

# 2

## The child worker and the adult observer

### Chapter Objectives

- To visit a Montessori Children's House.
- To introduce observation as an essential element of Montessori early childhood practice.
- To reveal how Montessori early childhood programmes reflect the stages of child development described by Maria Montessori.
- To explore, from a Montessori perspective, the activity of young children.



Trained as a scientist, Dr Montessori observed phenomena closely as a means of understanding the world and solving problems. When she turned her attention to the study of young children, close observation continued to be her primary strategy. To observe literally means 'to keep near' so you can watch something and come to know it well.

### A visit to a Montessori Children's House

The Children's House is the Montessori programme for children aged from three to six years. A visitor will see much in a Children's House that is shared with other early childhood settings for this age group. There are many distinctive features, however, specific to the Montessori approach.

Let's begin our visit.

The Children's House is light-filled, spacious and airy. It has an outdoor space easily accessible to the children. The furniture in the room is child-

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sized and includes wooden tables where children work alone, in pairs or in small groups. There is a lot of open floor space that is not carpeted. Low shelves are arranged throughout the room. On the shelves are sets of learning materials, each set neatly arranged in its own place.

The children have not yet arrived. A teacher and an assistant are preparing the classroom. The teacher is checking the materials to ensure they are in perfect order. Anything damaged or lost is replaced. The assistant checks that all consumables have been replenished. The adults make sure everything is clean and bright, and in exactly the right place, before the children arrive. One table is a little bit grubby, though, and there are some hand marks on a window but the teacher has specifically asked the assistant not to clean these.

As the children begin to arrive for morning school, the teacher stands beside the gate. Each child shakes hands with the teacher and receives a personal greeting in return. The children put away bags, hats and jackets.

Some children go straight to the shelves and select a tray on which there is a collection of objects, colour-coded to show they go together. The children take the trays to a table, lay out the objects carefully and begin work.

Some children go to a stand and fetch a rolled-up mat. They carefully roll the mat out on the floor and go to the shelf to select a tray of objects, before arranging them on the mat and starting work. One child has fetched a box of large cut out letters and is using the letters to compose words on a mat.

Some children take a while to settle. They walk around the room, check on classroom pets or chat quietly to friends before choosing what they want to do.

A boy of about four rushes in, throwing his things towards the storage area. 'I want to wash a table', he shouts at the teacher. 'You know what, Josh' the teacher says quietly, 'this table over here really needs a clean.' The teacher examines the table closely with the child. He collects the equipment, which is colour-coded and placed together on the shelf. Although the jug, bucket, brushes, sponges and cloths are child-sized, they are real, not toys, and so completely functional. The jug and the bucket have wide lines on the inside to show the child when to stop filling them with water. The child lays out his equipment, puts on an apron and soon is energetically scrubbing the tables using big circular movements. When he has finished, cleaned up and put all the equipment back on the shelf, with some help

from another child and unobtrusive guidance from the teacher, the child seems calmer.

One child has brought some flowers to school today and so chooses the flower-arranging equipment. Soon there are small vases of flowers decorating the tables. Again all the equipment is cleaned, dried and put away, ready for the next person who wants to use it, before the child moves on to other work.

A hum of working children settles over the classroom. Drifting across from the other side of the room is the sound of a child matching musical bells of the same pitch. On a mat in the middle of the room two children are working together with a wooden map of Asia. Each country is a separate piece. The children fit the pieces into the map as if it were a jigsaw puzzle.

A little while later the teacher gathers a small group of children together to give them a lesson. Josh is invited to join the group, which he does willingly. The lesson shows the children in the group how to put away their things in the storage area when they arrive in the morning. The teacher asks Josh to show the others how he hangs up his coat on a hook. Then Josh helps one of the younger children.

After the lesson, the teacher quietly moves around the room, observing, giving more lessons, sometimes to individual children, sometimes to small groups, intervening with as light a touch as possible if guidance is needed.

After about an hour there is an increase in chatter and clatter. Many children have finished their first work. They push in their chairs and carry material back to the shelf where it belongs, ready for the next person to use. Some children seem unsure about what to do next; others are eating and chatting at the snack table. Several have gone into the garden, one child is painting at an easel, one is working with clay and one is looking at books, sitting in a child-sized comfy chair in the book corner. The teacher quietly pushes chairs into tables, tidies a little and prepares for another lesson, observing carefully but not intervening.

