

# FIRST OBSERVE

## Meeting the needs of Children from Birth to 3

By Susan Tracy

*“Observation is my method. I will not teach it to you. You will struggle to learn it.”*

*Maria Montessori  
From a 1912 speech*

Observation is the foundation of the Montessori method. Maria Montessori herself developed materials and her approach through her observations to children. Her ideas about education were revolutionary because she had the courage to observe what was really happening with children rather than going along with the dominant theories of her time.

My mentors, Carolina Gomez del Valle and Sonja Koenig, were insistent that I observe. Most of what I share in this article I credit to them.

As Montessorians, we continue Montessori’s tradition of observation. I work with both parents and educators encouraging them to begin observing. Often, adults want a simple answer, a recipe. Sometimes I could give it and sometimes I do.

But I would rather turn the adult toward the child.

### **First Observe**

We must observe a child before we know how to respond. Sometimes when we observe, we’re able to stop ourselves from intervening or interacting in a way that wouldn’t really be helpful at that moment. Often we are ready to jump in and help. But, if we pause long enough, we see that children are successful on their own.

Observation is our true education. We must do a lot of observation early in our careers. In a Montessori teacher education course, the classroom materials are presented and the theory is given, but these serve only as an introduction. Our real education is found in observing the children every day. We must continue to refine the materials and interpret the Montessori approach to meet the needs of each child.

My first two years in Montessori were spent sitting along the classroom wall, writing down whatever the children were doing. I was not allowed to intervene. Hundreds of times I wanted to, but instead I saw the child discover a solution. The look of satisfaction would not have been present on the child’s face if I had helped. I began to see children as capable – and they were discovering themselves to be capable. I developed tremendous trust and a sense of peace – things really do work out.

By the way, the children I observed in these first two years were all under 18 months of age. First, observe...because it is of primary importance. I believe that we must develop our skills in observation if we are to use the Montessori method.

Otherwise we are responding mindlessly to children, not mindfully. It must be an ongoing part of our growth and self-development.

Observation, in the scientific sense, is the act of taking notice of particular phenomena as they occur in the course of nature. We select one portion of reality, at a particular moment, to record. An effort must be made not to change the reality that has been observed in the recording through preconceptions, judgments or evaluations.

We are observing something in nature – the young child. Children are close to a natural state because they are new to this world. They are just discovering the world. Gradually, a person is corrupted by society. A baby could care less what anybody thinks about what he’s doing. He is pure in action, pure in response. We are observing the natural behavior of the child.

Many adults find it difficult to spend time with infants and toddlers. I think it is because these young children are so very different from us. Most adults have had little experience with children, as families get smaller and relatives more distant.

Infants and toddlers have unconscious absorbent minds, driving their little bodies to observe, imitate and explore. They have no concern for our adult priorities. If I can get adults – parents or educators – to stop their adult activities and thoughts for a while and just observe, they discover this special, different being.

It is particularly important to observe infants and toddlers because they cannot communicate much to us verbally.

### **Write It Down**

When we observe a child, it is valuable to write down observations. If we take notes daily in the classroom, the result can be a detailed record of the children's behavior in that environment. You will use these notes in future months and years.

Write down your observation forces you to find the words to describe what is happening. Events become clearer to us when we put words to the experience. Describe the child's behavior as precisely as possible. Do they grasp puzzle pieces with the whole hand or do they use a pincer grasp to hold the knob? How many seconds do they stand without holding onto furniture? What sounds do they produce and in what situation?

We are studying babies and we must be as accurate as possible. It is not possible to be completely accurate in the present, but it is impossible when observations are recorded after the fact, hour or days later. The children are capable enough that we do not need to serve them constantly. We can sit down to take notes. That is how we see their capabilities! And they become more capable when we get out of their way.

When we observe, we usually pick a focus in advance. Think about your environment and the questions you want answered. Perhaps observe a material, an area of development such as language, movement, or relations to others.

Only through observation of a child can we truly know his and her needs, and therefore, what materials to place within the environment to aid development.

One role of the adult is to prepare an environment for children. We need to know how to set up an environment for children, at home or in the classroom.

The Infant-Toddler Montessori course is just the beginning of your education. We also need to know, in a particular moment, what to provide to each child right now. Observation is critical. I don't believe we can meet the child's needs without observing. When we don't meet their needs, we are actually causing problems for the child.

Only through observation do we develop in ourselves an objective and non-directive attitude in our relationship with the child.

We are often more comfortable with a directive attitude. Traditionally, adults like to direct children. We think we are in control. The beautiful experience with infants and toddlers is that we are so clearly NOT in control. Control is an illusion. Some things are out of our control. And that is very clear with the young child.

We influence, we prepare the environment, we respond. But we do not control. I see adult struggle with this. I have seen myself struggle with this. I see adults with their hands on children, moving their smaller hands or bodies. We don't have that control.

What we see is that the young child imitates us, so we model, present materials (in a more relaxed manner for the child under 2.5) and we know that we are always, always an example to those being around us.

If we develop a discipline of sitting down, taking observation notes, and getting out of the way, we receive a gift. That gift is trust in the children, and beyond that, trust in nature and all beings. Paradoxically, we also receive another gift – trust from the children.

