

# Unconscious to Conscious: A Critical Transition for Toddlers

By Sue Kennedy



There are many aspects about working with toddlers that we need to discuss. We really need to define who toddlers are, where they are and what they should be doing. Here I'm going to focus on how to know when it's time to move a toddler into the three-to-six room.

Many toddler teachers, I know, work in a situation where moving is done at a particular time. For example, when children turn three, they move. Or, they turn three and they are potty trained and they move. Or, they turn two and a half and they move.

## Why Not Follow the Child?

Most schools have a system, and I suppose you need that, although it would be nice if we could follow Marie Montessori's dictum and really follow the child, to move them when they need to move. What a concept!

One time while visiting with a school director, I mentioned something about that. I said, "You know three-to-six teachers sometimes..." Don't get me wrong when I talk about three-to-six teachers. I was one. I am not now. I come from that aspect of the Montessori experience also, so I speak of them with love in my heart. But most of them have a ways to go before they fully understand where toddlers are coming from.

## Adult Resistance

You know some of the things three-to-six teachers say. "Oh, but when new toddlers enter our class, we have to go back and do all those

presentations again. Or, we have to get all that different stuff out again. We have to disrupt our routine to follow them around when they come in whenever they're ready to move. It happens in October and it happens at the end of November or it happens in February." You know, they complain!

So my director friend, who is very infant and toddler oriented, said, "But, you know, if we are really committed to following the child, we should let each child move when he or she is ready. That is number one!

Number two, the materials these children need should be out all the time anyway. And number three, presentations should be an ongoing process."

So she was really shooting down some of those commonly expressed ideas and practices. It's nice to have that kind of supportive atmosphere.

## Other Issues

The other thing three-to-six teachers say is, "I'm not going to change those diapers. You can bring those toddlers into my room when they are potty trained. I am not going to do that."

I have another very good friend who taught in three-to-six classes for years and years. She said, "I don't see any big deal about potty training. It usually doesn't take very long. When the child moves into the three-to-six room, all the children are going to the bathroom."

All the children take care of themselves. It doesn't take very

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long for the new child to figure out, "Oh, so that's the way we do it. Okay, I'm ready."

And besides that, when the children have the responsibility to change their own clothes and when they look out into a room just full of the most wonderful things they have ever seen, who would want to spend time in the bathroom? They take care of their toileting. It's their problem and they solve it.

So when three-to-six teachers start saying all these things to you, "Yes, but you know..." let's see if we can help them.

## How Do You Know When a Child is Ready to Move?

If you have been working with toddlers, you know that some children are ready to move at two-and-a-half. Some children are not ready to move until almost three-and-a-half. It falls upon us in the toddler room to know when that child is ready to move.

It's really difficult to pin down that time when somebody asks you, "How do you know when a toddler is ready to move?" You say, "Oh, I don't know. I just kind of know



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they're ready to go."

In our age of accountability, we have to go with more than our gut feeling about each child. I want you to think about this child who is approaching the transition from the toddler room to the three-to-six classroom.

### Moving from the Period of the Unconscious Mind to the Period of the Conscious Mind

It will help us if we focus not on the physical movement from the toddler room to the three-to-six class, but rather on the time when the toddler moves mentally from the period of the unconscious absorbent mind to the period of the conscious absorbent mind.

We fully understand the conscious absorbent mind because that's where we are as adults. The unconscious absorbent mind, if you really think about it, is a lot fuzzier. Remember, when we experienced that period of development ourselves, we were in the period of the unconscious absorbent mind.

Over half of Dr. Montessori's book, *The Absorbent Mind*, describes the

child before three. She attached a great deal of importance to this period of life—long before modern researchers told us what was happening with the brain and what was taking place in the first three years of life.

This was a woman of tremendous insight, not a woman preceding the

understanding that our present age demands, but a woman absolutely fitting into the present. All you have to do is look at *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Discover* or any those magazines to find out how up-to-date she really is.

### The Unconscious Mind

Let's think about the unconscious absorbent mind. What are some of the things that we know happen in these first three years? Language is number one. Do I have to remind you how to speak your mother tongue? No! How do you know how to speak it? Learning language evolves, but what happens to language when you get it? Where does it go so that you always have it?

What does Montessori say these children are doing during the period of the unconscious absorbent mind? They are absorbing, yes, but they are not only absorbing. Dr. Montessori uses a word to describe what the child is doing from birth to three that she doesn't use to describe the child from three to six.

*Children from birth to three are literally creating themselves. She uses the word incarnation. That word gave me fits for years until I finally understood that it's the taking in of knowledge and making it a part of your whole being.*

for years until I finally understood that it's the taking in of knowledge and making it a part of your whole being. You know you can speak your mother tongue from top to bottom. Nobody has to tell you how. You know how to speak your mother tongue because you have absorbed language.

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What else does the child do during those three years? Movement! What kind of movement? Gross motor and fine motor! Specific movement—starting with rolling over and ending up walking, grasping—all of these things.

What is another critical period for birth to three? The critical period for order! But it is not the order of the three-to-six classroom.

What kind of order does that unconscious absorbent mind incarnate, absorb? The order of the universe, the order of the world, how it works, how it's put together, how I work in that world.