A small child notices the hand marks on the window and fetches the window cleaning materials. The child continues cleaning the window energetically long after the marks have been removed.

Soon most children have chosen new work. This time many have chosen a big work demanding more concentration, and the noise levels drop back to a hum.

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Suddenly, there is a loud crash. A small child carrying a chair has collided with an older child carrying mathematics material, a box of coloured beads. The box has fallen on the wooden floor and the beads scatter. Both children are a bit shocked, the smaller child close to tears. The teacher looks up, observes carefully but does not move or say anything.

'Can you help me pick these up?' the older child asks. The small child puts down the chair carefully, and begins to help the older child pick up the beads. Soon both children are completely absorbed in the task, the small child meticulously picking up beads one by one, and placing them in the box. There are a lot of beads so this is a big work and other children come over to help. By the time the beads are back in the box, the situation is resolved and both children are smiling.

Towards the end of the morning, the teacher plays some music quietly. The children begin to put their work away. Two children are counting a chain of beads stretched out on a long mat across the floor. As they count, they place small number cards at intervals along the chain. They are not finished, so they tidy up their work and leave it on the mat, placing their name cards beside it. They will return to this work later.

With the music in the background, one by one, the children begin walking around an elliptical line painted onto the floor. The children 'balance' on the line, carefully placing one foot in front of the other, heel to toe. Some children carry objects, such as flags, to add more challenge to the balancing exercise.

To finish the morning, the teacher and children sit together around a large, beautiful rug. They sing a song and the teacher reads a book about a wombat. An older child has just returned from an overseas trip. She uses the globe to show where she went. She tells everyone about a display she has made using things she has brought back from the trip. She has carefully written labels in her best handwriting to put on all the objects in the display. The teacher tells the children that the display has now become another work they can choose during work time. They can look at the objects, read the labels and ask questions of the child who prepared the display.

Most of the children go out to play. A small group stay in the classroom to set the table for lunch. One child brings a vase of flowers to place in the middle of the table. After lunch and play time the older children return to the classroom. The teacher uses this time to give longer, more involved lessons and to initiate larger projects, for example, in writing and reading, mathematics or science.

The appearance and routines of Montessori Children's Houses vary in response to, for example, the local culture, the resources available, local regulations, how long the school has been established or whether the programme is integrated into Whole day care. All Montessori educators past and present from anywhere in the world, however, would feel at home in the classroom we have just visited, and would recognize immediately the materials and classroom procedures. In particular, they would recognize the uninterrupted three-hour work period in which children choose for themselves what work to do, and for how long, when to have something to eat, when to have a rest and when to go outside.

### Questions for Discussion



1. What is your first impression of this Montessori morning? What questions does it raise for you?
2. What does a Montessori Children's House have in common with early childhood settings you are familiar with? In what ways is it different?

### If pedagogy is a science, what does the scientist study?

At the end of the nineteenth century, when Maria Montessori was studying to be a doctor, scientists placed a very high value on observing and measuring the phenomena they studied. When Dr Montessori first began studying children, she carried on this tradition. Her aim was to lay the foundations for a new science of pedagogy, so she devised very elaborate ways for measuring children, their height and weight, the length of their limbs, the width of their backs, shoulders and chests, the distance around their heads, wrists and ankles. She used these measurements to calculate complex ratios and rates of growth, and to classify children into different types.

Dr Montessori's measurements revealed to her that poor nutrition and hygiene stunted children's growth and disrupted their development. At the same time her observations also revealed that, while good nutrition, hygiene and safety were essential, they were not sufficient for children to thrive. Children also hunger after an environment filled with social interaction and sensory and cultural interest, an environment that encourages spontaneous activity.

In many schools in Italy in Dr Montessori's time the design of desks and benches forced children to keep completely still. Observing immobile children in order to study the life of children, Dr Montessori (1912/1964:

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14–15) decided, was no better than scientists observing mounted butterflies in order to study the life of butterflies. So Dr Montessori began observing what it was that children did when they were free to choose their own activity in environments filled with interest, without interference from the rewards and punishments imposed by adults. In other words, children's activity became the phenomenon she studied.

### More observer than teacher?

In 1913, during a teacher-training course at Ann Arbor in the United States, Dr Montessori told the trainees that 'the teacher in our method is more of an observer than a teacher'. Learning how to observe remains an important component of Montessori teacher training to this day. The importance Dr Montessori placed on observing children led the publisher of a popular American magazine at the time to describe her as 'the woman who looks at children as a naturalist looks at bees' (Rambusch, 1965: 13–14).

