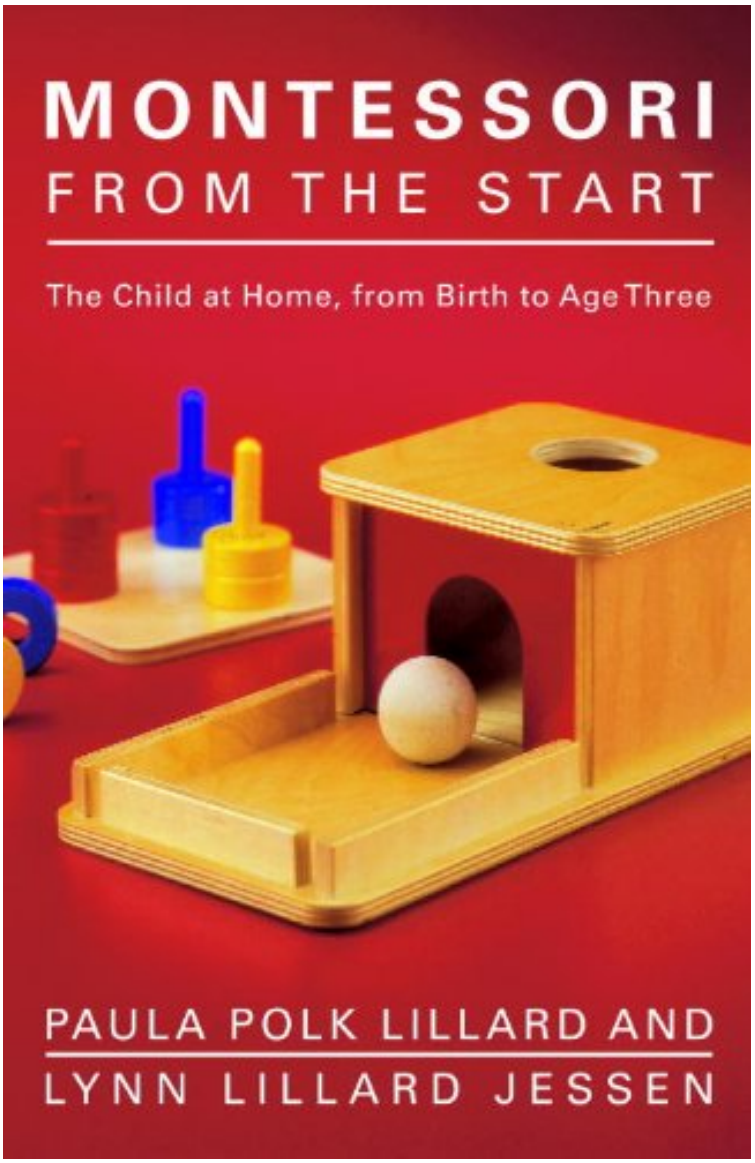
Montessori from the Start: The Child at Home, from Birth to Age Three



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurWhat can parents do to help their youngest children in their task of self-formation? How does the Montessori method of hands-on learning and self-discovery relate to the youngest infants? This authoritative and accessible book answers these and many other questions. Based on Dr. Maria Montessori's instructions for raising infants, its comprehensive exploration of the first three years incorporates the furnishings and tools she created for the care and comfort of babies. From the design of the baby's bedroom to the child-sized kitchen table, from diet and food preparation to clothing and movement,

the authors provide guidance for the establishment of a beautiful and serviceable environment for babies and very young children. They introduce concepts and tasks, taking into account childrens' "sensitive periods" for learning such skills as dressing themselves, food preparation, and toilet training. Brimming with anecdote and encouragement, and written in a clear, engaging style, Montessori from the Start is a practical and useful guide to raising calm, competent, and confident children.ExtraitChapter OneThe Completion of the Human BeingBefore we begin the chapters of practical detail that form the body of this book, it is important to visit two more areas of thought about the formation of human beings. If we are goingto help the human infant in the monumental task of self-completion, we need to understand where the energy for self-construction and positive response to life comes from in human beings. How do we encourage enthusiasm and interaction with the environment? How are they discouraged? Secondly, if we are going to define the human infant as incomplete at birth, we need to outline the specific formation that is necessary for the child to become a complete human being. Both of these topics come to light through an awareness of the differences between human beings and all other species.We have said that the human infant is incomplete at birth. It is our role as adults to assist our children in the formidable task of finishing their own formation as human beings. Only in this way can our children become fully formed adults and reach the potential which they are capable of from birth. The degree of this challenge for both the adult human being and the human child sets humans apart from all other species. It is true that the young of some animals, specifically mammals, are born in an immature state. However, their task is largely pre-programmed by their genes, and their instincts follow a narrowly limited path of development. Given the care required by creation's plan for their species, they only need time to grow bigger and mature into adulthood. They pay a price for the predetermined nature of their existence, however. They have limited versatility in their adaptation to their environment. For example, the foal and calf are destined to eat grasses and grains; the tiger and lion cub, small mammals. The ways in which they meet other challenges of existence are programmed as well: their fur keeps them warm, horns and sharp teeth defend them, swift legs carry them from danger, and so forth.The human child, on the other hand, is born with no set pattern of instinctive behavior to meet its fundamental needs for survival; its options are limitless. No predetermined response limits our possibilities in devising the means for meeting our fundamental needs for food, shelter, clothing, transportation, and defense. Instead of the specific instructions of instincts, we are given propensities to certain actions. Although we are born naked and defenseless without a means for shelter and with no instinctual knowledge of what is safe for us to eat, through these propensities we have more than survived; our behavioral tendencies account for the development of all the varied civilizations throughout the ages from prehistoric peoples to the modern era of telecommunications. Montessori offered a description of these propensities to help us understand how children respond to the environment in which they are born. She did not intend for any list of behaviors to be limited or necessarily definitive. Each of us could no doubt come up with a different list of our own. Nevertheless, the following ideas can serve as a general guide. For better comprehension and recall, we have combined them into four groupings.The first grouping involves answering the question, what is out there? It includes exploration, orientation, and order. Human beings set out to explore the surrounding environment and discover its possibilities. When we do this, however, we have to be able to find the way back to our starting place. Hence the human action of orientation and order is necessary. We need to build a mental map of our surroundings and an internal sense of direction, distance, time, and sequence. Our expression in language and organization in thought are based on this ability to recognize and use order in our lives. When these tendencies toward orientation and order are disrupted-as in changing geographic or emotional environments-we experience disorientation and stress. Similarly, if we are restrained from exploring our world either physically or intellectually, we tend to become bored, even depressed.A second grouping helps us deal with the results of our explorations: what might I do with what is there? Our propensity to abstract thought and our imaginations allow us to make new creations from what we find and see around us. Everything that we have in our modern lives of comfort and ease, and every vision of nobility, courage, and love, came from our innate tendency to imagine what is not yet before us. Hence, early humans watched animals use their hooves to dig and their horns to protect, and they devised tools and weapons of defense for human use. Through the ages, acts of human bravery and sacrifice were recounted to the young, and new generations dreamed of the heroic deeds and accomplishments that they in turn would contribute to society.The third grouping is the largest and involves the crucial transition from dream to reality: how can I carry out my abstract ideas? To make this leap, human beings are given five key behaviors: manipulation, exactness, repetition, control of error, and perfection. To make the clothing fit, the house shelter, the boat

