

The First-Plane Child and Obstacles to Normalization

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Editor's note: This article addresses adult-fostered deviations, which arise from the influence of the adult on the child or through the preparation of the environment. This is to be distinguished from differences that arise due to other sources, such as autism spectrum disorders or hearing impairments.

Psychological Deviations

Maria Montessori wrote extensively about psychic deviations and their cure in her book *The Secret of Childhood*. Most psychic deviations in the human person are sown in the first six years of life. They tend to submerge during the second plane of development since this stage is the most healthy, stable period of childhood growth. Montessori identified three main causes for psychic deviations in children. The first and most serious cause of psychic deviations occurs when the child has the will to act, but her movements are inhibited. The second occurs when the adult's will is unnecessarily substituted for the child's will. And the third occurs when the child is abandoned under a false understanding of freedom.

Ontogeny Recapitulates Phylogeny

Montessori frequently used the phrase "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" when discussing the development of a human person, primarily with the 0–3 and 12–15 age periods. This phrase refers to the idea that each member of the species journeys through the whole evolutionary process of what the entire species has accomplished. The human infant emerges from life in the waters of the womb unable to move. Then the infant slithers, creeps, moves up on all fours, and finally

becomes a biped. Every child experiences the same process of evolutionary development. The twelve-to-fifteen-year-old accomplishes this recapitulation of phylogeny in reproducing the accomplishments of human society in order to arrive at civilization. What brought about civilization? A nomadic existence shifted to subsistent farming. Adolescents flourished by building shelters, running a farm, and developing a micro-economy.

For the child in the first three years, we understand that his development involves a steady progression of movement. The first accomplishment is the control of the head. The infant cannot control the muscles of the neck unless he experiences lying on



Joseph, age four
Sacred Heart Cathedral School
Pensacola, FL

Joe explains, "The light went out when he [Jesus] died, but it still shines onto the earth."

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his tummy. We observe how natural it is for the mother to lay the baby down on his chest. The baby is given the opportunity to practice lifting his head. Later in the child's progression of movement comes lifting the head while lying on the back, which involves much more muscular control than lifting the head while on the tummy.

As this developmental progression continues, we see another important aspect of how movement propels the child. Each time a child pushes up with his arms, the myelin sheath is developing from the base of the brain. Myelin is a fatty substance that works its way down the spine and covers the spinal cord and the vertebrae so that the nerve endings will carry out muscular movement and development. There is a specific timeframe in order for the sheathing to mature. So each time we see the child push up, we recognize with delight that this movement is exactly what is needed for continuing development.

Next, we witness the baby rock back and forth, and then begin the process of crawling. We know now that the more a child crawls, the better. Eventually the child will pull up and start a cross-lateral walking movement. If we are able to prepare the environment to include soft furniture or allow our skirt or our pantlegs to be pulled upon, the child will learn to walk by themselves in the natural configuration, with their arms by their sides.

We can prepare a developmentally stimulating environment for the zero-to-three-year-old child by placing ourselves at the child's level. We arrange pictures at a low level in the room. We place objects, art, and images of beauty and interest that compel the child to crawl closer to them. A low mirror is wonderful for the little ones to watch their own movement.

Inhibited Movement

As mentioned before, the types of deviations that Montessori observed had three primary causes: the inability to move, the adult's own will unnecessarily substituted for the child's will, and the abandonment of the child.

When the child has the will to act but his movements are inhibited, it is often due to being placed in an apparatus. At one point during a lecture, Dr. Montessori held open her arms to show that this was the only apparatus a child should be put into. When the child outgrew the arms, then he starts to walk. Once he starts walking, it is a disservice to the child to pick him up to

carry him — unless he asks to be picked up. We also know now that inhibition of movement inhibits brain development.

Some types of learning disability, mild or severe, can be traced back to a child's first year of life and movement. This is an amazing discovery! I remember working with a mother whose son was not reading and writing. So we went through a number of questions, and then the mother mentioned that her son crawled a lot. I asked, "Well, how did he crawl?" And she answered, "Oh, he had the cutest little crawl. He kept his hands fisted up," and she demonstrated how he was crawling. On hearing that, I knew that if the hand is not pushing out against a hard surface, reading and writing are directly affected. Millions of sensory receptors on the end of the fingers need stimulation, which happens when the baby crawls with open hands.

We should see this progression of hand development in the infant. Once the baby loses the grip of balling up the hand, she will learn to push on her hands. When she is placed down on her tummy, she will eventually start to push up, and thus hand development continues on its trajectory, instigated by movement.

We used to proclaim with pride, "Oh, my child walked at ten months old." That was considered an accomplishment. Now, we understand that walking too early is not to be encouraged because the more the baby exercises the cross-lateral crawl, the more connections are made across the corpus callosum, the part of the brain that allows for communication between both hemispheres. Through this cross-lateral crawl, these neural connections are built.

There are a number of ways we can assist the child to crawl more. We can join her on the floor and crawl with her. If she happens to pull up and start walking at ten months, we join them and crawl with them; it is a way to encourage the child to come back down to crawl rather than to stand and walk. Or we invite the child to play the cross-crawl game with the baby on her back. Taking one leg and the opposite arm, we move these limbs to the middle of the body; then do the same with the other leg and opposite arm. This cross-crawl game is a wonderful way to reiterate the cross-crawl experience, and this action will create the same connections across the corpus callosum.

Substitution of the Will

The child reaches the stage of real independence as soon as he begins to move. The substitution of the will then becomes an issue, which has many sources.

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Placing the child in charge of his choices and respecting those choices becomes essential. For example, food choice is an arena where agency is important and easily encouraged. We can invite the child into age-appropriate food preparation. Many parents report positively on the impact of involving children in their own food choice and preparation. If the caregiver does all the cooking and the serving, the child has had nothing to do with that meal, his own nourishment. And if the parental food attitude is one of cajoling or bribing for reward, we witness an example of the substitution of the adult's will for the child's.