### Learning how to observe a classroom

When learning to observe, trainee Montessori teachers sit where they will not disturb, distract or interact with the children in any way. They record everything, including small details others might not recognize as being important. In particular, they record:

- everything that interests each child, no matter how apparently insignificant
- how long a child sustains interest in each activity they choose, whether for seconds, minutes or hours
- how a child moves, especially movement of the hand
- how many times a child repeats the same activity
- how a child interacts with others.

Trainees often begin by observing and recording, for an hour or more, everything one child does. On another day, in the same way, they observe and record two children, then, on a subsequent day, a small group of children. Eventually, with practice, they are ready to observe, in fine detail, the activity of a whole class of children.

Montessori teachers are also trained to observe and record the use children make of individual materials over a morning or over a week. In this way teachers monitor which materials continue to capture and hold children's interest and which materials and lessons might need to be changed.

### Questions for Discussion



1. In what ways do you think careful observation transforms pedagogy (sometimes called the art of teaching) into a science?
2. What aspects of children's activity do you think it is important for early childhood educators to record? Should equal emphasis be given to physical and social phenomena as well as educational ones?
3. What might you discover if you observe over time the ways children use a specific material in the classroom?
4. Would learning to observe children in the Montessori way be a useful addition to your repertoire of skills as an early childhood educator?

In the fields of child health and early childhood education, many innovators and researchers have based their studies of children on observation (Murray, 2009: 138). Observing in the Montessori way approximates the 'fluid rather than static' observation technique recommended by those advocating a sociocultural approach to observing and assessing in early childhood settings (Fleer and Surman, 2006: 145). Where the sociocultural approach foregrounds children's interaction with peers and teachers, Montessori teachers tend to place equal emphasis on children's purposeful interaction with objects that interest them. Dr Montessori, perhaps more than most, emphasized that not only is the true nature of a child revealed during freely chosen, purposeful activity generated by intense interest, but such activity is the basis of all learning.

The enduring Montessori contribution to early childhood education is a series of learning environments full of interest for young children at different ages and stages of development. Montessori teachers prepare these environments and then observe how children act and interact freely within them. Observation determines the help teachers offer children. This work is supported by:

- the conceptual framework Montessori educators use to prepare learning environments and to guide their observations
- an extensive teaching repertoire Montessori educators draw on so that just the right lesson or activity can be offered at just the right moment to any child at any point in a three-year age range and at any moment in a three-hour work period.

Key elements of the conceptual framework Montessori educators use to organize learning environments and to guide their observation of chil-

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dren's activity in these environments are introduced below. This framework underpins the distinctive Montessori orientation to child development and children's activity. Subsequent chapters introduce key elements of the Montessori teaching repertoire.

## Stages of development

Dr Montessori's observations revealed an 'infinity of variations' in the way individual children develop (Rambusch, 1965: 15). Emerging from these variations, however, she recognized common developmental patterns. Eventually, Dr Montessori (1949/1982) described human development, from birth to maturity, as a series of four six-year cycles (Table 2.1).

**Table 2.1 Stages of development**

Age range	Stage of development
0–6	Infancy (early childhood)
6–12	Childhood
12–18	Adolescence
18–24	Maturity

The early childhood and adolescence stages are turbulent, creative periods, in contrast to the stages of childhood and maturity, which, in comparison, are 'calm phases of uniform growth' (Grazzini, 1996: 213).

The boundaries between the stages are approximate only. Because Montessori educators observe children's spontaneous activity so closely, they are able to identify when individual children are in transition from one developmental stage to the next. In this way individual variation is taken into account.

Dr Montessori was careful not to represent human development as a relentless step-by-step upward progression from birth towards adulthood. Such a view of development inevitably focuses on what children are not yet able to do at each step on the pathway to adulthood, portraying them as imperfect adults with deficits to overcome. The Montessori model encourages educators to focus on what children can do at each stage of development and to appreciate the special intellectual power, social affinity and creative potential of each stage.

