



Montessori for infants & toddlers

Jane Lord, principle of Wharfedale Montessori reflects on the first 14 months building a Montessori infant community

The idea of opening a nursery did not sit comfortably with me for a very long time. I recognise that this is in part attributable to my age, as I am of a generation where mothers almost always had their little ones at home with them until they were at least three years of age.

However today in western society many more mothers are working and high quality care is needed more than ever. My own experience of day nursery care however, had always left me feeling uneasy. I felt that many aspects of the accepted norm in day care establishments could not be right for, or helpful to the healthy development of the child. The more I thought about this and listened to nursery nurses who

worked in day care establishments the more I realised that many of the best of these practitioners also felt uncomfortable with the way some aspects of care in nurseries were structured.

As a Montessori practitioner with enormous faith in Dr Montessori's approach and visionary understanding of children and their needs, I felt sure

“The most fundamental need as I see it is to move away from having separate rooms for the different ages of infant and toddler.”

many aspects of our Montessori approach in children's house could logically apply in baby and infant care. I had not undertaken Montessori infancy training myself but felt sure that with carefully chosen qualified staff, conviction and a positive attitude we could operate a nursery which met

the natural needs of the children in our care. We would, as in The Children's House, 'follow the child'.

The most fundamental need as I see it is to move away from having separate rooms for the different ages of infant and toddler. To do so is of course intrinsically Montessori. The vertical banding is just as important at this stage as it is in the children's house, or later in the primary. It does not surprise me when I hear of research informing us of late delay in development of language, when babies are always cared for with other babies of the same age in isolation from older children. It seems obvious that this would be the case, knowing what we now know about child development. Of course the adult staff will interact, talk and hopefully sing to these little ones during their busy shifts on duty, but what about the natural modelling from slightly older children? This surely follows across all areas of development.

The three-year age span also follows a



more natural family form of grouping and allows for each member of the small community to learn by example respect for the needs of all. The practice in many nurseries of having one set of staff working with just the babies for some six months is still common. Bonding is taking place between infant and carer at this critical stage of development and yet these little ones are then moved into another room with a different set of staff for a different age band. This can happen sometimes up to three times before the child is two and a half or three years old. Can this be good for such little babies when they are already away from their own mothers or fathers? If nothing else, what must it do to their ability to trust in us, or in any relationship?

The same team of staff in our infant community will be with the children throughout their stay in the nursery allowing real relationships to develop. It also allows the staff to really understand each individual at a deeper level and monitor and celebrate their progress in development. In our nursery with a fairly small number, our maximum being 16 registered, it is not absolutely essential to have key workers for different children but I think we will begin to use this system as we reach capacity. I do feel however that operating with a mixed age grouping like this in a larger establishment, it would be essential to have a key worker for each group of up to four children.

Working this way does of course mean that great vigilance is required with some of the more boisterous older children when they are with the six-month old babies but with qualified and experienced staff this should cause no great problems. In our infant community you will often see the older children sitting patiently playing with a baby passing back a thrown toy or a rolled away rattle again and again with great patience.

The 0-3 environment

In our nursery just as is the case in the Children's House our décor is calm and fairly neutral with just a few pictures and small examples of the children's activities displayed and changed regularly. There is enough in the environment to stimulate and invite exploration without

bombardment with vast amounts of mainly teacher produced multicoloured displays.

Almost all of the apparatus and toys in the nursery are wooden with the natural wooden furnishings and partitions supplied by community playthings.

Instead of taking the children into a separate room, we have a room divider,

“... you will often see the older children sitting patiently playing with a baby.”

which allows us to take the children to sleep in a quiet and slightly darkened space with lowered blinds. We use sleeping baskets on the floor which the children can clamber into themselves, an idea I borrowed from Ailsa Neville at Mill Cottage Montessori. They are in fact under bed storage baskets from Ikea with custom cut foam mattresses

Sensory exploration

Simple baskets filled with a variety of sensory objects allow the babies to simply explore without adult intervention and are wonderfully inviting. We have not as yet had a specific training in heuristic play as such, though this is on the agenda. Brightly coloured sheets of transparent silky material are good for draping over things to make dens or even just to float gently down over the children and whisk away again making them chuckle and grab the fabric.

Shiny thermal blankets to scrunch such as the variety given to people who go mountaineering or hill walking to keep them warm are also very popular. A Reggio Emilia style mirror tent was something I really wanted to have in the nursery having watched children enjoying one at the Reggio 'Hundred Languages of Children' exhibition. It was an expensive luxury purchase, but is so good for thoughtful, literally reflective play and exploration, and it is used a great deal by the children.

All the elements of Montessori practice that exist in children's house and meet the needs of the child during sensitive periods for language, movement, order and small things can start at this early stage in the simple but carefully prepared environment as well as the introduction of simple rules and routines to aid development of respect and self-discipline and control. Lots of opportunities for creative play; gross motor and fine motor movement, fresh air and freshly cooked high quality food are also of course very important.

Conclusion

Our Montessori infant community is a first in baby care in our local region and as such has taken time to build and is still growing. However we have held fast to our ways of operating, the benefits of which we see reflected in the contentment of the children in our care. By following as best we can, our belief in the Montessori philosophy and approach at this critical and formative stage in a child's life, I truly feel we are giving these little ones as good an experience in the nursery as we can. ■

Jane Lord is Principal of Wharfedale Montessori School and Wharfedale Babies.