

Help me to help myself

Sandra Morris-Cooles looks at well-being in the context of child development and explores how Dr Montessori's idea of the 'favourable environment' contributes to a child's sense of self worth.

The child is born with the human tendencies for exactness, precision, order and orientation. As with all human tendencies these are externally manifested in the sensitive periods that an infant passes through in the first six years of life – the period of the Absorbent Mind. In this connection we can link these particular human tendencies to the sensitive period for order. So often, however, we tend to focus on order in terms of cognition, whether this be the mathematical mind (Montessori, Reprint 2002) or the warp for language laid down in the brain. However, although important, this is only one aspect of internal order; the other aspect of internal order being of equal, if not more, importance is the order which engenders emotional well-being as, without a stable emotional base, positive learning in any area will be limited.

Children usually begin their lives in the nursery between the ages of 2 and 3 years. They come with their own individual internal working models of attachment (Bowlby, 1988). These models (mental schema) reflect the parenting style of the prime caregiver. Ainsworth et al's (1978) research - The Strange Situation Test - showed that children who were securely attached had received sensitive mothering and those who were insecurely attached had received insensitive mothering - mothers who were unable to acknowledge and respond to their infant's cues. In Montessori's terminology these might be termed as children who had deviations – they had veered off their natural path of development. In our nurseries, we will not be able to change the mother-infant relationship, but we can try and

ensure that we provide an environment that will enable the children to grow as social human beings and facilitate their positive well-being. As Montessori might have put it, becoming part of 'the cohesive social unit'.

How can we do this? First and foremost, it is important to understand the child's need for independence. The child is born with an inner drive to fulfil him/herself. This inner drive, the *horme* (Montessori Reprint 2002), is fundamental in the child's construction of self. No-one teaches a child to speak or to walk, we scaffold the child's attempts, but we cannot impose our will on the child. 'The child's first instinct is to carry out his actions by himself, without anyone helping him, and his first conscious bid for independence is made when he defends himself against those who try to do the action for him.' Montessori goes on to state that independence can only be fostered in an atmosphere of freedom. However, in a Montessori environment all freedoms will have limitations. These limitations are the ground rules of the nursery, the parameters of acceptable behaviour encompassed in respect for self, for others and for the environment. Such parameters not only support the social development of the child, but also give the child a framework of consistency and predictability. This links to the child's sensitivity to order. The child knows what is expected of him/her and is able to build trust in the environment and the adults within it. This framework gives the child a sense of security, a secure base (Ainsworth et al 1978) from which to explore the environment freely. Such independence will enable children to have a sense of well-being as they will feel trusted to be able to do things for



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themselves. Looking at Erikson's (1950), psycho-social theory of personality development, it is during the second stage of autonomy versus shame and doubt that the child, with the assistance of a supportive environment, builds a positive ego identity of free will 'A sense of self-control without loss of self-esteem is the ontogenetic source of a sense of free will.' (Erikson, 1950). This links so well with Montessori's writings, and the need to respect the child's attempts towards independent action and thought.

We need to help children to help themselves. The respect encapsulated in the ground rules is of paramount importance, as is the environment itself with full and easy access, and the Practical Life activities. The Practical Life activities enable the children to become autonomous beings, independent in action as they are no longer dependent on the adults to provide for them. The favourable environment, therefore, fosters the well-being and sense of self worth of the children. ■

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Montessori, M. *Absorbent Mind*
Erikson, E. *Childhood and Society*
Bowlby, J. *A Secure Base*
Ainsworth, M. in Bowlby