Montessori educators view development as a process of adaptation unfolding over time as a consequence of a child's active interaction with the envi-



ronment. Children construct themselves from what they take from their environment. They are able to do this because they are born with creative potential, manifested in the absorbent mind and the ebb and flow of sensitive periods from one developmental phase to the next. 'This is how', Dr Montessori (1949/1982:166) argues, 'differential continuity is kept going between the various human communities which have evolved each its own civilisation down the ages'.

### Questions for Discussion

Review models of child development you have encountered in your studies of early childhood.

1. How many of these models describe child development as a series of incremental steps? What other ways are there of modelling development?
2. How would you describe the model of development that underpins the curriculum mandated by your local educational authority? To what extent does this model take into account individual variation and the diverse contexts in which children grow and develop?
3. What insights and possibilities for new directions, if any, does the Montessori description of the stages of child development offer early childhood educators today?

## Multi-age groupings

Each stage of development, in the Montessori view, is made up of two three-year phases. In the first phase the special characteristics of the stage build in intensity, before gradually waning in the second phase. Each Montessori learning environment is prepared for a particular three-year phase. Three-year multi-age groupings are, therefore, a feature of the Montessori approach.

The way environments are prepared for communities of infants from birth to three depends on whether the infants are walking or not. The Montessori environment prepared for children aged from three to six is the Children's House. After the age of six children are grouped into two multi-age classrooms, the first prepared for children from 6 to 9 years and the second for children from 9 to 12. Montessori adolescent programmes are prepared for students from 12 to 15 years. After the age of 15 students are ready to participate in educational pathways that lead to post-school education and training.

### Questions for Discussion

1. What might be the advantages, and disadvantages, of grouping children and adolescents, throughout their education, in three-year multi-age settings following the Montessori model?
2. How are children grouped in early childhood settings with which you are familiar? How do these groupings benefit children's development? Do these groupings pose any problems?
3. What do you think are the advantages of multi-age groupings in early childhood settings in general? What are the challenges?

### Sensitive periods

When Dr Montessori studied children's spontaneous activity, she observed that children went through temporary periods in which they were intensely interested in very specific elements of the environment. As children begin each stage of development, new sensitivities appear and increase in intensity and focus for the first three-year phase; then, over the next three years, they gradually fall away until the sensitivities of the next stage take over (Grazzini, 1996: 212).

In the Montessori tradition these periods of heightened interest, called sensitive periods, signal the opening of windows of developmental opportunity. During these transient periods of heightened interest children tend to focus their attention on particular objects and activities, while ignoring other aspects of the environment. Each special interest is so intense that 'it leads its possessor to perform a certain series of actions ... with an outpouring of energy incredible to us' (Montessori, 1949/1982: 44).

When, in the wake of a sensitive period, heightened interest leads a child to focus on an aspect of the environment, the spontaneous activity that followed was observed by Dr Montessori to involve a great deal of effort. Moreover, the child becomes completely absorbed in the activity. If children are left free to continue this activity for as long as they want, when they are finished, rather than being tired, they seem refreshed, calm and happy. Where other observers might describe children's activity of this type as play, in the Montessori tradition it is called children's work.

When a new sensitivity emerges, if children are to construct the corresponding 'function' in an optimal way, they need to find something in their environment to be the focus of their interest and activity. If the envi-

ronment does not enable a young child to exploit a developmental opportunity signalled by a sensitive period, the opportunity may be lost and the child may find it much more difficult to achieve that same developmental step at a later time.

Montessori educators aim to prepare environments which match the interests of children during sensitive periods, and which, therefore, stimulate children's activity at times when their potential to construct the corresponding achievement, easily and spontaneously, is at its peak.

Today the phenomenon of developmental sensitive periods in infancy and early childhood is being re-visited by neuroscientists (OECD, 2007). Research appears to confirm that such periods exist, but the implications for early childhood education continue to be debated. Montessori educators would argue that tailoring a learning environment to a developmental stage and observing closely a child's freely chosen activity within that environment continues to be the best means for making judgements about how to meet an individual child's developmental needs, sensitivities and interests.

## Infancy: the formative period

Infancy, the period from birth to about six years of age, is, in the Montessori tradition, the developmental period of greatest significance. During this time helpless, newborn infants transform themselves into walking, talking children, adapted to their particular place in the world and time in history. In order to help parents and educators gain a deeper insight into this extraordinary period of transformation, Dr Montessori used two powerful metaphors: the psychic embryo and the absorbent mind.