sail, and the space shuttle soar required every one of these human tendencies during its development. In the world of ideas, communism and fascism were tried through these behaviors, and their results found wanting, even as democracies with dreams of liberty and justice for all became the goal in many parts of the world, and are now continually reevaluated.The last grouping consists of a single tendency. However, it can fairly be called the key to all the rest, for it involves a spiritual gift: the gift of ourselves freely given to others. This behavior answers the question, how can I tell others about what I have done? We call it communication. Without it, each new generation would have to rediscover all knowledge and wisdom of the past. With it, we stand on the shoulders of giants and can go forward in each decade to new heights in every field of human endeavor.Because of the new global world of telecommunications, the thoughts and accomplishments of all human beings, past and present, are accessible to a degree that no one could have envisioned in times past. The opportunities are vast. Yet, the challenges are exponentially greater as well. How can we still the constant prattle and noise that surround us in our technological world, and find time and opportunity for the most meaningful communication of all: the intimacy of love, understanding and respect of one human being for another in the home, the school, the workplace, in nature, our places of worship, and in our marriages.All of these behavioral tendencies-exploration, orientation, order, abstraction, imagination, manipulation, exactness, repetition, control of error, perfection, and communication-operate throughout our lives. However, they manifest themselves differently as we grow older. Exploration for a seven-month-old baby, a seven-year-old child, a seventeen-year-old adolescent, and a seventy-year-old senior citizen is demonstrated through different expressions. The phenomenon of exploration itself, however, remains a constant human behavior if we live fully from birth to death. Because our behavioral tendencies operate throughout our lives, to the extent that they are valid and universal to the human experience, each of us will recognize them in ourselves. We need only to look for them in our daily behavior.Human infants use the stages of their development referred to in the Introduction to help them in their task of self-formation. Specifically, in the first plane of development, they make use of their absorbent minds to incorporate the environment around them and of the Sensitive Periods to develop specific abilities such as walking and talking. In later developmental stages, they respond based on certain psychological characteristics that help them to develop their capacities.It is these behavioral tendencies-operative from birth and continuing into the later planes of formation, and forming a constant connection with the environment-that will enable the child to finally become a fully functioning adult human being. They supply the energy and enthusiasm for the essential, continuous relationship with the environment throughout our lives. When they are fully operative in our everyday activities, whatever our age, we experience joy and a sense of being fully alive. To the extent that they are missing from our daily lives, we feel listless and unenthusiastic.The energy of our response to life is directly related, then, to how our environment encourages and allows for the human tendencies in our everyday life. It follows that children need more than opportunity to respond to the environment; they will need encouragement. In the following chapters, we discuss ways to design the home environment for the child so that the human tendencies are actively encouraged. You will note that our suggestions are often at odds with the current fad or media hype. For example, psychologists today discuss the need for "stimulation" in the child's environment. The problem with this term is that it is vague. With the best of intentions, parents respond in excess and children are harmed more than they are helped. As you will see in later chapters, a simple but well-thought-out plan, geared to specific formation of the child at designated age levels, is the most helpful approach.Nor should we forget that the mission of human development is also the basis for creating homes for adults, too. In order to develop our humanity, we must nurture the human tendencies in all of us. Our homes also should reflect adult needs for exploration, orientation, order, imagination, exactness, repetition, control of error, manipulation, perfection, and communication. All of these behavioral tendencies are clearly visible through, for example, music, art, and other forms of spiritual expression, which indicate that their rightful place is in our homes. The mission of developing the home