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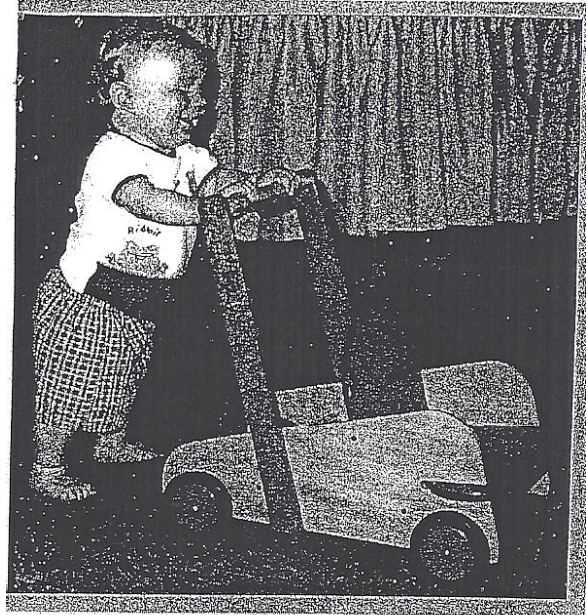
Internalizing this order is essential before children can ever learn about the order of the golden beads or the order of the pink tower or the order of the broad stair. As we create order in the school environment, that environment becomes the child's world.

Theirs is a very small world. So, as we create order in that small world, they come to understand the major principle of order, just as they come to understand the major principle of movement and the major principle of language.

Remember that Dr. Montessori tells us that we need to get the big picture first. Then we take it apart and we look at the smallest parts of it to understand them. Then we put it all back together again.

Montessori says that this applies to every level of education—and it





is very true for the toddlers. So, in this unconscious absorbent mind, there is the incarnation of language, movement and order.

What are some characteristics of the unconscious absorbent mind? What kind of people are toddlers? They are very social! Do they come into the room and just stand there and look around? No. They explore. How often? All the time!

What one word would you use to describe somebody who has to be on the go all the time?

Spontaneous, curious, active, yes. But all these need to be bumped up about three degrees. They are driven. Dr. Montessori tells us that the hormone, the life spirit inside them, drives them to learn. There is not an instant that toddlers are awake when they are not learning.

To me this is the principle characteristic of the unconscious absorbent mind. The child in the conscious absorbent mind learns to turn it on and turn it off. The toddler has no on or off button. They are on all the time! They have to be doing.

### Contrasting the Two

In the period of the unconscious absorbent mind, the child explores everything. The child who has moved into the conscious absorbent mind

thinks. In the unconscious absorbent mind, children are driven. Everything attracts their attention.

In the conscious absorbent mind, children choose among many choices. In the period of the conscious absorbent mind, children want to explain things and they are willing to listen to things being explained to them. The child in each stage is very different.

In fact, the job of these three age groups, the infant, the toddler and the preschooler are very different.

The job of the infant is just being, deciding to be. The job of the toddler is to do and the job of the preschooler is to think. So, working with toddlers, we are dealing with the doer.

### Age Appropriate Materials

When I go into many toddler rooms, I see many three-to-six Montessori materials. I went from being a Montessori three-to-six teacher to becoming a Montessori toddler teacher thinking, "No problem! I know how to do this." I soon found out that I didn't know what I was talking about at all.

### The Toddler's Use of Materials

Toddlers are not yet there. They are in a completely different other world. So I am very concerned when I see many three-to-six materials in a toddler classroom because it denotes a different approach to the toddler than where the toddler actually is.

For instance, if you have a stack of blocks, what is the toddler going to do? Knock it down. That's the only

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reason you build things, right? Why on

earth does a toddler knock the tower down every time they build it? Cause and effect! The toddler thinks, "I knock it down because I know I can do it again. I am pretty great! I know how to build it but before I can rebuild it, I have to knock it down."

### 3-to-6 Use of Materials

By contrast, what does the child with the conscious absorbent mind

do? Have you ever watched children of three build the pink tower. What do they do? They stand back, admire it and look at it. "Wow, this is

great." They make a little adjustment here. They make a little adjustment there. Then they think, "Okay, now I will do it again?" They take it down and they may look for another way to make order. There is a world of difference between toddlers and 3-to-6 children!

### Developing Control of Movement

This is wonderful! Let's consider what happens when toddlers carry something. Do you know why they spill stuff? They may charge across the room. On the other hand, I've seen what I think is a very wise action on the part of some toddlers who always want to work on the shelf. I think they know, "I probably can't get that to a table so I'm just going to work here." And that's okay.

You have all seen the toddler walking along, spilling. The toddler

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looks down and looks surprised at the result. It's as if they are saying, "How did that get down there. I have no way of knowing."

*Independence...is another word that truly identifies toddlers because independence is really what they want more than anything else.*

### The Sequence of Body Movement

A physiological thing that is happening is that the child's body is still moving as a unit. There is a physiological reason for most of the things that toddlers do.

When I looked through some of my videos of children, I found a little boy who illustrates this beautifully. He was transferring some pom-poms with tongs to another container. His whole body was moving. It was this foot, that foot, this foot, that foot. Watch your toddlers. See how they are moving.

I watched the same child a couple of months later and his feet were still. However, the top of his body was still moving. By the end of the year, he was just moving his hands. So you can see this progression of movement and you know, "Okay! He's come along. At each stage, he's doing it differently."

Watch the eighteen-month-old children who are carrying a snack to a table for the first or second time. They have to go back two or three times to bring some more. It's hard not to step in and say, "Let me help you. Let me carry this. Or, if you do this..."

What else is the toddler learning? Independence. That is another word that truly identifies toddlers because independence is really what they want more than

anything else. Independence is what they're learning as they also learn about the movement of their body. When it finally dawns on them that, "I do this, stuff falls on the floor. It must be connected with something I'm doing." So they try to figure it out.

### Isolation of the Parts of the Body

One of the clues to recognize the emerging conscious mind is observing how well toddlers can isolate particular parts of their body. It takes a very astute observer to realize that it is happening. We need to know what clues to look for. The isolation of the parts of the body is one of those very important clues.

