

# Maria Montessori's Special Lecture

A Lecture Given at the Montessori Congress in Oxford, England, 1936

*Maria Montessori*

## Part I

Rather than a lecture, I wish to have a discussion and exchange of ideas. First, I wish to explain this idea: that there is a profound and decisive distinction between the period between birth and puberty, and from puberty onwards. In the first period, which is our special period in pedagogy, we have the human individual creating and constructing itself. It is the individual which is the centre of all. All effort is directed towards the acquiring of functions; what we may call success, is the acquisition of the possibility of independent functioning.

The baby, as we know, when it is born, takes on functions; but there is a special social acquisition on his part because with each new function he can enter a social relation with those around him. When he is born he associates with his mother. When he can walk he seeks out other people.

To put it clearly, there is no clash between independence and the social individual. Only when there is independent development can he associate with others. So it is while we give the child all these means to become independent he develops vivacity and the possibility of social intercourse.

There is a social union of love. The love of the mother and other people for the child and the love that the child himself gives. As Crichton-Miller has said, for the child's development it is necessary to have security, valuation and freedom. What he called valuation of the child is descriptive of all we give of affection, encouragement and admiration. We have an individual which must be observed and helped, although the help must be limited to all that is purely necessary. This social union has the individual as the centre attracting value to himself and giving. He is the centre.

At this stage, if we give religious instruction, it would be the idea of a God who helps, sees and never abandons; so in nature we should have the idea that nature takes care of all the individual animals. It is a God who regards the individuality of children, animals and plants. Everything is a separate individual for God.

The same idea is present in the aid we give to the child to analyse all the things and sensations in the environment. We have a great mission to aid the individual in a clear, defined way. We try to facilitate what for him is a great effort; by clarity, materializing everything for him, even



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abstractions. So that he can handle materialized abstractions and go deep into them.

From birth to the age of twelve he lives a complete life. He acquires a wide culture by this means, and independence. He is able to acquire culture that corresponds to two years in advance of the usual school attainment. He has been educated in the manners of life, so that he can live in a social unit with ease.

At puberty he comes to the end of this period. Nature marks the end. It is an extra ordinary change, a point of life which might be called a rebirth. At this point the individual child is becoming a new born social being who did not exist before. As the newly born creature always is, he is weak and in need of help. This piece of creation is in need of the same detailed and minute care as is given to the baby. As with the baby he is delicate and liable to be attacked by disease. The fact that the body is growing is the cause of the weakness.

There is also a powerful inner development going on. This is a mystery just as the new born child is a mystery from a spiritual point of view. At all those stages of life

when something is forming we call it the mystery of creation. If there is the mystery of creation forming man for social life, we must call it Divine. The youth cannot voluntarily form himself. It is a delicate and all important point in life for which we are responsible.

What it is, we do not yet really know. We must hasten to understand and find out what they mean. If we are to arrive at any knowledge, the child, the youth alone can reveal it to us. We must give him conditions in which it will be possible for him to reveal it to us.

Where they usually change the teacher each hour without any sequence, it is hardly possible in the space of an hour to adopt the new way of thought. Whenever the adaptation is arrived at, the teacher changes. So this precious and difficult period passes as a succession of changes or gasps. I once studied the rules of religious life with great interest. In a religious order one finds forms of penance undertaken to purge the soul and make it better. All penances of a corporal kind were abolished in one order. There was to be no fasting, or limits to sleeping; one could even pray seated. But there was one form of penance, which was that when you began an occupation you were obliged to stop it. Never

were you allowed to finish it. As soon as you were interested, you had to stop. Very few people could hold against this refined form of torture, yet this is the life that youth normally leads at this period.

Why it is done, there is no reason. The reform of school for this period is very important. Many schools have been reformed. These are modifications of the old, more or less successful. They give greater liberty to the youth, and the choice of studies. Abstractions are materialized, making the work easier and more fruitful; the buildings and gardens are more beautiful.

I consider that as we are speaking of ideas based on development we must be more revolutionary. It is not the partial increase of liberty we have to consider, but what is the best form of liberty to help the child realize his independence. The crucial point is that we have to make real the social independence of man. We have not merely to consider the fatigue, etc., we have to know what the feelings and instincts are essential to this period of life. The child's sentiments are changing now. He is no longer satisfied to be the pet of the household. He has a sense of dignity. He feels that he is observed. He does not wish to be held at less worth than others. He wants to take the first steps in social life and he is anxious as to the figure he will cut. Many psychologists agree that the inferiority complex and timidity is developed at this stage. This brings serious consequences later. I was told the story of a boy whose whole character changed at this age, owing to the consciousness that he was poor and not dressed like others. The mother did all she could, but he always remained depressed. If his clothes were neat, he said they were out of fashion. Nothing could be done. He had a sense of injustice, and anxiety. Whereas he would like to enter in triumph into this social existence. Social differences at this stage are a form of anguish not felt either before or later. At this age in the school we may bring about a repugnance to social life. These forms of barriers between us and other people are formed at this age. The individual grows up weakened, humiliated and isolated. Whereas nature intended youth to go forward with the head held high and a competent step.

Without doubt, what we have here is a real idea of the social mission of society itself. It is entirely false to suppose that we apply the same principles as up to this age, the period of breaking up and isolating parts in the environment. Hitherto the adolescent has been occupied with movement in the environment; now by his own effort he is mastering the environment around him. The early period should be symbolized by moveable things. This period we could symbolize by the earth, because from it each social unit has its origin, and the earth is still firm.

Man's first work is to exploit the earth. His work is with the earth itself. Apart from the practical fact that it is the best thing for the child to be removed from his home and its emotional environment into the country, he finds peace and tranquillity in an environment new to him.

