

Mind and montessori



In this essay I intend to explore the relationship between obedience and discipline and how they are linked to the development of the will. I will identify the vital role that they have in the making of the whole person and just how essential they are to all areas of human development and integration. The terms discipline and obedience can have both negative and positive connotations. Traditionally the terms can convey negative images of punishment and of rules and regulations. They are commonly thought of as things that are imposed upon people by an external force that may well be maintained by fear or confusion.

Similar to the regime of soldiers in the army, discipline in education suggests a form of control and restriction; images of children seated in rows and kept in silence whilst being made to listen to the ideals and orders of the adults who reign over them. Hence obedience can be believed to be the action of a person whose will has been bent or broken, that for most humans feels against natural law and only seems effective from a distance. However, Maria Montessori observed a much more natural process at work among human beings that did not need to be taught, much less drilled, into the human psyche.

She believed that discipline, obedience and a person's will go hand in hand and it would be quite impossible to have one without the other. We can quite easily see that in order to obey in any meaningful sense there must already be the will to do so. This thought process requires a level of discipline. Discipline to Montessori is not something externally attained but rather something blossoming from within each individual child. Maria understood

that, regardless of culture or ethnicity, all humans inherently follow the same natural laws.

We are all driven to achieve independence and to be fully in control of ourselves - mind and body. We prefer order to chaos, as it brings the security and predictability we need to develop in this world. Montessori saw freedom as the single most important factor in allowing children to develop as individuals and the key to the development of the will. Most importantly is freedom of movement as Montessori identified the hand as being the path to the mind, the chief teacher of the child as it has been proven that motion greatly aids the development of the brain.

Movement not only positively contributes physically but it also awakes the intellectual potential of the child as sparks spiritual development. Freedom of movement allows the child to explore their environment and achieve success through experience and practice, encouraging the unfolding of the discipline required to concentrate. Montessori believed in freedom within limits and this was implemented by establishing ground rules in the classroom. While the freedom to follow their interests helps children experience success and independence, the boundaries are extremely important in supporting this.

When children work in an environment with appropriate freedom and logical limits, they receive a golden opportunity to develop. The order Montessori brought to her classroom provided the external sense of order that in turn promoted an internal sense of order and orderly thoughts, calling this the favourable/prepared environment. The prepared environment supports the essential process by allowing meaningful engagement, repetition and

exploration all within the security and predictability of an uninterrupted work cycle of around three hours.

Discipline is acquired indirectly by the spontaneous work inherent in the Montessori activities. The refinement of discipline comes from the interest and level of engagement found in the periods of concentration. This obvious concentration is the first clear sign of the development of discipline. Essential to such an environment is a competent, consistent facilitator, cognisant of the sensitive periods in order to support the child's interest and keep him/her on their natural path.

The didactic materials support this environment by providing activities that allow for the free flow of individual progression and holistic learning with levels of control of error. “ What particularly fascinated visitors was the order and discipline they managed to combine with spontaneity” (Montessori, 1966, P130) Children learn in a unique way from pre-natal life to about six years old. The child uses a special ability to soak up unconsciously knowledge, information and everything from their environment. Montessori termed this astounding mental process the ‘ absorbent mind’ (Montessori 2007, 2010).

Seen as the period of true inner construction of man. Montessori described the absorbent mind in two phases: zero to three years old and three to six years old. The information absorbed in the first phase is used to construct the basis of the personality. The amazing ability to so rapidly absorb the information required for language, physical skills and self-control invaluable prepare the child for future independence. The child refines ability in movement and learns to speak, to walk and to control his bodily functions.

Once these skills are somewhat mastered, by about the age of three, the child moves into the second phase which Montessori called the period of conscious work/conscious absorbent mind. During this conscious state of mind the child begins to intentionally direct focus and attention to the experiences that will develop those already created in the first phase. Therefore the fundamental task of the child in this conscious phase is that of intellectual development and the attainment of intellectual freedom.

The child's mind compels him to sort through, put in order and make sense of the information he has previously unconsciously absorbed. It is within this new order of intelligence that the child gains the freedom to move purposely, to concentrate fully and to positively choose his own direction. There is a universal power at work here; a power from which man's will is born. It is not physical but it is the force of life itself in the process of evolution, active within every child, guiding his or her efforts towards their goals.

Montessori termed this vital force the 'horme' (Montessori 2007, 2010 p74). "Horme belongs to life in generally, to what might be called the divine urge, the source of evolution." (Montessori, 2007, 2010, P76) In the first phase of the absorbent mind the horme is in full control and all actions arise from this natural impulse. This unconscious will-power urges the child forward to explore and grow. It is through the guide of the horme and the movement of the hand that the child will begin to awaken the impressions that he has observed through the ability of the absorbent mind.