### The Next Step

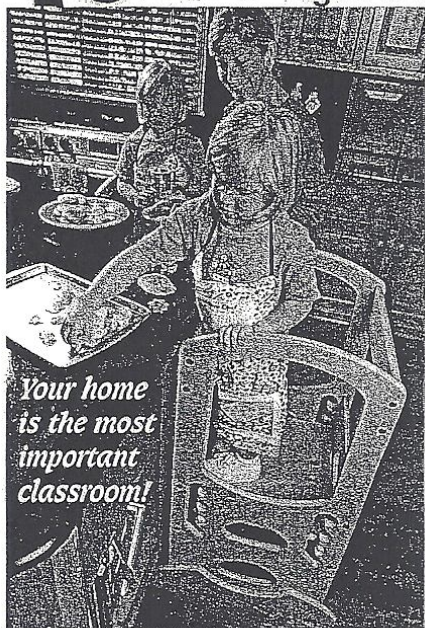
Children carrying water to a table for their snack sometimes spill the water from the glass to the floor. They may then learn to use a sponge or a cloth to clean up the water.

The next step up from that occurs when we see children spill on purpose as they head back after their snack. They know that they have to go get the mop or the sponge—and that is what they really want to do.

When you observe that behavior, what do you do? You set up a lesson that meets that need, like table scrubbing or chair scrubbing.

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## Matching Pictures

I want to describe one of my all time favorite activities for toddlers because it reveals so much about them. I looked for pictures to put on the wall and we didn't have a big budget.

I found a calendar of baby animals. Of course, toddlers love animals of all kinds, especially if you find a calendar of the adult and the baby. Go to a bookstore about March when you can buy the material you need very inexpensively.

I cut out both the big picture and the little pictures on the back and covered them with contact paper, which I prefer. I put the big pictures on the wall. I thought, "I don't want to throw away the little pictures," so I put three in a basket and waited to see what would happen.

One day a little girl realized that the little pictures matched the big pictures. She held the small picture up by the big picture. She had another little picture but the second matching big picture was too far to reach so I asked her if she would like a piece of tape. I gave her a piece of tape and, lo and behold, an activity was born.

I put all twelve small pictures out in the basket and taping them on or near the big pictures became a very popular activity.

## The Stages of Matching

One afternoon eighteen-month-old Matthew, who didn't have a lot of language, stood in front of me. I

said, "Oh, you want to do the pictures. Let me get the tape."

As soon as I got the tape, he took my hand and led me over to one particular side of the room. I thought, "What is going on?" Then it suddenly dawned on me that every time I had done the pictures with another child, I had gone over to sit at this particular place on the floor.

To Matthew, that was a part of the whole work. Children observe the whole process and it has to happen that way.

I sat down, put tape on the picture and gave it to him. Matthew went over, put the little picture on the right picture. I thought, "Wow, this little eighteen-month-old is ready—whole part, figure, ground, different size. That's wonderful. I gave him the next picture and this time, it didn't match. I thought, "Oh, oh." He went around the room with ten more little pictures. Not another one matched.

He came back to me with a big smile on his face and I thought, "What am I going to say." I thought and thought. Finally, I said, "Matthew, you put a little picture on every big picture." Matthew smiled like, "She got it! She knew what I was doing." He repeated the activity every day for about two weeks. He was just as happy as he could be.

Came the day when he walked toward the wall with a little picture in his hand. You could just see it happen. He stopped, looked at the little picture, looked at the big picture like, "Oh, this one doesn't go there." He looked around, found the right picture, went over and matched the correct picture. He had moved to another level of awareness. From then on, of course, all the pictures matched.

## Stay Where the Child Is

But what would have happened if that first day I had said, "Oh, Matthew, those pictures really didn't go together. First, he would probably never have done it again.

Second, what would he have thought about his own capability? "I thought I was doing it right, but she says it was in the wrong place.

She's the big person. She's right. I'm wrong." But children don't think "wrong," they think "bad."

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One reason why infant and toddler teachers have a harder time getting into the minds of their children is that toddlers do not have the language to tell us. You have to be not only an acute, but also an accurate observer. You have to be able to turn things around if you can tell by their actions that something is not working or if something is not set up correctly. They cannot always tell you with their words. It is much more difficult.

You really need as much knowledge about child development as you can possibly get and endless hours of observation. Every minute that you are in the classroom, you need to be in an observer mode. You need to analyze or at least catalog everything that is going on with your children.

## Limiting Possibilities

Some teachers try to make it a little easier for the children by putting a little circle of Velcro on the big picture and a little circle of Velcro on the little picture. Not only is it a little easier, you don't have to deal with all that messy tape. But what is it about toddlers and tape? They love it.



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There are all sorts of things that go on with tape. The children don't want to put the tape on the picture so they put it on the back. Then to make it stick, they can't see the little picture. So they flip it up and it flips back down. Look at all the learning that is going on. That is what is important.

The children try and I keep my mouth shut while they try. I don't tell them, "Oh, you have the tape on the wrong side. Let me put the tape on the right side so you can get the little picture up. Then you can see the big picture and the little picture and blah, blah, blah." Come on. We put our mouth in play too much when we are working with toddlers.

I do not like Velcro. Who determines where the picture goes? I am the control of error and I don't need to be the control of error for anything in that room. I have had children put the pictures in wonderful places—in between the big ones, up above the big ones. I asked one child why he put the picture way up there. "So no one else can reach it." He happened to be very tall.

### Making the Connections

Some children put all the little pictures on one big picture. Everybody in the room runs around telling them where they go. They don't care. They are having fun putting them all over. That possibility doesn't exist if each picture has only one spot to put one picture.

