

Montessori philosophy: the planes of development

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Montessori Philosophy: The Planes of Development Most people's idea of how children grow and develop is a steady continuous movement along a path from point A " birth, to point B " adulthood. Maria Montessori's philosophy on how humans learn differs in that she believed learning for children and youth occurred as a series of waves or cycles.

After years of observation, Montessori concluded there are four distinct planes of development that everyone must pass through on their way to adulthood: birth-6, 6-12, 12-18, and 18-24.

In each of the planes she believed that children and youth are drawn to different skills and activities and if they are provided with the opportunities to explore and practice them, children can make extraordinary progress. She also believed that the needs of each plane of development must be fully satisfied in order for the individual to pass into the next stage of development. Each human being is born with an internal or instinctual drive (which Montessori called the " hormone") which guides the developing child to seek out experiences which meet the needs of their stage of development.

The four planes of development are cyclical (each plane is characterized by a period of construction, followed by a period of consolidation), sequential (each plane builds upon the foundation laid by the previous one), and distinct (each plane of development provides the optimal time for learning in specific areas; the best time to learn a skill completely so that it forms part of the human being).

Learning skills outside of these optimal times is less effective and more difficult for the child).

The First Plane: Birth to age 6 The first six years of life are marked by tremendous physical and psychological growth, exploration and development. This is the period of infancy, an unconscious period of development. Physically, the body develops from head to toe. The child has a fragile immune system and is susceptible to illness. Psychologically, the child is a concrete thinker, taking in everything around him/her.

Montessori coined this plane as the time of the Absorbent Mind.

She believed that more learning takes place at this stage of life than during any other. Children begin to acquire language, develop cognitive and motor skills, begin to imitate the adults around them, and develop expectations of the world around them. The child during the first plane of development has many needs. Emotionally, he/she needs love and acceptance, respect and understanding, warmth and protection.

The child also has a need for security, order, as much freedom and independence as he/she can handle, and social relationships.

Montessori believed that a prepared environment should be provided to allow the child to explore and experience purposeful activities. Children in their first plane of development are constantly taking in and processing the world around them. The importance of these years of life cannot be underestimated and as parents, we should do everything we can to provide them with an environment that supports the specific developmental needs of this plane. This plane is of fundamental importance for the formation of personality.

You can support your child in the First Plane of Development by:

- recognizing that this period in their lives is the MOST important one, and will never come again
- providing plenty of opportunity for sensory experiences, because this is how the young child learns
- talking to your child in real language, reading to them, singing to them, explaining things to them; all of which will help them to acquire language and the ability to express themselves
- giving them the chance to participate in motor activity whenever possible (this means limiting time spent in car-seats, prams and seats)
- keeping your home uncluttered, and incorporating routine into your life to support your child's developing sense of order
- giving your child as much freedom as possible, within reasonable limits appropriate to their age and what they can handle
- developing and maintaining a strong, loving bond with your child

The Second Plane: Ages 6-12 The second plane of development is the plane of childhood.

The absorbent mind, so prevalent from birth to age six, gives way to the conscious mind in the second plane of development. Learning now takes place at a slower, steadier pace. Children in the second plane of development are much less drawn to the repetition of activities, unless there is some variation involved.

Children in the second plane of development are also no longer solitary beings. They now tend to gravitate towards others in their environment. Around the age of 6, children begin to become interested in their classmates and are learning how to get along.

They start to choose to work with others on projects of mutual interest. By 11 or 12, most students prefer to work with others rather than individually.

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Between the ages of 6 and 12, children experience great growth physically. However, what stands out greater than their physical growth is their capacity for great mental growth. In the second plane, children will reason about what has become part of their lives through the power of imagination and intelligence.

They need to hear stories of greatness and goodness and moral values.

The mind of the elementary child concerns itself with building a conscience, that inner sense of what is right and wrong. During this period of growth, they need to know that the adults in their lives love, respect, and understand them. The child of the second plane is hungry for knowledge and

understanding of the world built by nature and mankind, and is endowed with the power of imagination, abstract thought and reasoning, and physical strength. You can support your child in the Second Plane of Development by:

- modeling good friendships and how to make friends
- respecting your child's individual pace of learning; your acceptance of their differences will make it easier for them to accept themselves
- being there for them during social difficulties, and supporting them to sort things out for themselves
- accepting that you are no longer the centre of their universe
- living a moral life, so that your child can see a living example of right and wrong, fair and unfair, just and unjust
- surrounding your child with role models from outside your family
- using their innate love of fantasy, heroism and valour, as well their keen imagination to help them to learn and grow
- by giving them plenty of concrete learning experiences so that they can progress to abstract thinking slowly, and only when they are ready
- fostering their independence and giving them all the responsibility they can handle

The Third Plane: Ages 12-

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18 The third plane of development is the period of adolescence and marks the end of childhood. Youth in the early years of the third plane of development (12-15) are much like their counterparts in the first plane; they can be self-absorbed, they need adequate food and sleep to sustain rapid growth, and they need time to “ just be.

