

# The Infant as a Human Being

by Herbert Ratner, M.D.

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The late great Dr. Ratner was editor of Child and Family.*

**I think that at one point we all have a hard time fully appreciating Dr. Montessori – this is when she insists that her “method” begins for the child at birth.** As Americans we are prone to take a technological approach to our children: we put them on the assembly line of preschool education and expect to take them off the line 18 years later with a baccalaureate. But when Montessori thought and talked about the child, she had in mind the infant born into a culture which accepted and respected nature’s overall plan. In her culture the baby had a 99.4 percent chance of being breastfed. When Montessori was a young woman, the baby was born into a loving human environment – the home. Today the child comes forth in the coldness of the delivery room of the hospital to be promptly shunted off to the hospital mass nursery – which resembles a concentration camp for displaced persons. The mass nursery was the invention of an architect more interested in efficiency and an economic usage of space than in the welfare of the newborn. It was not the brainchild of a physician, since early in the century physicians viewed mother and infant as an inseparable couplet.

In this century of progress we have reduced infant mortality and have eliminated or controlled many bodily diseases. But as fast as we have progressed with the physical growth of the child, we have retrogressed in the far more important area of psychic growth. Because of our concentration on somatic medicine we now have a taller and more bodily healthy population, but this gain has been daily offset by the simultaneous production of more people with mental illness and emotional problems. With a dim realization that these problems have their root in childhood, parents have gotten caught up in many movements and activities that will “do something for the child.” Unfortunately, most of these are programmed to permit parents to get away from the home and away from the child.

I mention this not to criticize the Montessori movement (I am, in fact, an ardent admirer of Maria Montessori) but to point out the pitfalls which movements like this face. In this age, much of our motivation and energy leading to involvement in movements and organizations stem from escapism from the obligations of parenthood and from underlying anxieties over responsibilities. Hopefully, some of these movements will have a steadying influence and will restore a sufficiency of mental health so that our children will not suffer from the same shortcomings and anxieties as their parents. This applies particularly to the Montessori movement, but only to the extent that it recognizes the primacy and the irreplaceability to the family in the life of the child, and only to the extent that it does not restrict its concept of Montessori to several scheduled hours of exposure to Montessori materials five mornings a week.

I often see the disappointing results in children when parents are no more than faddist enthusiasts of Montessori, more interested in their new parental image and stylish dedication to Montessori than they are in the persistent giving of themselves to their children. **In your own preoccupation with the Montessori movement, don’t allow yourself to view the child in other than a proper perspective – the perspective of the total child.** Otherwise he will suffer the results of a Montessori experience that did not take, and the Montessori movement will be viewed as another one of those pretentious programs rich in promise but poor in performance. Accordingly, be sure that your interest in this exceptionally worthwhile movement is

based upon sound foundations, and not, as so often the case, on an unhealthy preoccupation with intellectual development.

Twenty or thirty years ago, when mothers promenaded down the street with their baby carriages, they asked one another, "What did your baby eat today?" (This perhaps in reference to a six-week-old.) The answers went something like this: "My baby now eats chicken!" with the other responding exultantly, "My child eats steak!" To these mothers the rapidity with which an infant could add adult foods to the diet was the measure of maturity. Now, I am afraid, when the Montessori mothers query one another about the child's development, the questions may take this form: "How far along the alphabet is your child now?" or "What words can your baby write?" Though intellectual development is of tremendous importance, emotional development is even more important. If your vision of Montessori loses focus by lopsided emphasis on the academic aspect, you are headed for trouble. Our greatest problem today is the emotional immaturity and insecurity of adults – difficulties which have their genesis in childhood.

It is significant that many parents become attracted to the Montessori movement because they are having difficulties in being parents. Their insecurities and anxieties concerning their capacity for unselfish love of their children lead them to seek external signs proving to the world that they do indeed love their children. Thus the intensity with which they try to get the child into a Montessori school.

**I need not tell you what a great person Dr. Montessori was. The question is this: Are you willing to accept her teaching? Or do you choose from her teaching only those items that have a special appeal to you but disregard tenets which may be central to her approach?** To me Montessori in many ways is greater than Freud. She is the forerunner of the mental health movement throughout the world, though mental hygienists have yet to grasp her message.

In this country, we tend to look upon the newborn as a slightly more complicated Thumbelina doll. Our attention is taken up by the mechanics of keeping babies dry, of getting food into their mouths, and of getting them to sleep. We have gotten into the habit of considering the baby's sleep as the great liberator for the parent. When the day comes that we have a deep-freeze to accommodate a baby, there will be some who will be more than happy to cache the child out of the way until he is old enough to enter a Montessori classroom or kindergarten.

It has been my professional experience that getting the child off to sleep is one of the great preoccupations of the American parent. Immature parents seek the satisfaction of their own adult desires rather than attending to the child's needs. A mother may say, "I don't understand why my baby always gets up at 4 a.m. to break into our sleep." By drawing her out, you may discover that she gets the child to bed at p.m. because she wants a long, free evening to herself. Actually, most of the time we permit ourselves to believe that what we are doing is for the good of the child. Some candid examination of motives, however, will quickly show that for the most part what we do is more for our own benefit than for the child's.