One little boy was putting all the pictures on the same one and they didn't match. Susan, who was helping Alex, sat right in front of one of the big pictures, which

happened to be an eagle. Alex picked up one little picture and saw the eagle on the big picture behind Susan. He said, "Bird." Susan said, "Yes, that's an eagle."

Then he went over to the other big picture of the eagle and put the little picture right with all the other little pictures." He wasn't making the connection yet.

See how much this activity allows you to do! You can set up so many activities in the room. Take the common

everyday ordinary shape sorter box, which all of you have in one form or the other. Or you have a put-and-take container with a big lid and you get two different types of objects to put in, like a tall, thin Formica color chip and a big round bead so that one will not go into the container.

One child tries to fit every shape in each hole to find out where it goes. A second child looks at the shape, looks at the box and then goes around the box trying. Another child looks at the shape, looks at the box, finds the match visually and puts it in.

This is analogous to the progression as the child crawls, starts to pull up and then later walks. We must tune ourselves into what is happening with each child so we can tell the parents. You may have a three-year-old who is not quite there yet. You say, "Here's why. Because of all of these things that are going on..."

### Putting Things Away

I know toddler teachers who really beat themselves up trying to keep everything picked up. It just doesn't happen. They get on an eighteen-

month-old's back all the time saying, "Put this away. Put that away." The toddler may already be working on the third material down the road from where they started.

As far as the young child is concerned, he may not have seen that thing for years and think, "I never did it." So it is futile to bring him back to that material. But the worst thing you have done, however, is interrupt the child's concentration on a piece of material.

If you can catch the young toddler in the process of walking away, then you might say, "This goes back on the shelf."

If you say, as so many of us do, "Can you put this back on the shelf?" "Nope," and off the toddler goes. Then you are stuck. You have to go with the choice that you gave them. Don't ever give them a choice unless you can take no for an answer.

### Watch Your Choice of Words

We each need to change our way of talking. Don't use "can you" and "will you" and "would you" and "should you," which I call the four letter words of Toddlerville. You will get yourself into a fix.

You can simply substitute the word please, which we all want them to



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learn anyway. "Please put this back on the shelf." Please put the puzzle back on the shelf." You can say this if it is said at the right moment in time, when you know that the child is finished and before the child has engaged with something else. It is not being dictatorial. It is a form of verbal modeling.

Do eighteen-month-old toddlers put things back on the shelf? No, not yet. They may not put anything away at first. Then they may put things away sometimes. They may need your help sometimes. Eventually they put things away always. This is another progressions to look for.

### Language Reveals Progression

Language itself tells us a lot about the progression of the children moving from the unconscious to the conscious mind.

You know, we talk about this

wonderful time of life with the toddlers. In my experience, the explosion into words always seems to happen while they are gone from school, like over the Christmas vacation. When they came back, they talked my ear off. My ears ached when I went home at night because they had talked so much. This is a wonderful time.

The danger is that people not knowing the developmental process say, "Hey. They are there! They have words. They are also doing all the thinking and reasoning. They have logic." They have words, yes, but they haven't mastered all the rest yet.

Language skills are not fully in place. It is only beginning to happen. The fact that they are gaining words doesn't mean that all of the language processes are working even close to capacity yet.

### The Language Explosions

Dr. Montessori recognized that there is an explosion into words first. Then later there is an explosion into sentences, which she calls the explosion into thought. When

children can put all of their words together, it means that they are linking them together to form a thought. This is another progression to look for.

Many adults see the explosion into words as an accomplished fact. Not so. It is like the child who is standing there taking one step, but the adult is ready to start him or her in ballet school tomorrow. The child has a long way to go. We need to help parents realize that.

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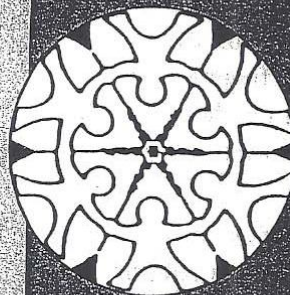
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## Progressions Using the Materials

One more example! I had a little tray with small indentations all around the edge and a little can of purple pompoms sitting in the middle with tiny tongs. I put it out on the shelf and an eighteen-month-old took the can. He banged it around, but he couldn't get the lid off. He didn't know what to do even after I took the lid off. He just wasn't ready.

In contrast, a two-year-old put the pompoms out in the indentations and when he was putting them back, one missed the can and rolled off the shelf.

With the next one, he deliberately put it on the shelf and it rolled onto the floor. Then he picked it up and threw it on floor. He was more interested in picking up the pompoms with his fingers and throwing them on the floor. So, for him, that was the object of the exercise.

The two-and-a-half-year-old got a mat. He put everything out. He couldn't make the tongs work to put the pompoms onto the tray. He placed them with his fingers. Then he used the tongs to pick them up to put them back into the can.

He also used what we call "outer speech," which is not intended to be informational with anybody. Outer speech helps to develop inner speech and inner thought. When we are adults, we call it "talking to ourselves." This child repeated, "Got it off!"

For him, all the pompoms went back into the can, the tongs went down

into the can and the lid went on the can. He sat and looked at it for a while. Then he put the tray with the indentation to one side, put the storage tray under the mat, folded the mat over and then put the tray with the pompoms on top of it all. For him, that was putting it away. So he was up and off and gone.

## Activities for Progression

We see many of levels of progression within the toddler group. We need to look for these progressions. We need, first of all, to set up activities that allow for progression. Then we have to allow that progression to happen when it happens.

We also have to remember that whatever the toddler does, moving to the next level happens when it happens. As one person said, "They are

not thirty-six inches tall until they are thirty-six inches tall."

What if we told a two-month-old, "We are going to spend thirty minutes a day together because I want you to learn how to walk? I'm going to tell you how it's done. I am going to talk to you about bouncing and I am going to hold you up until your feet touch the table while I talk." When is the child going to walk? When the child is ready!