” Learning and mental development may even slow down as more time is spent on their own, with friends, and eating and sleeping. Early youth (12-15) are coming to terms with their new identity as an adolescent and the world outside the family and school.

For the first time, they no longer see themselves as sons or daughters, brothers or sisters, or students, but as individuals who must integrate all of their separate identities into one while moving into a larger community. This is a time of dissonance as childhood ends and a new identity emerges. During this time, youth seek to understand their place in society and search for opportunities to contribute to society. Continuing to build on the sense of justice and fairness that was beginning to develop in the second plane, youth are naturally drawn to causes that involve high ideals.

They prefer to take on projects that require action and they believe they can make a positive difference in the world.

Maria Montessori suggested that due to the particular needs and interests of the adolescent, a new type of learning be included in his/her education. She suggested that time be spent on a farm as Erdkinder (Earth Children). The work on the farm would be done by the children, from the physical work to the accounts, planning and management. This connects the adolescent with

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the natural world and helps to develop a sense of responsibility towards natural resources.

Montessori coined a new term “valorization” to describe the process the adolescent must go through in integrating a more mature identity and the sense of being able to succeed in life by his/her own efforts. Youth are able to visualize and idealize perfection: a perfect world or a perfect family.

This causes them to blame those closest to them, usually their parents, for life’s imperfections. Early youth are especially vulnerable to seeking or creating heroes to counter act the flaws of those whom they see as imperfect. Montessori cautioned guides and mentors at this level to be fully aware of the difficulties during this time of transition so that they could assist the youth in moving through this period with less dissension and regret for all involved. Changes in behavior must be seen as normal passageways to maturity, not as problems.

It is important to recognize that academic growth will only occur when the social and emotional needs of the adolescent are met.

Physically, the transition from childhood to the adult state is established by puberty; psychologically, there is a transition from the child who has lived in the family to the adult who has to live in society. From the psychological point of view, this is also a critical age where there are doubts, hesitations and violent emotions. “This is the time,” says Montessori, “when the social man is created but has not yet reached full development.” You can support your adolescent in the Third Plane of Development by: •understanding the impact of the tremendous hormonal changes upon their physical and mental

state •being prepared for a changing sleep/wake cycle, including an increased need for sleep •helping them to find a way to contribute to their community in meaningful ways, including acting as a role model for them •providing emotional support and maintaining a loving relationship which is unflinching and unconditional •allowing them plenty of time away from home, living independently from you amongst positive role models •facilitating a means for them to earn money, and become financially independent from you •recognising the important role of peers and peer relationships at this time in their life

The Fourth Plane: Ages 18-24 The fourth plane, from 18-24 is known as the plane of maturity or adulthood.

More stable than the third plane, it is now possible for the young adult to pursue studies that interest them in the context of making a difference in the world. This is known as the time of the “ specialist mind. ” The fourth plane of development is marked by the acquisition of economic independence. Previous educational and life experiences have, along the way, provided a general purpose... “ the whole life of the adolescent should be organized in such a way that it will enable him, when the time comes, to make a triumphal entry into social life ” not entering it debilitated, isolated, or humiliated, but with head high, assured of himself. ” By now, in earlier eras, the young adult would have become providers and heads of households, starting and taking care of their own families.

They would have been self-sufficient, productive members of their community, thus fulfilling two of the most basic and fundamental needs of any human being: the need to feel useful and the need to have an environment conducive to developing an occupation that best fulfills an

individual's desires, talents, and abilities. Conclusion Thus, the developmental life of a human being is a sequence of births. An earlier plane always prepares the one that follows, forms its basis, and nurtures the energies which urge the individual towards the next period of life. If the child is allowed to unfold according to his/her natural development and is provided with the right environment, they can offer their gifts to the rest of humanity.