

# Six “Sensitive Periods”

By Maria Montessori

This is easy to observe. On a shopping trip to the supermarket, for instance, you may notice that you're two year old wants to touch everything in sight. He will go to the shelves, pick something up, look at it, feel it, turn it around, try to find out what it's for and what can be done with it. He probably does this over and over again, and you may find it difficult to prize him away when you are hurrying to get home – the resulting confrontation is fairly familiar to any parent. In this situation it can be a help to know that your child is not being deliberately “naughty” but is, according to Montessori, showing his predisposition to develop new knowledge and skills through his senses. He needs to explore everything – thing this is how he learns. In Montessori terms this a “sensitive period.”

Once he has acquired adequate knowledge of the world, the phase passes and there is no longer an uncontrollable desire to touch everything. But if too many restrictions are placed on the child and his natural instincts are stunted while he is in this phase, he may throw tantrums to show you that he has unsatisfied need to learn.

Montessori identified six such sensitive periods:

- Sensitivity to order
- Sensitivity to language
- Sensitivity to walking
- Sensitivity to the social aspects of life
- Sensitivity to small objects
- Sensitivity to learning through the senses.

## Sensitivity to order

Sensitivity to order appears in the first year – even in the first month – of life and continues through the second year. During this time babies and children are striving to sort out and categorize all their experience, and it is easier for them to do this if there is some kind of order in their lives. They like to be handled in the same way, by the same person, and in a familiar environment. This should not be confused with an adult's need for neatness; for a baby it is more a need for consistency and familiarity so that he can orientate himself and construct a mental

picture of the world. This need is particularly evident in the child from about that he becomes very upset by changes, such as redecorating his room, moving house or going on vacation.

## Sensitivity to language

The ability to use language – to talk – is obviously of major importance as it plays a vital role in all subsequent intellectual growth. The sensitive period for language begins from birth. Your baby hears your voice and watches your lips and tongue – the organs of speech – from birth, absorbing all the time. By the age of six, with almost no direct teaching, basic sentence patterns, and the inflections and accent of language. This does not mean that he has achieved full language competence – he will continue to acquire more complex sentence structure and to extend this vocabulary throughout childhood. By six, however an extraordinary amount. Has been achieved. If, for any reason, a child is not exposed regularly to language during this period, he will be irrevocably damaged. Depending upon the degree of deprivation, he could suffer more limitations in his intellectual growth than could ever be compensated for totally. Montessori believed, therefore, that it was particularly important for adults to converse with children during this period, continually enriching their language and giving them every opportunity to learn new words.

## Sensitivity to walking

When your toddler first learns to walk at around twelve to fifteen months, he has a need to practice and perfect the skill. You walk because you need to get from one place to another, or for exercise, but at this stage your toddler walks for the sake of it. Once he is mobile, he is constantly on the move. In her book, *The Secret of Child-hood*, Montessori gives an example of two-and-three year-old children walking for miles and clambering up and down staircases with the sole purpose of perfecting their movements.

We tend to underestimate a child's ability to walk—even very young children are capable of walking long distances, provided they can do it their own time. There is a difference in going for a walk with a child and taking a child for a walk: it is no use taking a child by the hand and marching along at an adult pace – he will soon become tired and ask to be carried – but if you go at his pace, stopping when he wants to and moving on when he is ready, the walk can be very enjoyable for both of you, and you can cover a surprising amount of ground!

### **Sensitivity to the social aspects of life**

At about the age of two and a half or three, you will notice that your child has become aware that he is part of a group. He begins to show an intense interest in other children of his own age and gradually starts to play with them in a cooperative way. There is a sense of cohesion which Montessori believed was not instilled by instruction, but which came about spontaneously and was directed by internal drives. She noticed that at the age children began to model themselves on adult social behavior and gradually acquire the social norms of their group.

### **Sensitivity to small objects**

At around one, when the child becomes more mobile and therefore has a larger environment to explore, he is drawn to small objects such as insects, pebbles, stones and grass. He will pick something up, look at closely and perhaps put it in his mouth. The urge to pay attention to detail that children of this age have is part of their effort to build up an understanding of the world.

### **Sensitivity to learn through the senses**

From the moment of birth, your baby receives impressions of the world around him through his five senses. First the senses of sight and hearing are active, and then gradually, as movement develops, the sense of touch plays a role, followed by a sense of taste, as he is able to put things in his mouth. Like later child development experts, Maria Montessori recommended that a baby be kept close to the adults caring for him so that he could see and hear everything going on around him. As soon as he can move – crawl or walk – he needs plenty of freedom so that he can explore. This is probably the idea that parents find most difficult to accept, but do try to do so if you can; if you prevent this sensory exploration by constantly saying “no” and confining your baby of toddler in a play pen or strapping him into a chair for long periods of time, it will inhibit his learning.