For a while I flirted with the notion of reading to you twenty to thirty pages of the secret of childhood and commenting on it. This book contains tremendous insights. Dr. Montessori's overall comprehension of the child made it possible for her to assimilate much important work on the genesis of emotional problems. The problem of mental illness in this country is overwhelming. The fact is that of the millions of healthy normal babies that nature turns over to us each year, one out of ten will enter a mental institution sometime during the course of his life. We have yet to fully grasp what Montessori knew: that nature's norms should be our guide and that deviations from nature's script get us in trouble. We will never have enough psychiatrists, paramedical help,

nurses, clinics, and institutes to take care of people's illnesses. Our hope rests in such movements as the natural childbirth associations, which are trying to maintain natural deliveries for normal cases, restricting pathological deliveries to pathological cases, and La Leche League, which is helping mothers rediscover the simplicity and the joys of breastfeeding. The former have as their goal the delivery of a wide-awake baby to the arms of a wide-awake mother, and the latter has as its goal the initiation of a lasting bond between them. Dr. Montessori is very eloquent upon the newborn infant's need to get into the mother's loving arms and to be kept out of the hands of doctors and nurses and spared the inequities of hospital technologies.

The mental illness problem will only be solved by parent's growth as human beings. **In the parent-infant relationship it is the parents who need to learn what they must do, how they must grow. The baby is born knowing where he wants to go and how to grow and, given half a chance, will gain the goal – nature is resilient, and the child can accommodate to a certain amount of bumbling on the part of his parents.** But adults- hopefully the maturing adults in process- have to learn to become parents through the daily exercise of the art of parenting. This learning centers on their total dedication to the needs of an infant totally dependant on them.

There seems to be a rule of nature. God is going to exact a certain measure of time from you as a parent. **An old Jewish proverb goes something like this: "If you don't get up for your crying child when young, you will be getting up for your crying child when old."** This is to say that if you don't want to give yourself to the child when he needs you and is most dependant on you, you will end up having to give time to him when he is of an age to be happily self-reliant but instead finds himself in difficulties he can't cope with by himself. There is a kind of justice he can't cope with by himself. There is a kind of justice built into nature that cannot be avoided. When nature's norms are interfered with, she invariably retaliates.

**The baby's fundamental need – precisely because he is a human being- is to be loved.** And love centers about a one-to-one relationship. This is why babies don't come in litters, but come one at a time. **But it takes a mature person to love a baby, because love takes time, love takes patience, love takes fortitude, love even requires a certain kind of humility: to love another better than one's self.** The baby needs time to be understood: he needs time in everything he does. It is a basic Montessori principle that the preschool child has to establish his own pace in doing things so that everything has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

**The emotional framework in which the child lives does more for him than the intellectual framework. The emotional formation of the child centers about those who are important to him. Here the mother is the cardinal figure.** It doesn't make any difference how competent the teacher is. If the child is uncertain of the mother as the one most important person in his life, he can't function well. Similarly, a mother has difficulty functioning well if she does not have the security of knowing that her husband really cares for her and appreciates her. Analogies are often the simplest way of going from the known to the unknown. Perhaps the best way to understand your child is to put yourself in the infant's place analogically by likening your feelings toward your husband to your infant's feelings toward you. Do not do unto your child, what you do not want your husband to do unto you. I don't think most women could, without crying, tolerate a husband who yelled at them. Yet how often they yell at their children, how often their faces register an expression of hatred.

Your happiness is going to come out of your long span of parenthood. The latter years of life are just as long as the early years of parenthood. And when you enter those years, you will receive the same rewards you gave your children, now adults, in their childhood. You don't receive of

those rewards unless you gave of yourself when your growing children needed you. For instance, you can't possibly make out well in life if you think of the house as not belonging to the children as well as to yourself, of the living room as not being for them but only for you and your husband and adult guests. You cannot think of your children as people who are constantly threatening, imposing, encroaching on all of your material possessions – your new lamp, your clean sheets, your clean upholstery, your good dishes. You are much better off in this relationship of love to think less about your rights and more about your duties – as you would want your husband to do in relation to you.

In *The Secret of Childhood* Montessori's notion about sleep and the child is just beautiful. She describes cribs and playpens as prisons with bars. She suggests that a bed for the child should just be a little off the floor so that the preschool child can climb into it when tired and out of it when rested. This would be revolutionary in the American home. The whole notion of this approach is ordered and dedicated to the needs of the child. **Dr. Montessori feels that orderliness is built into the infant – an orderliness that is connatural with nature's intended prepared environment, the mammalian mother.** When the baby has the urge to suck, there is a breast to suck on. When the baby has hunger, milk comes out of the breast. When the baby looks up from the breast, a smiling face shines upon him. When the infant is cold, a pair of loving arms envelops him with love. When wet, he is changed. When he cries, somebody picks him up and comforts him. This is a wonderful, orderly world. For every question of need, there is a responsive answer. This natural orderliness only ends up in chaos nowadays because, from the moment of birth, the baby is presented with a disorderly world.

George Bernanos, the famous French intellectual, said, "Hell is the absence of love." I think that the modern preschool child goes through much hell. The baby starts life by being dedicated to the proposition that he or she wants to grow up. More often than not the parent does everything possible to prevent him. Yet preventing the baby from growing up is hard work. Someone once said, "It takes years of hard work to turn out a juvenile delinquent."

**Nature goes out of her way to give each human infant a private tutor.** We go out of our way to develop a litter situation: the mass nursery, as if it were more appropriate for the newborn to be raised in litters like kittens and puppies; the day-care center for the older child. If we are not careful, the Montessori system, under the guise of progress, will also reach down to rob the struggling toddler of his private tutor and place him in neutral, nondiscriminatory, impartial but foreign, antipathetic environment of litter life.

Yet a private tutor is essential to the preschool child from infancy on. **The mother has been ordained by nature to be that tutor. She is the prime educator. And her prime function is to teach her child how to be loved and then how to love. The most important educational need of the child is to feel himself worthy of love and a worthy dispenser of love. If infants learn what love is, they can go through life with sanity and happiness.**

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A tribute to Dr. Herbert Ratner <http://www.lalecheleague.org>