

# Supporting two year olds in a Montessori setting

## A practitioner's point of view

Rather than forming childhood through adult eyes, as some in our present society would have us do, **Dawn Nasser** suggests we imagine ourselves as two year olds in order to properly understand and interpret their development.

“Children must have potentialities that correspond to heredity: not language, but the potentiality to learn a language, not the control of movement, but the potentiality to achieve coordination. They have potentialities to absorb information from their environment through their senses.” (Montessori, 2012).

Research tells us that childhood is not nearly so much about ‘the child’, their rights, or their unique individuality and independence to grow but more about the principles, preconceptions, plans, theories and belief in what we as a



first know life in its entirety” (Montessori, 1931). Sadly, today our children are still living in a society that is focused on constructing childhood through the eyes of adulthood.

So what is it like to be two years of age? How can we be sure that we truly understand and interpret the child’s development? Sandberg and Vuorinen (2010) argue that very few of us actually have limited early childhood memories

your child to move freely? Is it engaging as soon as the child arrives? And when they take the next step forward is there something else there to inspire?

The learning environment needs to flow before the children, to enable them to take an intellectual walk and make the connections in their brains. The brain is made up of nerve cells called neurons that are structured

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society expect the child to become (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2007; Canella, 2004). To achieve this, current government policy directs us to educate the youngest children to be ‘school ready’ in an environment where it is proposed that one adult can safely care for six children aged 2 to 3 years. Over a hundred years ago Maria Montessori (1997) maintained “...the adult has always seen only himself in society and in its progress”. She argued for an “aid to life”; that for development to happen information can be absorbed but it also needs to be “accepted, assimilated and understood” (Montanaro, 2009), and in order for the adult to support and educate through this process “we must

and that the majority of these usually start at around the age of 4 years. Their research shows that our childhood play experiences, prejudices and traditions will play a ‘subjective’ part in how we ‘believe’ we know and understand the child. Degotardi and Davis (2008) confirm that many observations made by practitioners are often illustrative and based upon physical behaviours as opposed to trying to ascertain the child’s inner emotional and mental state.

I ask you to imagine you are one of the 2 year olds in your class. Close your eyes and picture your chosen child. What are they doing? What does your environment look like? Does it allow

somewhat like a tree, and transmit and process information by means of electrical and chemical signals. When movement is linked to an experience it is an ‘activity’ that forms neural interconnections (Gopnik et al 1999). It is the links between the neurons and how they respond to environmental experiences that makes one child different from their friend, who can be doing exactly the same activity. This makes every child ‘activity dependent’, and that without activity linked to movement, language and understanding, relevant connections in the brain are not made. ‘Activity dependent’ is all about ‘cells that fire together wire together’ (Eliot, 2009).

**Continue to picture yourself as a two year old whilst reading the next three sections.**

**Movement:**

Today, I am Jake. I'm two years and four months and I need to move my whole body freely. That is space between tables, but not too far away, as I am still practicing my balance and co-ordination. If I have to walk too far to find somewhere to sit I will probably forget and play with the activity at the shelf, or I will drop it on the way. I love to pour. Today I have chosen pouring from a teapot into a china tea cup. Today there is something extra on the tray. It is a tea strainer. The water looks different when I pour it today. I use my hands to lift the strainer, I turn it over, I touch the rounded edge, I peer through it, then I pour water through it. I love using my hands. I am very good at becoming engaged and explore activities that are based on real life, especially if water is involved. I am experimenting, creating and thinking critically. And while I'm doing that, I can make a mess. I need space and time to engage with what I have chosen (Orion, 2009).

**Language:**

I need to listen to language and to have opportunities to use my own. In particular, in my individual play I will talk to myself, using my own words reinforcing what I know. I want an area where I can go and feel secure with an adult who sits with me and reads me a story. Sometimes, I like to stay there for ages. I have my favourite books and I need to hear these lots of times so that I can take in the information and recall it in my play, I need to assimilate it and allow myself to understand and absorb its meaning. I have my favourite teacher. I like the way she talks to me. She uses her words very carefully and she speaks to me directly, always with a smile. She never tells me what to do but she does often say that I should not do something that I want to, like tipping the washing up bowl of water all over the floor. She understands that all I want to do is mop it up. I love mopping the floor. She never says 'no'. She just explains that we should not do that but if I wanted I could help sweep the floor around the art table as it is dirty, or I could clean the table. And I notice that when the floor does need mopping and if I am close by she always ask me if I want to help her. I have my own mop. It is red. I know that as she and all the other



When painting, two brushes are sometimes better than one

teachers always say the same thing 'here is your red mop'. She gives me choices as I am actually not very good at choosing when there is so much in front of me.

**Understanding oneself:**

I am not yet very good at playing with another friend but I can play alongside them, with my own activity. I don't really understand how to share just yet. I cannot quite grasp the rules of play and when I want something I will just 'take', 'grab', 'push' and even bite, to get it. And I am not even sorry. Why would I be sorry? I don't really know what it means. It's a word someone tells me to say when they don't like something I have done. I am starting to understand that I have made someone sad or cry. I know when they make a strange face or there are tears. I don't like being sad, it makes me get a loud noise in my head, sometimes I think people can hear my loud noise. And it makes me stamp my feet and fling my arms out then I feel strange inside and I can't sit still. I am starting to realize that I don't really want anyone else to feel like that. I much prefer to be busy playing with water. I can learn these skills in small group guided by my teacher, who understands I need language, stimulation and movement. (Orion, 2009).



Using the builders tray

With thanks to the children of Rose House Montessori and 'The Nest' Paint Pots Chelsea.

As I leave you with your vision of this child in your class, the most frequently asked question comes to mind: "Should our 2 year olds be in our 3 to 6 year old environment? How can we support them? Do we meet their growing needs when they are busy using their senses to explore the world, whilst the 3 to 4

year olds are busy refining theirs?"

What I do know is that whatever class environment you have for these 'little people' it has to include preparation, observation, assessment, planning and then yet more preparation. These are the vital tools that lay the foundation for the continuous cycle of on-going daily reflective practice and which should always give thought to:

- Independence: 'help me to help myself'
- Concentration: 'don't interrupt me, let me be able to play on my own and work at developing my own internal need through choice'
- Control of error: 'I can do this without being dependent on an adult, if the activities and resources that I choose guide me in doing it.'

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