In the California lectures, Montessori says that this just appeals to [the human's] vanity and the basest part of [humanity] to hold out food as a reward. Thus, we must involve the child in the preparation from the very beginning. They can do so much. They can pull grapes off the stem. They can spread the butter on the toast. I will never forget calling my friend, Nisha, before I led a parent meeting. I said, "I need some ideas for what they can do in the kitchen. What is Sarah doing right now?" Sarah had just turned two. And Nisha replied, "She's up on a chair at the counter getting the toast out of the toaster. Now she's putting the butter on the [toast]." At age two, Sarah was involved in her own food preparation.

If the child is of an interior, more melancholic temperament, and the adult is consistently substituting the child's role of agency in decision-making, then the child becomes incapable of acts of the will: "I don't know how to make my own choices. I need someone else to make choices for me. When I have tried to express my choices, they have not been accepted." This capitulation is unconscious, but sadly, with this loss of agency, the child starts to assume: "I am not good."

When the child has had these kinds of experiences of inhibited movement, substitution of the will or abandonment, psychological deviations can occur. They include possessiveness, unnatural attachment to an adult, shyness, and destructive behavior.

Possessiveness

Montessori saw possessiveness as a weak deviation, one that was easily cured. She found that possessiveness was fostered by the

adult's will being substituted for the child's will, enforcing a movement of the soul for which the child was not ready. Children are not capable of sharing until closer to the age of reason. We can make them turn over to another something that they were using, but this is not sharing. Because we are big, we can enforce their compliance.



*Parker, age eleven
The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Morristown, NJ*

Parker drew this artwork as a response to hearing the parable of the Mustard Seed.

Dr. Montessori described that there is a secret within created goods, within creation. Until the child has been permitted to work with whatever he chooses for as long as he likes, he will most often never arrive at this secret. The secret is to use, but not to possess. Imagine if the child is deep in concentration and a sibling comes along and says, "I want to use that, too." The child protests the interruption, but the parents say, "No, you have to share." The instinct, if this happens over and over, is, "Mine, mine, mine." This possessiveness really is unnatural to the human person. When children are permitted to have as much time as they desire with whatever they have chosen, they then become very generous. They become generous once they have arrived at the secret: "I don't need to possess this. I just need to use it and then place it down for someone else to use."

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We see this with a child who has been forced to share when he comes up to another child in the atrium and says, "You have to share that with me." Our response needs to be, "No, he has chosen this and he may work with it for as long as he likes. Let's find something else that you would like to do." The child may reply, "But I want to work with that." We witness the great desire to have. Our answer: "You can want to, but he has chosen it. He will work with it for as long as he likes. You have two choices. You can sit and wait, or you can work with something else. Here is a place where you can wait." How many times have we seen this? To see a three-year-old wait fifteen to twenty minutes for something, that's development of the will! That's everything that our society needs: delayed gratification, sacrifice of the will. Then how much more does that matter when the child gets to work with this object?

Unnatural Attachment to an Adult

The unnatural attachment to an adult can be fostered either through abandonment or through excessive praise. When these forces have been constant, a child develops to the point where she cannot act unless an adult is encouraging. We experience the child who wants to sit right next to us or who wants only to talk with an adult. At times, the children are truly in need of conversation with adults, so we need to have meetings for these conversations with the children. But when the need is expressed as a deviation, we see that the attention-seeking is never satisfied, and the child is unable to work unless the adult is right beside her. The cure for this deviation is work. We persevere in trying to find a work that will capture the child's attention so much that she is no longer interested the adult's attention.

Shyness

Montessori was very careful to distinguish shyness from an interior disposition or a more interior temperament. A quiet interior temperament is not a deviation. This is the nature of this person. Shyness, however, is associated with shame. A shy child cannot look someone in the eye, or she seeks inordinate refuge hiding behind the parent.

What better place for the child with the deviation of shyness than to be in the atrium! In the beginning, a parent might sit in, assisting the child to discover what work in practical life interests him. In my third year in the atrium, we were singing, "Jesus loves (the name of the child)." One child responded, "Don't say my

name. Don't say my name." In these first few meetings, his face would turn red, and his head would hang down. I thought, "I don't want him to stand out." For him, the feeling was not joy that his name was being sung. So we sang other songs. By the end of the year, he was fine with his name being sung and it was practical life that helped him through shyness and shame.

Destructive Behavior

Destructive behavior appears so often in the child who has a lack of coordination. We want to provide practical life work, to bring the whole body, the whole personality, into union: handwashing, walking the line, big and small motor activities will assist this child in developing an integrated coordination. A help for this child could also be to shorten the length of the child's session to avoid overwhelming her with input. The child could come initially for thirty to forty minutes, and then gradually build into full two hours.

What We Can Do

The first thing we can do when we suspect deviations is to record these observations. Keep a log to write these down, and be specific. Start noticing when deviations happen. Notice patterns. A record of this information will be helpful for you and all involved. It is a wonderful opportunity for us to ask for God's grace in every moment as to how to help this child.

Conclusion

From where does our self-esteem arise? It is in knowing ourselves and embracing our capacities. Practical life aids in this. In very young children who have suffered severe abuse, sexual or physical, we see that those toddlers consistently choose food preparation over any other work. Montessorians have observed time and again that these children particularly prepare food and offer it to others. Typically, most toddlers, as they prepare food, eat it as they prepare. When someone receives the gift of their food and eats, that helps the child to know, "I am good. I can do this. I can." The child instinctively knows the importance of food. And when they understand that "the work of my hands is nurturing another," remarkable healing is taking place.