environment has belonged primarily to women in past civilizations. Whoever may now assume this responsibility, the role of homemaker remains essential to human destiny. Today, althuogh some of us enjoy the greatest affluence the world has ever known, we find that developing a home environment that serves the human spirit, a home of beauty, order, and simplicity, remains a very challenging task.We now turn to the child we have referred to as "incomplete" at birth. In some ways, this lack of completion is shared with other mammals when they are born. In varying degrees, they also require adult-nurturing for a period of time before they become fully functioning adults. None, however, need the assistance of adults in their group for nearly a quarter of a century. This is the span of time Montessori identified as necessary for complete adult formation in the

human being. Her conclusion is supported by recent scientific research demonstrating that the foundational neural structures in the frontal lobes of the human brain are not completed until approximately age twenty-four. It is in the frontal lobes that our most advanced reasoning and knowledge reside, including wisdom.What must the human child achieve in order to become a complete human being? The development of the brain through sensorial awareness and interaction with the immediate envir-onment is the beginning of the child's journey. This development is individual to each child; no two brains are alike. In this sense, we are all "originals." In fact, the brain that each human being builds is so different, it is amazing that we can understand and communicate with each other at all. We do, however-against huge statistical odds.*The outward manifestations of brain development are the child's self-formation as an individual of growing independence, coordinated movement, language, and a developed will. In order to become a complete human being, the child has to advance in all of these areas beginning with the first days of life.For the young of the animal species, independence as soon as possible is essential as a matter of physical survival. For the human child, independence, the ability to do things on one's own, is most important for its psychological component; it is the path to confidence and self-assurance. The infant is born as one who must be served. Gradually, the child is helped to take care of basic actions independently and, finally, to serve others. To grow in confidence in this process of forming independence, the adult has to prepare just the right amount of challenge for the child to face. Even adults lose confidence when they find themselves overwhelmed by situations where they have no chance of success. Yet, we routinely put children in this position by not thinking through simple acts of everyday life and then finding the best means for a child of that age to do them independently.Everything we will describe to you in subsequent chapters will help the child to ever-increasing independence of action and therefore to the ability to help others who are less capable because they are either younger or otherwise less developed. Montessori outlined environments leading to the child's independent functioning at school as well as at home, thereby preparing the child for growing intellectual independence as well. The comfortable self-possession of students from a quality Montessori school is the attribute most often remarked upon in their assessment by other educators and professionals.The significance of independence for the human child then is the view that it gives of the self. In Montessori education, self-evaluation is a function of realistic achievement through in-dependent action. Adults cannot give children confidence and self-regard through external praise and evaluation; those come as the result of the child's own efforts. An infant first explores an object, perhaps a carrot, with the senses of touch, sight, and smell. If the environment is properly prepared for her, at fifteen months of age, she can wash it with a small vegetable brush. By eighteen months, a child can use a vegetable peeler to peel one slice of carrot skin at a time and then discard it in a dish. She can use a small cleaver, with a filed blade so that it is not overly sharp, to cut pieces of the peeled carrot for eating or serving at family dinner. By five years old, a child can prepare her own lunch for school from preselected items and with a minimum of adult assistance. From such independent accomplishments come the child's sense of self-mastery and resulting self-confidence. (Cautionary note: Adults must always be in constant attendance or monitor closely when such objects are used.)This independence in the child is not to help make life easier for the adult. In fact, at least initially, helping children to establish independence requires a great deal of effort and thought on the adults' part. Montessori encourages us to go to this trouble for children so that they will experience the confidence that comes from not having to wait for someone else to do what is needed. It is not to help adults, then, that we help children to become independent in daily acts; it is to help children.Revue de presseA major and timely contribution to the early childhood yearsanecdotal, rich in insight and experience, practical and useful. This informed, careful, and intelligent response to the unfolding of personality will peak parents interest as they learn how to establish healthy, enjoyable, and sustaining relationships with their children. A must for parents-to-be, nannies, and care-givers. Virginia McHugh Goodwin, Executive Director, Association Montessori International, U.S.A.