

# Settling into nursery

**Antonella Cirillo** spotlights the importance of forging affectionate and trusting bonds with those children for whom the nursery is a new world, and thus getting them off to a good strong start.

**W**hen Daniel arrived to visit the school for the first time, he was two years and four months old. He walked in, gave the nursery a cautious but charming smile, and stood hugging his mother's leg. From that secure place he surveyed the big room, his eyes wide and attentive. The fish tank next to the entrance caught his interest and looking up, he pulled his mother's trousers to invite her to see it; gradually he moved on to examine a tractor puzzle, still making sure that mum was close by. This was the beginning of Daniel's time at the nursery and from then on he came every day. During the next two years he made new friends and new discoveries.

Children often start to attend nursery when they are two years old like Daniel. Some of them might be used to the presence of other children, coming from a family with brothers and sisters,

understand that sometimes they might have different goals, go different ways. What is becoming important is that after being apart, they always come to be together again. They are now in what is called the goal-corrected partnership (Bowlby, 1988).

Children thrive when they are partners in positive relationships and can form new affectionate bonds with available, loving and helpful adults. All teachers and in particular the key person, provide this warm support in the nursery so that each child feels special, loved and valued. It takes time for young children to settle in the nursery; they can be upset at seeing mum leaving and they long to see her again at 'home time'. It is so important that the key person continues to observe and be ready to comfort, to reassure that 'mummy is coming later', to catch the interest of the child, to have some quiet time, looking at a book so that the child can snuggle up



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or have attended a playgroup; others might have lived only with adults. They come to visit this new environment; they look around but need to do so from a safe place, close to mum. They need the secure base, from which they can start to explore; they also look up at her to check that things are ok. "Will I be alright? Do I trust this new world? These adults? These children?"

At home, most two year olds have already formed strong attachments to the very special people that are consistent presences in their lives: parents, siblings, grandparents and nannies. They shared many daily routines and gradually they feel safe in their presence, they feel valued and loved and they love and trust them. They start experiencing longer separations, and of course, the reunions that follow. They are beginning to

and relax. It is important to remember that this process is not smooth and linear, but can be bumpy and reflect each individual family change and, possibly, crisis.

The way each child settles in is to be monitored and facilitated by responding to each individual child and his/her way of dealing with these important changes and transitions.

Two year olds who feel safe engage happily and intensely with the world, learn, and develop. What we teachers, therefore, provide is a prepared environment that is ordered and beautiful, accessible and inviting. Children of this age can remember more, grow familiar with it and choose the materials and activities that are 'calling' to them. The two year old child can feel that he/she has some control over his/her experience, and is

safe, valued and protected. The external order of the environment together with routines that are consistent and therefore predictable are then reflected in the child's internal order and harmony.

Just before the age of two children have become able to recognise themselves in the mirror (Smith et al. 2005); if they see their reflection with some lipstick on the nose, they touch their own nose, whereas only a few months before they would have tried to touch the child in the mirror. This shows that they are more aware of themselves, who they are, what they like and do not like. They want to continue to seek independence by being active, by walking and exploring. Two year old children want to be independent, they have a growing sense of what they want to do and

have developed skills that assist them in their exploration and discovery of their world; their body is stronger and they can control more effectively the way they use it.

Montessori (1988 p.83) wrote of the child: 'little he cares about the knowledge of others; he wants to acquire knowledge on his own, to have experience of the world, and to perceive it by his unaided effort.'

For the two year old anything can be the object of meticulous exploration. What we can provide to facilitate the child in this adventure is an environment that is rich in opportunities, space and time.

The shelves in activities of everyday living, for example, can be inviting with rows of trays and baskets where beads can be threaded, jugs can be used to pour coloured water or seeds, pebbles, sand or conkers can be transferred with spoons or tongs, boxes and bottles can be opened and closed. The child is free to look and ponder, to choose to use them. We can put ourselves in the child's position and imagine how fulfilling this experience of being free to move, choose, work, or rest can be for the child: "This is me; I can decide to use this material, I can get into it, can try hard to do it, I can do it, I do it myself." By repeating the work that he or she has chosen, the child develops an awareness of his/her actions. Montessori (2012 p. 169) writes: "through movement we come into more intimate communication with and are more intelligently connected with the environment, we acquire consciousness."

The two year old is also deeply interested in expressing ideas and preferences and in listening to the new words and to the knowledge and understanding that they convey. It is during this year that we assist a language explosion: the child starts to form longer sentences and learn a phenomenal number of words every week. Activities and people in the nursery therefore offer continuous opportunities for these exchanges, supporting the child's development of language and communication skills.

In the Montessori nursery, the two year olds can decide to use material that is in a box and using the previously learned skill of opening a box, have access to it. The child is becoming gradually aware of when s/he needs the toilet, recognising and anticipating sensations and signals



PHOTOS: BLUE BUTTERFLY MONTESSORI, PINNER, MIDDX

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from the body and using new skills in pulling up and down pants and washing hands. The child can choose to have snack and use the developed motor skills to take care of him/herself and pour the milk or water. S/he can start to share this moment with other children in a way that is spontaneous and not forced by adults' timetables.

At this age children are interested in other children and can enjoy playing in their company. It is engaging for them to stand at the sand or water tray as part of a small group and 'take inspiration' from the way another child uses the funnel or strainer. At other times, when outdoor, children can join in the excitement of climbing up and down the climbing frame, or use the tricycles; the shared interest and pleasure are an intrinsic element of their learning, and will lead to the development of important social skills such as taking turn, negotiating and co-operating.

However, in particular in the first half of this year, children are still impulsive and not very good at waiting and sharing. Teachers can help: pointing out and offering other interesting tools, materials, experiences that are available, while suggesting that the original activity can be done later. The role of the teacher is therefore to recognise both the need for the child to take decisions, make choices and develop the will, and the need to develop self-regulation. There is no need for long lessons on fairness and right and wrong, but the repeated experiences with a helpful adult who mediates and facilitates, nurtures the child's emotional and social

development. The ground rules of mutual respect among children, between children and adults, and the respect for the shared environment are significant to the child's development. In the Montessori classroom where vertical grouping is used, older children and teachers offer a consistent repeated model of behaviour and language that the two year old children imitate.

Because of the impulsivity mentioned earlier, two year old children are often known as the 'terrible twos'. However, when we become more knowledgeable and aware of their stage of development, we are also more in tune with what they are able to do and all the skills they are developing. We understand their need to take decisions, make choices and be actively engaged in their interaction with the world of people and of things. By observing children, we can understand their interests, and therefore we can plan and offer opportunities and experiences that nurture learning and enjoyment in mastering, discovering and sharing.

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