



PARENTING FOR A NEW WORLD

ASSOCIATION MONTESSORI INTERNATIONAL / USA

COMPETITION AND MONTESSORI EDUCATION

Why Montessori Education Is Our Child's Best Foundation for Today's Hyper-Competitive World and the Unknown World of Tomorrow

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How does Montessori prepare children to compete in a healthy, secure and happy way while avoiding the extremes of a high alert state that sees everyone as a competitor and every encounter as a competition, provoking the anxiety-ridden, attack-or-retreat mode of a win-or-lose model?

Who are these children who must go forth to live in this hyper-competitive world?

Let's take a look at who they really are. Our children are dynamic, self-forming beings who develop themselves upon the foundation, shaky or secure, of the previous stage, in accordance with the vital drives of their present stage. Where does competition fit in?

During prenatal development, the baby doesn't compete at all. At least we hope not, unless we are having twins or triplets. During the years from birth to three, our children don't *really* compete; they sometimes grab (and may, we must admit, observe the other's distress with not always innocent astonishment and, sometimes, even glee). Yet most often these little ones empathize, encourage and help one another. The first three years are for them, by nature, a period of intense self-absorption driven by the urgency of their sensitive periods¹ through the power of their unconscious absorbent mind² that lays the foundation for formation of the self.³

Children from age three to six are fully involved in individual self-formation.⁴ They are in a period we call the conscious absorbent mind. They engage in individual purposeful activity⁵ of their own choosing

and enter into deep concentration⁶ during cycles of activity.⁷ As the children near age six and put the finishing touches on the foundation of their self-construction, they need more social and collaborative activities. Competition may arise spontaneously as an elected and collaborative game that is typically loosely organized and flexible in its rules. The emphasis in young children's spontaneous play is on interaction, exploration and rule-formation, not on winning.

The elementary years follow, the period when our children of six-to-twelve years begin to form spontaneously self-organized groups for chosen projects, as they continue to act individually to expand their skills and learning. The absorbent mind of their first six years of life gives way to a reasoning mind⁸ and a powerful imagination⁹ with which they explore natural systems and human cultures over time and space and issues of fairness, right and wrong, and during these six years a new power of imagination lights it all up. And, like younger children, they are propelled by the drives, the sensitive periods of their stage of development.

These elementary children begin to choose in earnest how, when and with whom to compete—which activities, what arenas. That's for us to observe and guide with our wisdom and with confidence in ourselves and our children. The less anxious and pushy we are, the more these sturdy and resilient elementary children will discover their own relationship with a competition that fits their individual temperament and that of their peers. They learn a compassionate give and take. Some choose to pursue competitive activities, and some do not.

Throughout their early childhood, elementary years and adolescence, our children are preparing themselves to enter the adult world of their time and place. And it is often a hyper-competitive world, but also one that offers rich opportunities for the less competitive and the differently competitive; opportunities for those who prefer to step out of the fray to create, produce, invent, innovate and lead us into new realms of human achievement. Innovative and creative pursuits often require the efforts of those secure enough in themselves to establish their own separate worlds of concentration within a zone of quiet or frenzied activity. Rich opportunities also exist for spending a satisfying life supporting the work of others, whether competitive or non-



competitive, as they make their unique contribution to the world or give their best in a smaller realm. Our aim is to help our children enter this world whole and hardy, eager and able to participate in their own way, according to their own sets of abilities, their talents and interests.

How do we help our child prepare to live in a hyper-competitive world?

Our little bundle of joy (and sleep deprivation), this mysterious being bursting with energy (and determined to have her way with us), this genetic package that self-reveals day by day to our wonder (and consternation) is often not exactly what we dreamed she'd be, nor is her temperament always perfectly suited to our own gifts of parenting. She may be livelier than we had wished, more retiring than we hoped or more puzzling than we feel equipped for. Her expression of competition may be different in quality or intensity than we would wish or think best. But our lives together will go so much better than we have come to experience if we take a few things into consideration, including accepting, admiring and appreciating her as she is rather than as we had hoped she'd be, or comparing her to the vision we had of who she would be, or to another child in our own family or someone else's.

We don't get the baby or child we want. We get the one we get, and that is both the challenge and the beauty of being a parent. We fall in love for life with a surprise and grow into it over a lifetime. That realization and its acceptance—no, better—the embrace, the celebration of its truth is our foundation as parents for preparing our child for a hyper-competitive world—loving who she is with no comparisons so she will love who she is with no comparisons. That's the best way to see that our child can find the particular form or degree of competition that will make her the healthiest and happiest in her life.

During his first three years of life, our child is driven to develop through absorbing unconsciously the places where he spends his time and the adult relationships within which he spends it. He forms and expresses himself accordingly. Mind you, he is not likely to express all that he is absorbing in the way we might have wished him to. And he may ex-

press those aspects of his environment and relationships we most wish he hadn't taken in. He is, after all, his very own person (from conception). We provide the prepared environments¹⁰ and the prepared relationships,¹¹ and our child shows us who he makes of himself in response! If this sounds a little too random or unpredictable, not to worry. He is well equipped with an energy pack, a vital life force,¹² that just won't stop, and he aims to fit in over time. A bit more unsettling?