## Learning Cause and Effect— Making the Connections

Walking is a physical activity. Somehow we can let walking happen because we know it doesn't happen until it happens. But When a child is just learning about cause and effect, we immediately want to explain to them verbally why something works or doesn't work or why something is not okay to do.

A parent told me, "My nineteen-

month-old is always sticking things into sockets." She explained that she finally found a socket protector that he can't get off, after she had tried everything else she could find. She asked me, "Why does he keep doing it? He knows that it is going to shock him."

I told her, "No, he doesn't."

She said, "What do you mean?"

I told her, "He is not connecting the shock he gets with the fact that he put something into the socket. That is cause and effect."

She asked again, "You mean he doesn't connect the two."

I answered, "Right. For him it has no connection yet. He is still in the process of developing an understanding what is happening."

Understanding is a mental process so we can't see it happening unless we know what we are looking at and looking for. It is more difficult for adults to let mental activities happen because they can't actually see them happening.

One way of describing the unconscious absorbent mind is that it processes information by action on an object. The conscious absorbent mind processes information by thinking about objects or by thinking about the action they will be using on objects. It's the difference between doing and thinking.

If you really develop the habit of continuously observing children, you will see it happen. Just remember, toddlers don't want your words. They want their actions. That is the basic difference with toddlers.

## Make Language Concrete

When we do use words, we need to make them more concrete. I have heard teachers say, "Carry that tray carefully." What is a carefully? Can you show me a carefully? Instead say, "Put your hands here

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to carry the tray." Maybe they are trying to carry the tray down here which is why it is tipping." Or, we say, "Clean up that water." Can you show me a clean up? Instead, say, "Get a mop (or a sponge)."

There is a lot more to know and do with the clean up cloths. Toddlers can help you put them into the washing machine. They can get them from the machine, fold them and put them into the supply basket in the room before they ever get around to using them to clean up. Sometimes toddlers will fold things for forty-five minutes. I saw a teacher one time, who brought a big basket full of cloths to a table full of children waiting to fold. They folded them all fairly quickly but they weren't through. So as the children took the folded cloths over to the supply basket, the teacher picked up a few, shook them out and dropped them into the basket again. These children needed to fold.

focus on. They will usually pick hearing, which is more developed from birth on.

### Eye to Eye Contact

Some children don't look at you when you talk to them. Don't tell them that you need to see their eyes. They are not deliberately defying you or ignoring you. They are just having trouble processing information.

Other children may just not be interested in what you are doing at that time. You may want to approach them another time. If what you have to say is vitally important at that moment, get down on their level and say, "Please listen to my words."

### Defense Mechanisms

It is also amazing how quickly children learn defensive mechanisms because of what is going on at home. Some inattention also has to do with feelings. Don't automatically impute inattention to counterproductive behavior.

### The Appropriateness Scale

Sometimes it is wise to remove material that is too demanding from the environment for a while. The more you have to help with an activity—and this where you can really rate where an activity is on the appropriateness scale—the less appropriate it is for the toddler.

For example, it is not an appropriate activity if you have to go get the water or set up all the material or get the glue. There are some activities that do need some adult involvement. But, when you have to do quite a bit of it, the success of that activity does not belong just to the child. You will want to step back and think, "No. I want all this success to be the child's."

*Being truly independent means that you are independent from the beginning to the end of an activity.*

### Independence

Independence is a really big issue for toddlers. Being truly independent means that you are independent from the beginning to the end of an activity, not just in the middle.

When toddlers have a snack, they do everything from putting it on the plate, pouring the glass of water, taking everything to the table, eating, dumping what's left, pouring out the water, doing the dishes and putting them in the drainer before going off to another activity. They need to do the entire cycle of work before they are truly independent.

### Helping Parents Understand

Explain to parents that if they fill the plate, fill the glass or do any part of the process, the child is not independent. Help parents understand what independence

*...children get very frustrated because their mind is beginning to take over the control of the body instead of the body being in control of the body.*

### Mind Over Body

In moving from the unconscious to the conscious absorbent mind, children may get very frustrated because their mind is beginning to take over the control of the body instead of the body being in control. With their gross and fine motor skills, they can't make things come out exactly as they want. For example, they can't line things up exactly right because the fine motor movement is just not that fine yet.

### Processing Information from Two Modalities

When you are modeling for toddlers, be aware that there are some children who cannot process information from two different sense modalities at the same time, especially very young children. These children may not be

able to listen to your words and look at you at same time. You need to do a lot of modeling without words to help them focus on your actions.

If both hearing and vision are involved, they have to pick one to

*When you are modeling for toddlers, be aware that there are some children who cannot process information from two different sense modalities at the same time, especially if they are very young children.*



means. Helping the parents is as important as helping the child. Even when we are with children during many waking hours of the week, they are still the parents.

Most parents, especially the young parents, really want to know. Develop a rapport. Help them feel good with what they are doing. Explain that for the child to master and to enjoy the entire process, the child needs to be involved in all the parts.

Parent involvement also provides a marvelous opportunity for language. Give the parents some hints, like sweat pants that come down easily during the toilet learning process. Help parents understand the whole process of an activity.

### Follow the Child

Follow the child. We can't say that often enough. One day at circle time, the children want to sing forever. How many of you have gone to circle time and have sung about a song and a half only to find that you are singing a solo?

Do you say, "Looks as if we are done for the day?" Or do you say, "No. You all need to come back and sit down on this circle because we have songs to sing. We have to read a story and..." I hope none of you are doing

that, but I have seen it happen.

### The Limits of Adult Influence

Dr. Montessori tells us that during the period of the unconscious

mind, there is a limit to how much the adult can influence the child.