### The psychic embryo

The 'psychic embryo' is the metaphor used by Dr Montessori (1949/1982: 52–72) to describe the post-natal period. Just as an embryo needs a special, secure environment to 'construct' each of the organs that will later function to sustain life after birth, newborns need a loving, secure environment to construct each psycho-social 'organ' they will later need in order to function in the social and intellectual life of the human community into which they are born. The development of a child's eyes and ears before birth, for example, is matched by the development of a child's visual and aural perceptions in the period immediately after birth. How an individual child's psycho-social functions develop depends on the interaction between the child's remarkable ability to learn and remember

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and the material and social environment provided by the child's carers and community. It is from resources available in the environment that children construct themselves.

### The absorbent mind

The unique and powerful way young children learn and remember is captured in Dr Montessori's metaphor, the 'absorbent mind'. Young children, she argues, 'absorb' impressions from the environment, and these impressions form the actual fabric of the mind and intellect under construction. What is more, young children learn and remember without knowing they are doing it 'simply as a result of living, without any need for more effort than is required to eat or breathe!' (Montessori, 1949/1982: 22). The absorbent mind enables children to adapt to the unique time and place into which they are born.

### The first phase of infancy: from birth to age three

The sensitive periods of the first three years of life correspond to the stellar achievements of this age, learning to walk and learning to talk. In the Montessori tradition these two achievements are closely intertwined. In fact, a distinctive feature of the Montessori approach is the importance given to the role of movement in the construction of the intellect. This is the focus of the next chapter.

The sensitive periods that emerge during the first three years of life are outlined in Table 2.2.

**Table 2.2 Sensitive periods in the first three years of life**

Age range	Sensitive period
0–3 (peak at 3)	a strong urge to use all the senses to explore the world
0–3	an intense interest in spoken language
0–3 (peak at 2)	a love of order and routine
2–3	an interest in precise controlled movement
2½–3½	a fascination with very small things

The sensitive periods of this phase ebb and flow. The love of order and routine, for example, peaks at about the age of two when the need to orient the self in the world is at its most intense. A toddler's tantrum is interpreted by Montessori educators as a response to something perceived to be out of place or a familiar routine disrupted, in other words, an assault on the sen-

sitive period for order. Toddler tantrums illustrate just how intensely young children experience this sensitive period when it is at its peak.

During her lifetime Dr Montessori outlined ideas for supporting the development of infants from birth to three years of age. Today there are Montessori Assistants to Infancy who help parents prepare for a new baby. Montessori Assistants to Infancy also prepare for environments are also infants and toddlers in day care, and for toddlers accompanied by a parent. Infant communities, as these environments are called, are secure and nurturing places filled with opportunities for independent activity.

## The second phase of infancy: The Children's House

While babies and toddlers effortlessly and unconsciously absorb myriad impressions from their environment, from about the age of three the child is 'always playing with something ... working out, and making conscious something that his unconscious mind has earlier absorbed' (Montessori, 1949/1982: 23). From the age of three children bring their understanding of the world to consciousness through their own activity, especially through activity with their hands. During this period the gradually waning sensitive periods of infancy evolve in the ways outlined in Table 2.3.

**Table 2.3 Sensitive periods in the second phase of infancy**

Age range	Sensitive period
3–4	successive interest in specific types of sensory exploration, one sense at a time
4–5	an urge to refine sensory perception and discrimination
3½– 6	an interest in the customs of their social group
3½–5	an interest in writing
4–6	an interest in numbers and counting
4½–6	an emerging interest in reading

Children of this age are ready to take their first steps beyond the home and family into the wider society. The Montessori environment prepared for these children, the Children's House, is sometimes described as a society in embryo. The materials in the Children's House are offered as motives for activity through which children refine and extend their control of sensory perception, movement and language, the functions they created from scratch in the first three years of life. Through this activity, children learn to be independent in practical, everyday ways.

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The Children's House was the first learning environment Dr Montessori prepared, and it remains central to the Montessori early childhood educational programme. Dr Montessori lived through the terrible events that afflicted European society in the first half of the twentieth century. The solution to society's ills, in her opinion, lay with young children aged from three to six. She argued that quality early childhood education is the best way to reform society and to build a peaceful world (Montessori 1943/1971; 1946; 1949/1982: 58).

