an important part of this bonding but whether that is possible or not, it is important to remember that this is a time when a mother needs to relax and stay with the rhythm of the baby. The rest of the family should be asked to be supportive to allow this to happen.

Reference:

Understanding the Human Being, The Importance of the First Three Years of Life, by Dr. Silvana Q Montanaro ISBN 1-879341-00-X www.nienhuis-montessori.com

At the Heart of Montessori 3 – The Infant Toddler 0-3 years, by Clare Healy Walls ISBN 978-1-906018-66-5 (Part of a series of 6 books on the Montessori method for all age groups) www.originalwriting.ie

Q I understand that there is an element of free choice in a Montessori school. What happens if my child just wants to paint all day and never for example uses the maths materials?

Yes, one of the key principles of "following the child" and celebrating the uniqueness of each individual is to give children opportunities to make decisions about what they do whilst at nursery. Montessori believed that children's development and learning are guided by their sensitive periods, which are evident in the choices of activities children make. These sensitive periods drive the child's interest and therefore it is quite likely that a child will engage in the same activity and repeat it over and over until their inner urge is satisfied and the skills associated with that urge perfected. This is why at certain stages of their development and depending on



the child's interest and temperament you will find young children repeating the same activity. Parents often witness this behaviour at home when children want to see the same video over and over again, or want to listen to the same story or tape until they know every word of it.

Having recognised these individual urges within the developing child the Montessori nursery provides for these needs by organising an interesting, diverse, accessible learning environment. The teacher observes and records the children's interest and ensures that the activities on offer scaffold and develop the child's interest and skills so that learning opportunities are maximised.

We must also recognise that whilst we try to interpret young children's behaviour we will never really understand fully their motivation, urges or reasons for their behaviour. Therefore it is not what the child does, but how he or she engages with the activity that is important. This is where the teachers' observation skills come to play a vital role once again. If the child is interested, engaged and involved, if the child stays focused on the self-chosen activity it is very likely that they will benefit from it. However, if the engagement is half hearted, if it looks like the child has chosen

the activity because they want to mark time then it is the role of the teacher to entice the child towards something else.

To answer the question, you need to trust in the environment of the Montessori classroom, that it has on offer activities which will engage your child. Trust in your child's ability to make choices for themselves. Trust in the teacher's knowledge of your child and in her/his skills to extend your child's learning.

Respect your child's need to paint for as long as he/she needs to. When else will your child have this luxury of time if not at nursery? Your child will also learn about important mathematical skills such as symmetry, pattern, logical thinking. The time spent at the easel will give your child the opportunity to think, to explore, investigate – it will feed his /her curiosity – the best gift you can give them for life.

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