Some adults get into a contest with toddlers to try to influence them, but actually, it is the lack of the adult's ability to influence them that is the definition of this period. When the adult gets into a battle of

will, who always wins? The toddler! You may accomplish your goal, but you lose the battle.

### The Importance of Observation

We see another progression as children are able to stay in a circle longer. Becoming an observer is vital. When you observe, you can tell a lot about where they are.

The young child is in a world that we cannot really understand because we don't remember being there. We have to accept the fact that where they are is where they are. They know where they are. And they are the only ones who know where they are.

We have to interpret their progress to help them advance and learn how to verbalize. We are a passage way into the conscious absorbent mind. Only as toddlers are allowed to experience fully the period of the unconscious mind, to incarnate absolutely all that they need to know at this time, can they be successful as a three-to-six person, as a six-to-nine person and so on.

### Progress is Not Pushing

Progress is not made by pushing them to do this and pushing them to do that. This is a danger we need to be acutely aware of. With all of the studies that are coming out now, some people are saying,

"Oh, toddlers can learn math. They can learn science. They can learn...." Don't push them there before they are ready.

Some of the studies I have read have a little note at the bottom, "This does not mean that you should do ...." Be aware of all these wonderful things that are going on and let the child experience them fully. Let the child be. Follow the child. Nature is guiding him.

### Computers and Television

Parents today are very impressed with computers. There is an interesting book you should read by Stanley Greenspan, "The Growth of the Mind or the Endangered Origins of Intelligence." (Greenspan, 1997).

When scientists first came out with information on brain research, they told us that the physical stimulation of the environment—the sights, the sounds and the colors, the music and all kinds of things—cause the dendrites and the axons to grow and stimulate the brain to make all those neuronal connections.

### Human Attachment

Greenspan tells us that while these physical stimulations are necessary, first there must be an emotional connection with the loving response of an adult.

Children have to connect with their own emotions before they can

connect with anything in this world.

We each have this same need.

Toddlers cannot connect with computers. They cannot connect

with television. The addition of the human voice and the human touch is needed for a significant connection to be made.

I am thoroughly convinced that this is the reason that we have teenagers today who show no remorse for killing people. They have no connection with people.

Attachment theory is becoming more important. Do you know where attachment happens? In our

...physical stimulations are necessary, what has to happen first, however, is an emotional connection with the loving response of an adult.

Progress is not made by pushing. Be aware of all these wonderful things that are going on and let the child experience them fully.

during the period of the unconscious mind, there is a limit to how much the adult can influence the child.



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hearts—at any age. If a secure attachment does not happen at an early age, it doesn't happen nearly as well later.

## Language Acquisition

We can see this when we consider language acquisition. Did you learn a second language as an adult? Was it easy? Was it hard? By contrast, have you ever seen two-year-olds sitting and thinking, "Man, this is hard! How do I say that word?" No! What do they speak? They just absorb language and they speak.

## Bilingual Education

Bilingual education can start at a very early age. Children can learn other languages at two, three, four, whenever. I once knew a sixteen-month-old who spoke English with her teachers, German with her dad and Chinese with her mom. She only had a few words in each, but I don't know that any sixteen-month-old has more than that. She could do it! Language needs to be experienced.

## Television or Water?

There is one more thing I want to say about computers and television. If you leave young children alone with a water table and a computer, which do they choose? That is a no-brainer. They will go for the water anytime. Propose that to your parents.

Parents say, "Oh, they will make a mess. There will be water all over the floor." That's why parents prefer the computer.

You can respond, "Children love water on the floor. That means they can get down on the floor

and clean it up." Most parents just don't get it. We are so fortunate that all we have to do in the classroom is watch the children. Parents have a lot more on their plates.

## Watching

We have to help parents realize that, from birth to three, watching their child is the most important thing they can do. Give parents little hints of the things that they can look for. For example, "When your child is spooning sand outside, does he or she move their whole body in the process." They probably have never noticed. Explain how important observation is.

Toddler teachers need to understand fully the stages in toddler development to be able to feed information to parents. When parents look and see it happen, they will say about you, "Why, she is not just a babysitter after all!

Of course, you know the answer to that, don't you? "I never sat on a baby in my life!" Tell them. That will get their attention. And then make your point.

When you give parents developmental signs to look for, they will say, "This person knows what she is talking about. And she is talking about my child."

Get parents involved with their child, watching their child, finding all the wonderful things that are going on.

## Children Must Experience

When children get closer to three, the inclination is to push more. This is when it is hardest to pull back. When babies have just taken their very first step, you would never scoop them up, carry them around

for the rest of their lives and tell them, "Now, I'm going to talk you through the rest of this. I'm going to tell you all about walking. I'm going to tell you about running and

I'm going to tell you about climbing. I'm going to tell you about ballet and running the hurdles. Then you will know how to do all these things." Right?

Wrong! Children have to experience. They have to go through it.

After children get the first spoonful of food into their mouth, do we say, "Now, I'm going to tell you about eating. I am going to tell you how you hold a knife, how you hold a fork, how to place a napkin in your lap and on and on." No. Children have to practice each thing themselves.

It is the same with their mental activities. They begin to get an idea, a thought about how something works. But you don't say, "Stop. Let me explain to you how these things work, why this sinks and why this floats and what this means." No. You place the activity out for the children and you let them practice, practice, practice so they can find out for themselves.

Most adults can let children experience walking and eating, but we find it difficult to do so when the children begin to use the thinking process. We think that our words can do the job.