That's not all he has—he has DRIVE. He is driven to become his own version of the very best person he could possibly be—considering his environment and relationships—and he will stop at nothing to achieve just that. His drive is actually an array of drives, those sensitive periods, designed to push him to pursue every possible purposeful activity (especially the perverse ones, so do act to eliminate them from his experience) available in his prepared environment at home and in his Montessori school, as long as the adults in his life know how to work with him and not against him. Ah, there's the rub! His strong and persevering Will¹³ is our best ally in supporting his development, and that includes his personal expression of competition.

By the time our child enters the period of three-to-six years, she will have mastered a language and be urgently driven to expand it (watch your tongue in her presence!); gained control over her body (and let you know that both it and she are separate from you); established an astonishing (and hair-raising) array of movements and be roaring to refine them (at the potential expense of life and limb); waged her own struggle for independence¹⁴ and autonomy and will be pressing hard to take it further (too far too fast). She will have used all her senses to explore vast territories (and claimed them all as rightfully her own); made discoveries you never imagined her capable of (well, she is brilliant, after all); shown you the strength of her Will to do as she is driven (no better tool for learning, when self-disciplined), and so much more!

How does Montessori prepare a child for entering a competitive world?

It's easy to see what this child needs! No? Actually it can be very difficult to see what he

needs. He needs freedom within strong limits;¹⁵ he needs liberty and responsibility.¹⁶ If this balance is challenging for whole nations of adults to figure out, it can be even more challenging for a parent and child to do so. No worries! Montessori is here to help you build an ever-fresh relationship with your child through his continuously changing ages and stages.¹⁷ And when we look out at today's fast-paced world, with its ever-escalating spirit of competition and its shifting political and economic terrains and climates, we know we want to help our child prepare himself well for the unknown and unknowable future.

Zero to Three, Three to Six

The best way to help our child is to work with her instead of against her as she prepares herself for the future by living in her present developmental moment of today, and that's exactly what Montessori education does. Her nature is to develop herself as a whole individual during the first six years of life by choosing purposeful activities and projects from the environment of self-correcting materials¹⁸ and carrying them out independently, at her own pace, in her own way, and without reference to any other child. Her first challenges are to know herself and her own way of being, becoming and belonging, to establish her own personal best and test herself as she chooses, when she chooses, according to her own unconscious and then conscious measure, and without any thought of what another child is doing or not doing—how well, how fast—or not.

During the years of three-to-six, the child learns to choose, to persevere, to find satisfaction and joy in the doing, to get lost in the process, to engage fully with no consideration of the rationale or product. He works for his own self-affirmation, his own sense of self. He establishes his default for intrinsic motivation while allowing for the possibility of extrinsic motivation¹⁹ on those rare occasions when appropriate. These are the years when the child becomes who he is in such a way that nothing and no one can separate him from his true self or shake his confidence in who he is at his core. This sense of self, for better or for worse, runs deep and survives to the end of his life.

During these years a child praises himself within his core. He sets his gauge highest for self-evaluation. If, during these years, a child is measured by adults against other children, or praised and rewarded, or urged to look around at others and judge himself against them, or them against himself, he will miss out on this critical stage in the establishment of self, risk his personal inner security and lose the attachment to his own values. This establishment of self is what the child needs to take along when he goes out into this hyper-competitive world with all its pressures and stresses. And the development of this secure sense of self at his core is exactly what makes him a compassionate and ethical person. An insecure self can make for an unethical and greedy person, a depressive and anxious person, an overly competitive person who must constantly reaffirm his own worth to himself by besting others. He will go toward adulthood vulnerable to the opinions of others, to their judgments, instead of forging his own way in basic collaboration with them and in chosen competition, as each situation dictates. And when this weak self inevitably meets with failure, our common human experience, he will be devastated and desperate, learning little from it except vengeance or despair.

Six to Twelve

During the next six years, when she is in elementary school, the child develops as a collaborative being. She organizes herself in groups for projects in botany, zoology, history and geography, while simultaneously continuing her individual progress in reading, writing and math, with the support of her mates and in balance with her support of them. She and they may make fierce but friendly little competitions to spur one another on in spelling or math facts. They may choose to organize their roles in projects, sometimes according to their talents and at other times according to the practice needed by the participating individuals. They may run relay races or play organized sports on the playground. Some children become serious dancers or ball players during these years and enter into various degrees of competition, but how well they do in comparison with others does not touch their deep sense

of self or their security in who they are or their respect and value for who others are. It enhances both for a period of time—years, a decade, a lifetime. It isn't who they are but rather what they do. And they do it fiercely! Yet they don't position themselves in any essential way in doing it against others.