We see mistakes, messes and disagreements. We also see corrections, resolutions and growth that would not happen if the adult had either prevented the mistake or corrected it, rescuing the child.

Parents who learn to observe in a parent-infant program develop trust in their child and the knowledge of the vast capability of this little, new human being. How many people miss this completely? Think how this early relationship of trust rather than worry will affect the child. Think of the life-long impact if the important

person in his world thinks the child is capable, rather than helpless and empty.

With trust, we begin to see that there is a plan within each child, a plan for becoming a human being. It is not a conscious plan, but a life force that drives the children to complete themselves, to learn what they need to learn. The plan within each child is better than any plan we could think of. If we think we are in control, and we try to force our plan on a child, it will likely be nothing like the child's own plan. It is better to observe how the life force is expressed in this being, and respond to it.

Only through observation will we develop a non-judgmental attitude and therefore, a respectful attitude toward the child, others, and ourselves.

I'm sure that we all judge children and their behavior – good, bad, naughty, smart, mean, right or wrong. The question is not whether the behavior is good or bad, but is it helpful or useful for that child and the family or community? It is one thing to label behaviors out loud or in our minds, beyond that we also label children. They live up to our labels: the bully, the victim, the good girl, and the bad boy...

We also judge parents. I hear firsthand judgments about parents who work too much, who aren't married, who aren't raising their kids the way we think they should... When we judge someone else, that person knows it at some level.

It damages the relationship. They may withdraw from your program. They may agree with you that they are a bad parent and act from that definition of themselves.

We are hardest on ourselves. I observe that children do the best they can, that they always have a reason for what they do, even if the

adults around them don't perceive it. When I accept the children as they are today, I have to accept other adults and myself. We all have reasons for what we do. We are all doing the best we can. A very helpful lesson!

Only through observation will we develop in ourselves the capacity for silence and going within, which results in an attitude of respect and concentration while indirectly promoting the same attitude in the child.

To be able to truly observe, we have to be in the present moment, watching what is happening in front of us. That is not possible if we are thinking about what we're going to do next, or what happened to us that morning. Quiet your mind and your body, free yourself to observe.

Adults today, in this society, have to create the opportunity for silence if they want it to be a part of their lives. Most of us lose touch without need for silence. It becomes very difficult to stop our adult thoughts, our urgent to-do lists in our heads, and just be present with a child. We think that the children need us and that we can't take time to sit down to observe.

I give educators the opportunity to sit for a little while each day to observe the children. In my parent-infant program, I give parents the opportunity to sit, focus on their own child during class time and take observation notes. Some adults take advantage of these precious opportunities. Some do not. Some cannot. These adults are

too out of touch with their ability to quiet themselves. They will not reap the benefits of observation.

I was not naturally calm. It is a skill that I learned. I believe that everyone can learn to become calm.

*"...this calmness is usually considered to be one of character, a lack of nervousness. But there is here a question of a deeper calm, an empty, or better, unencumbered state that is the source of inner clarity. This calm consists of spiritual humility and intellectual purity necessary for the understanding of a child.."*

*Maria Montessori  
The Secret of Childhood*

We cannot expect the children to be normalized, concentrated, concussed and calm if we are not.

I once got a fortune cookie that said, "One cannot hurry with dignity." As a parent or educator of young children, we sometimes feel that we need to be in three places at once. Someone is spilling over here and someone is hitting over there when you would like to show a child a material. You feel so needed.

When you discover that things work out and children can learn to solve problems themselves, you will realize that there will be a moment for you to give whatever little help would benefit the child. You do not need to be everywhere at once. When this time comes, you will be comfortable to sit down with your notebook and observe. Until you are really needed, sit

down with your notebook each day, observe and be comfortable.

I know that this is difficult. Practice silence for yourself every day. Practice away from children so you know the feeling. Then you can recreate it when you are with children. There are many traditions of silence and contemplation, such as prayer and meditation. For some, going for a walk or spending time in nature will help. Relaxation exercises can be a place to start. I went through childbirth using these techniques and felt no pain. I now teach these techniques to pregnant mothers.

There are levels of observation that have been identified. We advance through these levels as we gain skill observing; focusing on the children and on what is really happening in front of us.

The most basic level is seeing – simply using your eyes. The next level is looking

– directing the eyes toward something. Beyond seeing is watching – following the subject of your observation with your eyes. The next level is observation – all of the above, done with purpose.

The highest level is contemplation. At this level, we are one with our subject. When we are completely focused on a child, we may have the feeling that we are the child – we understand what he is trying to do, that we are in that body moving in that way. We are completely in touch with that child, even though he may be unaware that we are observing. It is a great help to the relationship between parent and child if this connection can be formed early on. Many factors in our

society prevent this bond. I encourage it by teaching parents to observe.

In my experience, to be able to identify closely with another person, at the level of contemplation, is to have compassion for that person. It doesn't happen often, but it is a connection that we can make. When we have compassion for another human being, then we can understand their needs more completely, and respond to those needs. This is a true relationship of love.

Sometimes the loving response is not easy or obvious. Sometimes it is to believe in that person and get out of their way. Love helps us realize our true role. We facilitate the growth of another human being. ■



We cannot create observers by saying 'observe,' but by giving them the power and the means for this observation and these means are procured through education of the senses.

(Maria Montessori)