### Children's activity: is it play or work?

Children's freely chosen activity is described by Montessori educators as their work. The term 'work' suggests an arduous activity undertaken to produce some kind of final product, so it can seem out of place in our era when play, not work, is recognized as 'the foundation for all learning' in early childhood (Waller and Swann, 2009: 40). If children in our time are free to develop through play, it is in no small part thanks to the work of social reformers such as Maria Montessori, who, at the turn of the twentieth century, campaigned for the abolition of child labour. It is worth exploring, then, what exactly Dr Montessori meant when she described the spontaneous activity of children as their work.

Dr Montessori was very clear about activity she did not think was children's work. For example, she was appalled by the 'sorry spectacle' of the schoolrooms which emerged during the Industrial Revolution and which continued to blight the lives of countless young children well into the twentieth century. In these schoolrooms large groups of children were 'condemned', in her words, to sit in dirty rooms on hard benches, listening to the teacher for long periods of time. In Dr Montessori's view, furthermore, the 'prizes and punishments' teachers used to make children pay attention to 'barren and meaningless knowledge' resulted in 'unnatural' and 'forced' effort (Montessori 1912/1964: 14–15). This, argued Dr Montessori (*ibid.*: 21), was a form of 'slavery' from which children needed to be liberated.

The activity Montessori educators call children's work is, therefore, certainly not enforced activity. It is in fact a type of activity many adult observers would call play, but with two distinctive features (Montessori, 1949/1982: 156):

- It involves a great deal of purposeful effort and concentration.
- It is oriented towards future achievements.

The use of the word 'work' to describe this type of activity is a mark of the respect it receives in Montessori schools. As much as possible, Montessori educators avoid anything that might distract or disrupt a working child because the child's effort and concentration are understood to be responses to the heightened interest of a sensitive period and, thus, a sign of development in progress. Montessori educators believe that the term 'work' gives the activity through which children construct the adults of the future the dignity it deserves. This activity, after all, can be thought of as the most fundamental contribution any group makes to society (Montessori, 1918/1965b: 9).

### Questions for Discussion

1. What do adults typically see when they observe young children's spontaneous activity?
2. What is the adult's role in relation to this activity?
3. What prejudices might distort an adult's observation of children's activity? What impact might such distortion have on the adult's interaction with children in an early childhood setting?

## The normal state of childhood

When children are engaged, by choice, in developmental work, this is considered, in the Montessori tradition, to be the 'normal' state of childhood. When children are overly timid, passive, clingy, nervous or withdrawn or when children are overly aggressive, destructive or possessive, Montessori educators interpret these behaviours as adaptations children have made in order to accommodate developmental obstacles in the physical or social environment. The solution, from the Montessori point of view, is to remove the obstacles and to allow children to be free to turn their attention to things that interest them, letting them concentrate on the resulting activity for as long as they like.

When a child's behaviour is unsafe, disruptive or distressing to themselves or others, Montessori educators intervene immediately, distancing the child from the source of the problem and guiding the child towards something they know from observation will capture the child's interest and attention, even if, at first, that interest and attention are only fleeting.

## Activities



Observe children at play in a range of settings, for example, at home, shopping, at the park or at an early childhood centre. If the play is the type Montessori educators describe as children's work, use the following questions to reflect on your observations:

- What captured the child's interest?
- What activity did this interest generate?
- How long did the child continue the activity?
- Was the child interrupted or distracted? If yes, how did the child react?
- If the child was free to finish the activity in his or her own time without interruption, what did the child do after finishing?

If the play is a type a Montessori educator would not describe as children's work, use the following questions to reflect on your observations:

- What are the features of this type of play?
- Did you observe behaviour that signalled the child was facing a developmental obstacle? If so, how would you describe the obstacle and the child's adaptation to that obstacle? If it were possible, how might you adjust the child's environment to remove or ameliorate this obstacle?

## Creativity and imagination in early childhood

The activity Montessori educators interpret as work involves children using their hands to interact with real things in the environment. The emphasis on real things draws attention to a claim sometimes made about Montessori education, that the Montessori approach restricts children's creativity and imagination. This claim deserves a closer look.

In the century since the first Children's House, the Montessori approach to education has been criticized from time to time for not letting children engage in creative and imaginative play. This is clearly a misconception, given the high value Dr Montessori placed on children being free to choose their own activity, activity adults often interpret as play. One reason for this misconception, however, may be the fact that Montessori classrooms do not have a lot of toys.