## Building the Pathways

In Alaska, here is an example that makes a lot of sense. If you just had thirty-six inches of snow in a day, which we often have, and you try to walk through it the first time, it's a hard to make the initial

help parents realize that from birth to three, watching their child is the most important thing they can do.



path. Do you say to yourself, "Well, I just won't go to the grocery store until next month. I just can't get there?" No. You slog through the snow the first time. And when you go back, the path gets a little easier.

Every time you go over that path, it gets a little flatter and a little wider. Pretty soon, it

becomes relatively easier to walk to the grocery store and back.

It is the same thing with our thought processes.

When children think through their thought process the first time, it takes a long time.

When children think through their thought processes the first time, it takes a long time. We adults have to learn to stand there as if we have duct tape over our mouths and wait.

## Let The Thinking Process Happen

We adults have to learn to stand there as if we have duct tape over our mouths and wait. We want to talk to tell them. Instead, we have to let the thinking process happen.

My favorite story is about a seventeen-month-old girl named Rachel. Once while she was walking across the floor, she lost her shoe. I said to her, "Oh, Rachel, we need to put your shoe on your foot."

She plopped down on the floor and I sat right down in front of her with her shoe. She sat there with her bare foot propped up against her other knee so I could not reach her foot. She wasn't doing anything to help.

For once in my life, I kept quiet. I started to think about what was going on. Piaget tells us that

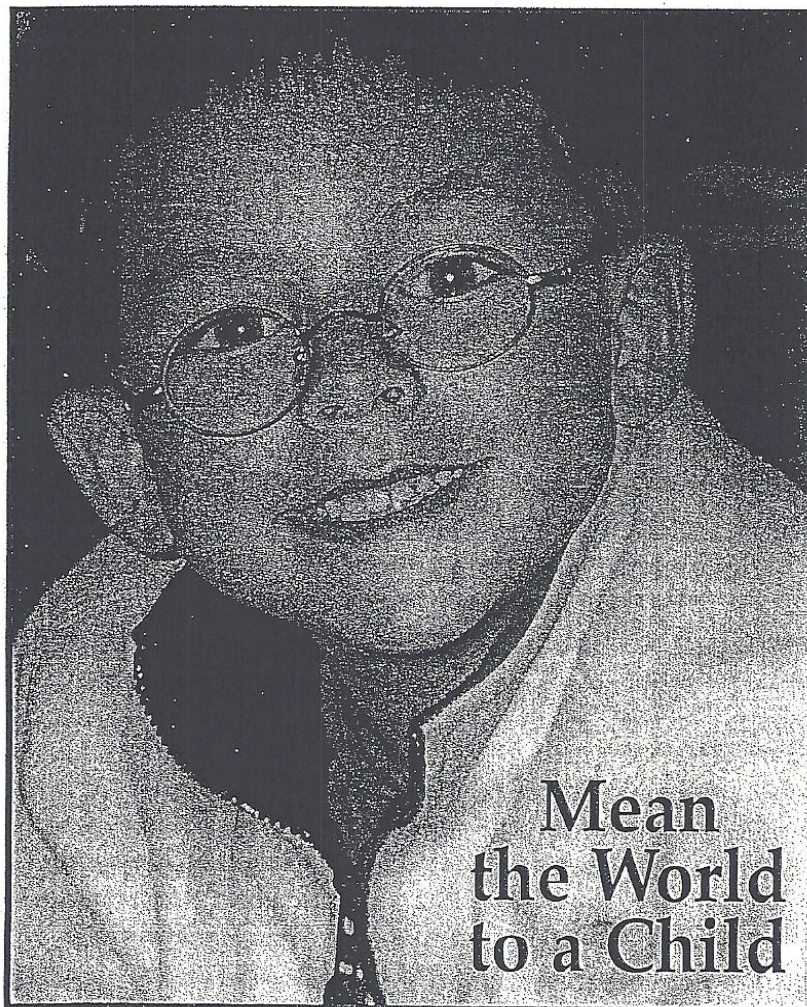
children of this age think in pictures. So I got this picture in my mind. "Rachel has a rolodex in her mind of body parts. She flips through and gets to foot. I heard her say, "Ah ha, here's foot.

Here's another rolodex of clothing." So she flipped through and, "Ah ha, here's shoe." About the time I got through thinking about that process, Rachel stuck her foot out. I put her shoe on and off she went.

I could have done several other things. I could have sat down in front of her, taken her foot, put on her shoe and she would have gone. Or, I could have sat down in front of her, added words, "Let me have your foot. I'll put on your shoe and then you can go play."

Instead, I just sat. It took her a while to think through that whole process—making that first pass

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through the deep snow. The next time it will be easier. She is going to put it together, a little quicker, maybe, until finally she puts her own shoe on. And, incidentally, she might have put her own shoe on earlier if I had let her. This happened in my earlier, dumb days.

## The Rule of Eight

We have to allow this thinking process to happen and it doesn't happen quickly. You know the rule of eight, don't you? When you say a toddlers name, wait at least eight seconds before you say it again. They need that time to process. Remember to wait.

## The Child is Without Guile

Unless a child has been in an unhealthy home environment at home and brings negative learned patterns to school, the young child is without guile. There is not the sense of trying to fool you.

On the whole, young children are the most honest of people! That's one of the

reasons I love working with this age group. Three-to-six is very close.

Yes, you will get a child once in a while

who is trying to deceive you. But that child is the exception to the rule. Then you have to bend your rules somewhat to make things fit.

There are individual children who have difficulties. Often there is a difficulty in the home environment and the behavior reflects an adjustment that children feel they must make in order to survive.

## Separating School from Home

It is very difficult for young children to separate school from the home so they continue their misdirected behavior. It is really sad when they have fallen into a very destructive way of behaving and are not allowed just to be a toddler.

About three, when they are beginning to move into the period of the conscious absorbent mind, children can start to separate their behavior in different environments.

