

Keeping an eye on the children

Barbara Isaacs discusses the benefits of observing children in their home environment.

All parents and carers keep a watchful eye on their children to ensure that they are safe, but could there be more to it than just making sure our children are safe and having a good time? Is there any value in observing children's activities and behaviours at home? Getting to know our children better is not a bad idea at any time during their lives. In the first three to four years of their lives observation is the best tool we have to get an insight into children's well being as they are not really able to tell us how they feel and what they need. It is particularly so in the first year of life, and it is at this stage of development that mothers and prime carers spend time getting to know their infants so well that they are able to recognise the cry which tells them if they are hungry, uncomfortable or wanting company. So why do we stop when they get older?

I am reminded of a passage in Deborah Jackson's book "Do not disturb" in which she writes about finding her toddler sitting in the living room intently watching a ray of sunshine making a pattern on the floor. She was overwhelmed by her stillness, concentration, and the peace she generated. This was a special moment which she shared with her child because she was able to stop and just watch, without thinking about the next job or her own agenda.

There is a preconceived idea that observing children takes a long time and that one needs training to do it. Yet I believe that it should be possible to begin by giving it just five minutes. Why not start when the children are in the bath, as this is a time we need to be there and a time children enjoy without expecting too much involvement from the adult as they



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engage with their bath toys and other objects around them? You may discover that they have far better wrist control than you anticipated as they undo the lid on the shampoo bottle. You may see their fascination with the rainbow which suddenly appeared in the soap bubble or you may share in the moment of pure joy as they discover they can splash the water. You may also find that your toddler is content and concentrating when engaged in something which captures their interest.

You can also try to do short observations or "child watching" in a playgroup when you may discover your toddlers' fascination with blades of grass, the company of older children, the slide or the quality of sand running through their fingers. Why not spend a little time watching how your child organises the cars, dolls or bricks? This may be at home or in the toddler group.

Recently, during a teaching practice

visit in a toddler room I witnessed an enchanting little play scenario. A girl of about two insisted she put on the Sleeping Beauty dress she had found in the dressing up box. She admired herself in the mirror and had to look several times to make sure she looked right. She then picked up two dollies and proceeded to look after them, stroking their heads and finally putting them to sleep in a quiet corner of the room. This short play told me so much about this little girl, about her joy in "being Sleeping Beauty", her need to care for her dollies and her tenderness as she made sure they went off to sleep safely. I am convinced that if I was her mum I would have recognised some of my own movements, as children often mirror and imitate those adults they love and admire. I would have appreciated the love and care she had taken with "her babies".

Getting to know children through observation means that we gain a deeper insight into their lives, better understand their motivations, skills, joys and loves, and also find out what upsets or disturbs them. All this information will help us in our parenting and in supporting our children in their play, learning and development. So why not take the time to learn more about your children and why not share some of your discoveries with the readers of *Montessori International*? ■