When they experience it at the right time, in the right environment, and in the right way children can gain all the benefit of competition without suffering its damage. When children are introduced to competition too early, when it is imposed rather than chosen, or when they live and learn in a competitive atmosphere in their early years, they miss out on much—not only in establishing their own self-worth, but in understanding the worth of others. They can become vulnerable or callous. They are deprived of a form of collaboration that is far beyond the simpler complexity of team work.

As Angeline Lillard, Steven Hughes, Daniel Pink, Peter Denning and many others have pointed out in their writings and lectures, Montessori education prepares our children for the world of the present while giving them the best preparation for the unknown and unknowable world of their future. The method of Maria Montessori's genius is to recognize the child's characteristics and needs in the present moment of development and to provide the environment, activities and relationships for meeting them—himself. Montessori's means are a prepared environment and relationships for maximizing the power of the will and choice, establishing "personal best" and individually-set goals and standards, self-correcting materials and self-evaluating processes, independent and collaborative activities—all designed for the particular three-year stage of development in the evolving twenty-four-year continuum of the Four Planes of Development.

With an authentic Montessori education and a home-life to match, children grow into confident, self-motivated, highly self-aware adults who see competition as a tool for accomplishing over-arching goals, something they can step into and out of at will and as the situation requires. What more could we ask?

Endnotes

1 **sensitive periods** - Young children experience transient periods of sensibility and are intrinsically motivated or urged to activity by specific sensitivities. A child in a sensitive period is believed to exhibit spontaneous concentration when engaged in an activity that matches a particular sensitivity. For example, children in a sensitive period for order will be drawn to activities that involve ordering. They will be observed choosing such activities, becoming deeply concentrated, sometimes repeating the activity over and over, without reward or encouragement. Young children are naturally drawn to aspects in the environment that meet their developmental needs.

2 **absorbent mind** - A mind able to absorb knowledge quickly and effortlessly. Montessori said the child from birth to six years has an "absorbent mind."

3 **Self** - The deep sense of being from which the person experiences individual life; consciousness, thought, feelings and action

4 **individual self-formation** - The foundational development of the young child under six of basic language, movement, will, emotions, sensorial and dynamic knowledge achieved through independent individual engagement, concentrated effort and hands-on action in relation to activities of his own choosing in his environment

5 **purposeful activity** - A process or engagement that serves to further the child's development

6 **concentration** - The act of concentrating. The young child focuses his or her attention on aspects of the environment essential for development. From a Montessori perspective, concentration is "a consistent activity concentrated on a single work—an exercise on some external object, where the movements of the hands are guided by the mind." (1983, p. 149). Deep engagement.

7 **cycles of activity** - Little children, when engaged in an activity that interests them, will repeat it many times and for no apparent reason, stopping suddenly only when the inner need which compelled the child to activity has been satisfied. To allow for the possibility of long, concentrated work cycles, Montessori advocates a 3-hour uninterrupted work period.

8 **reasoning mind** - The mind of the human being older than 5 or 6, characterized increasingly by the ability to reason, imagine, analyze, generalize, see patterns, introspect, abstract, and choose

9 **imagination** - The mind's tendency and ability to picture what has been seen or experienced (repro-

ductive imagination), piece together from what has been seen or experienced (constructive imagination), or bring into being what has not been seen or experienced—something unique (creative imagination)

10 prepared environments - The Montessori classroom is an environment prepared by the adult for children. It contains all the essentials for optimal development but nothing superfluous. These include order and reality, beauty and simplicity. Everything is child-sized to enhance the children's independent functioning. A trained adult and a large enough group of children of mixed ages make up a vital part of the prepared environment.

11 prepared relationships - The child's productive interactions and emotional attachments with adults who understand the her characteristics and think, speak and act to meet her needs

12 vital life force - The *horme*, as described by Montessori, or Bergson's *elan vital*, to which she compares it

13 Will - The inner force behind choice in thought, feeling and action that propels, inhibits, gives formation to or controls the impulse

14 independence - Not depending on another - "with various shades of meaning." (OED, p. 836). Normal development milestones such as weaning, talking, etc., can be seen as a series of events that enable the child to achieve increased individuation, autonomy, and self-regulation. Throughout the four planes of development, the child and young adult continually seek to become more independent. It's as if the child says, "Help me to help myself"

15 freedom within strong limits - The dynamic arena of active exploration of the child circumscribed by clear and firm but cheerful limits, according to his own good and the rights of others in keeping with optimal development and learning of the individual and the group

16 liberty and responsibility - The response to life that includes choosing and acting independently according to one's own liking while acting to contribute to both one's own and the common good

17 ages and stages - Montessori's Four Planes of Development (birth to 6, 6 to 12, 12 to 18, and 18 to 24) as described in her writings and provided for meticulously in Montessori homes and schools, according to the characteristics and needs of the developing person

18 self-correcting materials - Psycho-sensorial-motor, pictorial, and written developmental and learn-

ing materials that allow the child to explore, act and decide, and then discover his own errors and correct them himself

19 extrinsic motivation - The carrot-and-the-stick approach in child development, schooling, family life, business and politics

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