Once awoken, the child embarks on the journey of spontaneous discovery with the important foundations of self-discipline. By three years old the horme is slowly replaced by the will as the child progresses toward greater

independence and greater conscious awareness. The absorbent mind is a transitory state where once specific skills are mastered the relevant sensitive period (wherein the child is innately driven to develop in areas of interest and specific skill) disappears. The development of the will works in conjunction with the sensitive periods of development.

A child may only fully embrace, and benefit from, the prepared environment when the senses are refined and the sensitive periods for order, language and movement have been developed. Montessori observed that by allowing children the freedom to develop their own individual sensitive periods, through the cycle of activity, they refined their own senses and actually disciplined themselves with the use of control of error. “ Discipline in freedom seemed to solve a problem which had hitherto seemed insoluble. The answer lay in obtaining discipline by giving freedom. (Montessori, 2007, 2010, P184) An adult’s job in a Montessori setting is to provide an optimum prepared environment, to allow the children to develop their own concentration and discipline and to give the child freedom and space to work within consistent boundaries. If this is fulfilled the child will be capable of following their own will and with inner discipline suppress spontaneous impulses and follow instructions. Through the attainment of discipline and obedience we find that children work harmoniously; they co-operate and offer moral help to each other.

This is strengthened by their sense of ownership and their sense of responsibility which they come to learn through the care of self and through care of their environment. Vertical grouping (different ages in class) provides the foundation for social unity and provide the children with opportunities to

help each other and to team build. In a free, yet structured, environment children learn to know and understand their own minds and are then drawn to those activities that help them to progress. The repetition of this experience brings about calm and balanced behaviour.

Behaviour becomes naturally controlled and the child begins to sublimate their own will for the good of others or the group. Social unity enables each individual child to take responsibility for their own actions and this then guides the child towards discipline and obedience. This is implemented through grace and courtesy role-play. Obedience develops in stages. It is an active process that develops slowly from within. Montessori identified three levels of obedience: the first is purely dictated by hormic impulses. The child is only able to obey if he or she has reached the required developmental stage.

They may be able to obey once but not again. This is evidence that the child has not yet gained the confidence or skills required to comply. Montessori suggests ; “ If the child is not yet a master of his actions, if he cannot obey even his own will, so much the less can he obey the will of another”. (Montessori 2007, 2010) The second level allows for the child to obey with ‘ help’, that is if complications or obstacles are removed for them. The will of the child may be directed by himself or herself and also now by another. This behaviour does not ensure that they will obey all the time.

The child may also be testing boundaries at this point as there is still room for refinement. The third level is when the child begins to obey with purpose and experiences joy and anxiety accordingly. A natural reaction to this understanding of social expectations is obedience and this also strengthens

the child's ability to exercise his or her will. This process of developing discipline and obedience open the doors to a world of socialising and forming friendships thus promoting self-esteem and the joy of life. Within these levels of obedience the absorbent mind is also split into two embryonic phases.

The first is the ' spiritual embryo' (Montessori 2007, 2010) which lasts from birth to three years. It is unique to human life as it slowly rears own independence and autonomy. To Montessori it was the poignancy and uniqueness of the human soul, a vivid image that encompasses the idea of inexorability, miraculous growth and spiritual emergence. As it is the phase in which we all learn to talk, think and remember, it greatly develops the will. Everything absorbs in this phase builds the foundation for all future learning as the child is at its most vulnerable in its environment.

The second phase is the ' social embryo' (Montessori 2007, 2010). This is when the child wants to understand the complexities of relationships and his surroundings, thus internally creating himself socially. The demands of the home begin to wain to make way for the will. Discipline and obedience work very much hand in hand here, as the child learns to take into consideration the needs of others by sharing and waiting. Montessori saw that precisely because children were allowed to work in such freedom that they displaced their innate social cohesion.

She observed that true discipline and harmony came from within and were things that could never be taught. Montessori commented ; " Indeed, if the human soul did not possess this quality, if men had never acquired by some form of evolutionary process this capacity for obedience, social life would be impossible" (Montessori, 2007, P234) On this basis Montessori philosophy

stresses the importance of the development of a child's independence, discipline, obedience and the will as a whole as she believed them to be inextricably linked.

Montessori's ideas of how to develop discipline, obedience and will are logical and clear. It makes good sense that a child who is given the freedom to develop his or her own self-discipline while being allowed to explore their will within safe limits, inevitably develops and refines a healthy form of obedience, rather than the submissive alternative or even deviations such as disobedience.

We must look at this issue from the perspective of the child, rather than that of the adult. A belief in choice rather than force paves the way forward to obedience. The development of the will is very much in line with the refinement of discipline and, just as concentration and discipline need to be developed, so does the will. This school of thought and faith in human tendencies can only be beneficial for the individual and for society as a whole.