

# Reading 1

## The secret of childhood

*Maria Montessori*

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**Notes** Maria Montessori's ideas gave rise to a powerful schools movement which we read about regularly in South Africa – the Montessori Schools. These infant schools work on the basis of Montessori's ideas that children are innately gifted and that teaching should enable these innate talents to emerge.

This article was written in the early twentieth century and you may find some of the language a little difficult. Montessori's key points are these:

- learners have within them all they need to learn and to live in the world;
- an adult's (or teacher's) role is to create the conditions in which this natural 'talent' can surface;
- there are 'sensitive periods' in which this development occurs most rapidly;
- while environment doesn't trigger learning (as Skinner might suggest) it can hinder the development of a child's full potential.

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### Reading Psychic development

The *sense perceptions* of even the tiniest infants initiate their psychic development *before* there can be any question of its external expression. Even though this development takes place in secret, it would be wrong to imagine, as in the case of speech, for example, that it is not happening. To take such an attitude would be the same as to say that a child already possesses in its soul the faculty of speech even though its external organs are as yet incapable of giving it proper expression. But what actually exists in the child is a *predisposition* for acquiring a language. And the same can be said of all the various aspects of his mental life. In an infant there is a *creative instinct*, an *active potency* for building up a

*These edited extracts are from M. Montessori, **The Secret of Childhood** (New York, Ballantine, 1966), pp. 37–39.*

psychic world at the expense of his environment.

In this regard, the discovery of the so-called 'sensitive periods' that are closely connected with the phenomena of growth is of special interest.

**[We must]** appreciate a crucial factor in the development of a child.

There is within a child a *vital impulse* which leads it to perform stupendous acts. Failure to follow out these impulses means that they become helpless and inept. Adults have no direct influence on these different states. But if a child has not been able to act according to the directives of his sensitive period, the opportunity of a natural conquest is lost, *and is lost for good*.

During a psychic development a child makes truly miraculous conquests, and it is only our being accustomed to seeing this miracle under our eyes that makes us indifferent spectators.

- How does a child, starting with nothing, orient himself in this complicated world?
- How does he come to distinguish things, and by what marvellous means does he come to learn a language in all its minute details without a teacher but merely by living simply, joyfully, and without fatigue, whereas an adult has constant need of assistance to orient himself in a new environment and to learn a new language, which he finds tedious and which he will never master with that same perfection with which a child acquires his own mother tongue?

A child learns to adjust himself and make acquisitions in his *sensitive periods*. These are like a beam that lights the interior of the child or a battery that furnishes energy. It is this sensibility which enables a child to come into contact with the external world in a particularly intense manner. At such a time everything is easy; all is life and enthusiasm. Every effort marks an increase in power. Only when the goal has been obtained does fatigue and the weight of indifference come on.

When one of these psychic passions is exhausted, another is enkindled. Childhood thus passes from conquest to conquest in a constant rhythm that constitutes its joy and happiness. It is within this fair fire of the soul, which burns without consuming, that the creative work of man's spiritual world is brought to completion.

On the other hand, when the sensitive period has disappeared, intellectual victories are reported through *reasoning* processes, voluntary efforts, and the toil of research. And from the torpor of indifference is born the weariness of labour.

This then is the essential difference between the psychology of a child and that of an adult. A child has a special interior vitality which accounts for the miraculous manner in which he makes his natural conquests. But, if during his sensitive stage a child is confronted with an obstacle to his toil, he suffers a disturbance or even warping of his being, a spiritual martyrdom that is still too little known, but whose scars are borne unconsciously by most adults.

Up till now we have not suspected this kind of growth; that is to say, the

**[We must]:** Text between square brackets has been added or modified.

Note how Montessori suggests that children learn particularly easily because, in this sensitive period, they are enormously curious and also observant. Do you recognize any of this kind of thinking in current debates about learning in South Africa?

attainment of these specific characteristics, and yet through long experience we have noticed the sad and violent reactions of children when the activities are checked by external obstacles.

### ***Sensitive periods***

The study of the 'incarnation' of the child and of the sensitive periods might be compared to an exploratory operation which enables us to see the functioning of the various organs that promote the growth of the child. They show us that a child's psychic development does not take place by chance, that it does not originate in external stimuli but is ***guided by transient sensibilities***. In other words, it is guided by temporary instincts intimately connected with the acquisition of specific traits. Although this takes place within an external environment, the environment itself is more of an occasion than a cause: it simply provides the necessary means for spiritual growth, just as a material environment provides food and air for the development of the body.

Notice how this view of the environment's role in learning is very different from the view that Skinner proposes in the next reading.

A child's different inner sensibilities enable him to choose from his complex environment what is suitable and necessary for his growth. They make the child sensitive to some things, but leave him indifferent to others. When a particular sensitiveness is aroused in a child, it is like a light that shines on some objects but not on others, making of them his whole world.

Our experiences certainly do not lead us to de-emphasize the importance of a child's environment for the development of his mind. As is well known, our educational system esteems a child's environment so highly that it makes it the centre of instruction. We also have a higher and more rational esteem for a child's sensations than other systems of education, but there is a subtle difference between our concept and the older view of the child as a merely passive being.

We insist upon the child's inner sensibility.

A child has a sensitive period which lasts until he is almost five years old and which enables him to assimilate images from his environment in a truly prodigious fashion. He is an observer actively receiving these images through his senses, but this does not mean that he receives them like a mirror. A true observer acts from an inner impulse, a kind of feeling or special taste, and consequently he is selective in his choice of images.