But remember, this change doesn't occur in a moment, like walking through a door. They go back and forth from the unconscious to the conscious mind.

## The Evolving Environment

The infant environment must be constantly evolving to meet the challenges of the developing body—and the developing mind. Toddlers aren't there yet. They are in the process.

Refinement comes after three. Remember Dr. Montessori's four planes of development. Acquisition of skills occurs between birth and three; refining skills occurs between three and six.

I think of the three-to-six as an explainable environment. There are a lot of presentations going on there. I think of the toddler environment as an explorable environment.

## What Do We Want for Our Children

We have to be careful about what we want to see happen for the children. Is it really independence and language and movement and order? Or, is it sit down in front of

the television and stay out of my sight, go potty when I put you on the pot and put everything away even though you spilled a hundred block on the floor?

First, let us be sure what it is that we are looking for and what we want the children to do. Then let us help the parents get the same vision that we have.

## A Child's Idea of an Activity

You have to watch to see what the children's idea of an activity is and what their idea of completeness is.

If you put out nuts and bolts, you might go by and see that someone has put all the nuts and bolts together. You might think, "Nobody is working with these nuts and bolts so I'll just put it away."

No. If you just sneak over there and undo them, the children will do them again.

When they walk by this time, they

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*The three-to-six is an explainable environment.*

*The toddler environment is an explorable environment.*



will think that somebody left the work unfinished and they take it as their own. If they see that all the nuts and bolts are together, they think the work is done and they walk by.

They want to go around completing activities but according to their idea of what complete means.

Finally...

I want to leave you with this thought.

Infants and toddlers, when they are allowed to be who they really are, have a great gift

for us—the gift of joy. If infants and toddlers are really where they need to be, doing what they need

Infants and toddlers, when they are allowed to be who they really are, have a great gift for us—the gift of joy.

to do, their lives are full of joy. Look for it. Expect it. Set up an environment that will let it happen. Understand it because they are in a processing phase. And—enjoy it. We do not have to justify what we are doing with toddlers in terms of anybody else if we are

accomplishing this.

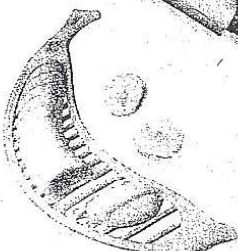
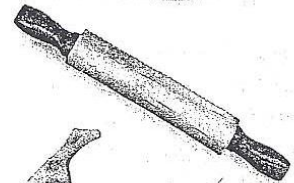
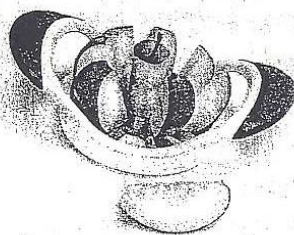
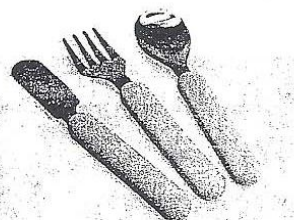
If your infants and toddlers come to you, learn and enjoy their day, then you have done your job.

As toddler teachers, we have the best job going—diapers and all. But we have a very big job to do. We have to help our

parents, our administrators and our colleagues understand the toddler.

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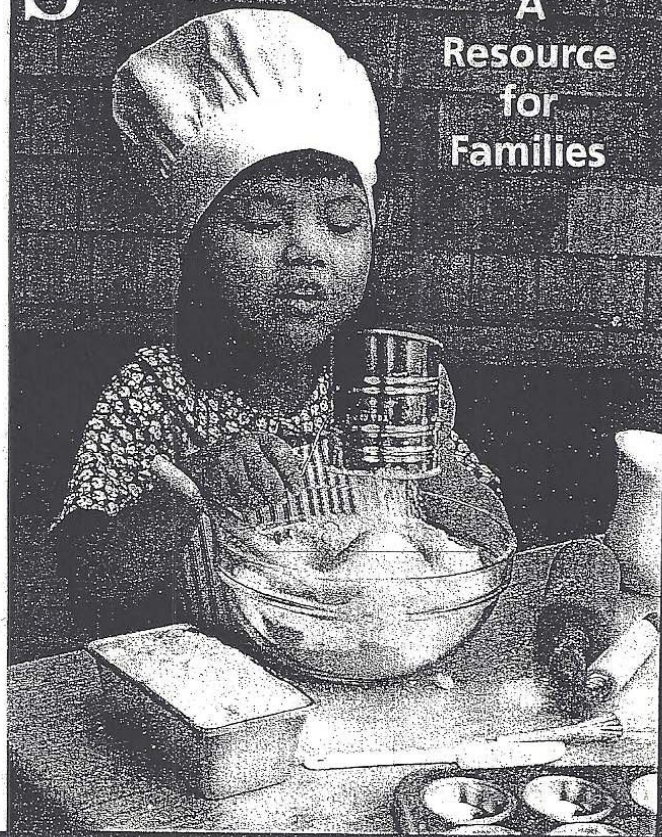
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## Redirecting Children: An Avoidance Sheet

Beware of

- a) Judgmental words
- b) Superlatives, including always and never
- c) Negative words
- d) Counting: that's the tenth time I have asked you...
- e) Making a command into a choice... ending a sentence with okay?
- f) Focusing on the doer not the deed
- g) Imprecision

Avoid saying

- a) Stop that!
- b) No hitting!
- c) You're a good kid!
- d) No, no, that's not right!
- e) Put your coat on this way, okay?
- f) That doesn't belong there.
- g) Don't you understand?
- h) You never listen!
- i) I like the way that Eric is sitting
- j) You can't do this now
- k) What a beautiful drawing!
- l) Don't touch that!
- m) Good boy!