There were toys in the first Children's House in the slums of Rome, many of them expensive, elaborate toys provided by wealthy benefactors. Dr Montessori observed, however, that, when left to their own devices, the children tended to ignore the toys and chose instead to work with 'real



things'. Over the years, her observations confirmed this trend, and toys ceased to be a feature of Montessori early childhood education (Montessori, 1936/1983: 130).

Many Montessori classrooms today include a limited range of carefully selected toys, for example, plain building blocks. The Montessori materials also share many of the characteristics of toys, although they are different from toys in important ways, as we will see in the following chapters. What are not found in Montessori classrooms, however, are toys based on distorted representations of reality, representations often referred to as fantasy. Excluding fantasy from early childhood opens the Montessori approach to the accusation that it stifles children's creativity and imagination. In fact, Montessori educators argue the opposite is true. They argue that the best way to nurture children's creativity and imagination is to bring them into contact with reality in meaningful and rewarding ways.

As with most Montessori principles, the emphasis placed on reality emerged from observing what interests children most. Just as children in the first Children's Houses found real things more interesting than toys, Dr Montessori observed that, more than listening to fairy tales, children like learning about the marvels of the real world, such as a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, or the parts of a plant.

In Dr Montessori's time fantasy and play were often used as a means of control. Children were sent away to play by adults who wanted to be rid of them and fantasy was used to terrify children into obedience or submission (Mario Montessori, 1965: x). Furthermore, because of her background in psychiatry, Dr Montessori interpreted living in a fantasy world disconnected from reality as a symptom of illness, not as a manifestation of creativity or imagination. The fantasy worlds offered to children in Dr Montessori's time, as in ours, are the products of adult imaginations. Such fantasy, in the Montessori view, risks depriving young children of opportunities to create their own responses to the real world, which, for a young child, is the source of novelty and wonder beyond all others.

Although Montessori early childhood educators turn away from toys and fantasy, creativity is central to their work. In the Montessori view, the period of the absorbent mind from birth to about six is a period of creativity second to none because children are literally creating themselves out of everything they absorb from the environment. Once children are six, imaginative story-telling becomes a catalyst for learning in Montessori classrooms.

### Questions for Discussion



1. What, in your opinion, is the role of creativity and imagination in early childhood? How does this compare with the Montessori attitude to fantasy-based toys and stories in early childhood settings?
2. How do Montessori's ideas about the absorbent mind, imagination and creativity resonate in today's world, in which young children can be bombarded with fantasy-based cartoons, movies and picture books, as well as toys and food products derived from these?
3. Can you think of contemporary contexts in which play and fantasy are used by adults to control young children? How is this achieved? Is the outcome positive or negative in your opinion?

## The first phase of childhood: children aged from 6 to 12

The 'real' world for children who work and play in the Children's House is their immediate surroundings, all the things they can hear, see and touch. From about the age of six, in the Montessori view, the special intelligence of early childhood, the absorbent mind, begins to make way for a different kind of learning and remembering, one based on reasoning, abstraction and the imagination. Children increasingly exercise their imagination, ask questions, research and problem-solve in order to explore the wider world, far beyond the immediate here-and-now accessible to the senses. The sensitive periods of this age include:

- a heightened interest in being part of a social group
- a fascination with different fields of knowledge
- an urge to investigate ethics and morality and to construct a social conscience.

Children of this age are able to handle abstract concepts, including mathematical and scientific concepts, so they begin to 'let go' the concrete material they used in the Children's House, although this process may take a few years.

In the Montessori view, 'there is no limit' to what children between the ages of six and twelve can explore, 'if the opportunities are there and the conditions are favourable' (Grazzini, 1996: 216–217). Children of this age in Montessori schools are expected to meet the requirements of the local education authorities, but after that they were free to pursue independent

study and exploration. As a result, twelve-year old children completing the Montessori programme have often covered material not usually studied until secondary school in other educational settings.

### Summary

This chapter began with a visit to Montessori Children's House. It then explored the place of observation in Montessori practice. Finally, the chapter introduced key features of the conceptual framework used by Montessori educators when they prepare learning environments and observe children's activity. These features include:

- stages of development
- sensitive periods
- children's activity as developmental work
- the normal state of childhood.

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What preparation is needed if children are to be free to meet their own needs and follow their own interests in an early childhood setting?
2. How does our view of childhood shift if we think of children as workers constructing the adults of the future?
3. If children are workers constructing the future, what is the social role of early childhood education?