

Words, Words, Words, and their role in development of young children's communication skills



This reflection focuses on Montessori's writing about the human tendency for communication, the sensitive period for language, and the adults' role in supporting this unique human characteristic. It is based on an article written by **Barbara Isaacs** for Teach Nursery and published in their latest issue.

In the recently published 1946 London Lectures, Montessori writes: (2012, p61) "The child possesses a language that has grown perfectly from something which was forming inside him. Language seems to be born in completeness at this stage, just as the child who was being formed for such a

language is created inside the child. It is a miracle of creation, an inner construction. For this reason, language is part of the psychic organism of each individual. It stems from the child's efforts in the first two years of life during which he is completely unconscious, then partly conscious and then more and more conscious until, at

language we need to also acknowledge the role of the parents, siblings and peers, and carers and practitioners who enable the unconscious construction of language within the child.

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last, he has this great lift of language." Whilst Montessori celebrates the child's enormous efforts in acquisition of

beliefs. Nature endows us with the potential that Montessori described as the human tendency for communication. How this tendency unfolds and how our communication skills develop will depend on our temperaments, culture and mother tongue and also on how they are nurtured by the significant adults and peers in our lives.

For Montessorians the sensitive period for language 'guides' the child to mastery of not only his/her own first language but also to acquisition of other languages if they are part of the daily life of the child. The vast body of research into acquisition of language confirms Montessori's instinctive belief that infants are able to hear in the womb and that they need to be surrounded by language if they are to become competent users of language as they mature. We now know that newborn babies respond to their mothers' speech within the first day of



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life. We also acknowledged that our culture is transmitted through lullaby's, rhymes and stories that our parents, family and friends share with us during in childhood.

When learning to speak babies respond not only to the sounds of language but also to its rhythm and pitch. The majority of children will be able to utter their first words sometime around their first birthday, whilst their prime carers will be able to recognise patterns of 'words' several months before. During the second year of life young children's language unfolds and blossoms as they absorb it from their environment both in the spoken form and through gesture and non-verbal communication. In the early stages of life we communicate our feelings in the way we handle and care for babies, particularly during routines such as feeding, changing and settling to sleep. Our touch expresses our feelings of love and concern and will be accompanied with soothing gentle words. Our attachment behaviour is deeply rooted in the communications between the prime carer and the child in his/her first year of life.

Montessori recognised the importance of tuning into language and urged carers to give babies and toddlers the opportunity to hear everyday speech both inside and outside the home. As the child's sensitive period for language unfolds the adults' and peers' role change as they scaffold, mirror, share and encourage the toddler to utter first

phrases and sentences and develop their vocabulary. Wherever possible we should model language for young children – use rich vocabulary and be careful when speaking to use grammatically correct sentence structures. The child's capacity to absorb language at this stage is enormous as we often witness in the language competent 2 year olds when they first enter nursery.

These children benefit from a language rich environment where the adults and peers understand their potential. Their carers name the flowers, plants, shrubs and trees in the garden or park, they describe the components of the digger or rubbish van and how they function. They explained appropriate behaviour when visiting the local library, toddler group or playground. They ask questions that help them problem solve, explore and encourage conversations and discussions and nurture the unfolding of imagination. Books are a great source for enhancement of language skills and should be on offer daily providing opportunities to play with and explore language, and enabling children to express their thoughts and ideas as well as their feelings.

For language to develop fully it needs to be shared – it is a tool that brings us together. It also has the potential to separate and isolate, as is often witnessed when working with children with hearing or speech impairments or with those who do not speak the language of the country where they are

living. Humans – and particularly young ones – have a tremendous potential to communicate through gestures, and sign language has become a very useful communication tool for many babies prior to their ability to voice their needs and desires.

Over a hundred years ago Montessori studied children who were brought up by animals, such as the Wild Boy of Aveyron, who was also the subject of François Truffaut's film *L'enfant sauvage* (1970). For these children, the opportunity to develop human speech is limited. They compensate by developing other skills as they adapt to their unique environment. However, when expected to integrate into society, their capacity to do so becomes limited, because they have not had the opportunity to do so early on in their lives. Current neuroscientific research demonstrates that our unique sensitivity to language in the early years, which was described by Montessori at the beginning of the 20th century. Therefore it is our responsibility to nurture young children's language as one of the key tools for life and an essential foundation for later literacy. Young children also need time to develop and practice their language skills before they are expected to embark on the journey of becoming a literate human being. This is the final stage of their sensitive period for language.

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