The two years he has gained in study can be given back to use in a different way in this new period of life in the fields far from the annoying forces of life. He can break away from the warning anxieties of his elders, not to be late for school, dinner, etc.; he steps out into another life where all men are equal and he can get spiritual and mental repose. Who knows what will emerge from the soul of youth at this stage of life. Take an episode from the life of Christ. He, too, fled from home in the search for wisdom. I no longer belong to the family as the child. I have something else to do. This mission of man must come to each child. He must be relieved from all that might hold him back. He must attain the full stature of man. In this epoch we get the idea of a God who guides not one individual, but humanity in its destinies.

Practically he ought to be working, not just for fun. In many reformed schools we find that form of work. Work is done as exercise upon the land. They may study biology, or they build a house in the woods, but it is no good to live in. Just as Froebel taught his children to lay tables for dolls, whereas we give real work when they lay the tables; so with this other work it must be really as serious. I am merely speaking of the initiation that is to help this period of change, but I do insist that the work must be real, so that the adolescent lives out a social life. Social life must be taken in its essence.

Social life is not sitting in a room together or living in a city. It does not regard social relations. The essence is that something is produced which is useful to the whole of society and is changed for something else. Production and change, exchange, are the essence of social existence. It is a production and exchange which does not only bring in the people living near to one, but those far distant. Division of labour enters into it too. Well, the youth should experience this in life. This is the secret of social life. The other is only casual. He must live it and feel it deeply. This, for me is the most important, I mean, the adolescent must produce and sell what he wants; sell it so that he may buy something else. Produce for people unknown to him. This represents a connection.

There is a vivacity of life in all this. Little by little he is able to realize social life and find his own economic independence. This is the root and a great advance in the correction of many ills in society, because we have a strong mental barrier against money and work, because we have profaned

them. Whereas exchange is the link between all men forming society. Work stands for the natural form of life. There is no mystery of money which up till now has resided in poppa's pocket or locked up so that we can never get at it. It is even essential for someone to die in order that we may get it. Study is even prompted so that he may be able to earn money. All growth may be sacrificed for this. But this should not be thought of in connection with study. It will come by life. When we see that life is a matter of work and exchange, it has a vivacity exceeding anything that we find on the tennis court, in the cinema or ballroom.

In Germany I saw people keen and eager. The whole day was a festival. Parents visited the school, buying what was there, or else the boys went out to sell it, There was a variety in life, and yet the individual was getting opportunity for repose. Many forms of study can be done parallel with this, all leading the child to a clear comprehension of the time in which he is living. We must help him to discover what part he is to play in society, for anyone who realises his own mission must respond to the environment. The nobility of the youth's soul will find expression in this way without the assistance of vocational guidance.

## Part II

I should like to clear up some points already touched upon and I repeat these points to recall the fact that the life of the child is one of direct relationships with other people. We resume these social relations under the name of love. It is the art of being among other human beings which is based on certain feelings and ways and manners that facilitate living together. When I say this is the setting in which the child finds himself at the earliest age, I do not mean it disappears when he grows older. The 'child' as he goes on living does not disappear, he grows up. We ought to perceive that there is a period in life of condensation or concentration of love, and to store up this love (just as people going into a gassed region take a supply of oxygen in an apparatus). When adolescents enter on the second stage of life, we have to deal with another set of relations.

These relations represent the new social life. As I was saying yesterday, children on the land are given the possibility of living over again the primitive social existence which is built up on the principles of production and exchange that comprise the whole of social life and are the very embryo of society.

The essence of this social life is work. Work and exchange bring together people far apart bring them in touch who would never otherwise be in touch at all.

I am not here stating, as many do, that the child needs to pass through the same stages of growth as primitive society. The exercises I propose have not this object at all. I mean something else: Looking on the child with the same eyes as we looked on the newly born, we see that he has a sensitive period to go through which has the same relation to social life as previous sensitive periods have to individual life. As in the previous sensitive periods, the growing man fixes and stabilizes functions which he would otherwise not be able to develop; so it is essential at this period of life to have the possibility of fixing his relation with social life, because in this sensitive period he is prepared to take up his part in the social life of humanity. It is the same psychological mechanism at work as is at work in achieving perfection of speech during the sensitive period for acquiring speech.

Real earnest work and the exchange of its products constitute the mechanism or working of social life, because the aggregate of human society is based on the division of labour. Labour is requisite to carry on the production essential to the existence of mankind. All the rest follows as the consequence of that, i.e., organization.

Man does not live as do the animals in direct dependence on nature, nor like the birds and beasts seeking food in the environment. It is essential to understand that man lives by and through the work of other men. Human society for its very existence requires reciprocal help. This law becomes more and more rigid as society goes on progressing, and becomes progressively more complicated, so it is only through the society of his fellows that man can exist at all.

Man does not any longer live in purely natural surroundings although he does live in a natural way, but the nature in which he lives today is a nature that man themselves have built up, a supranature, a state of nature constructed upon nature.

In speaking of the child, we are now dealing with the manners and rules of social existence, and we come to the need of laws regulating work and exchange. People think this a complicated affair, but it is essential that the child shall be able to live it through in its essential meaning: work, produce, buy, sell and really handle money for himself, and realize how necessary it is to have rules for all this, and that they should be observed.

If any mistake or oversight is made by the child such as being late for a meal, he can remedy it by asking pardon, but here the rule has to be observed absolutely in order that the youth may understand what social discipline means. To this state of things man has to adapt himself in the course of exploiting the soil. The youth has to arrive at

this experience of actual living, and thus changes in his way of life come about.

In the first period (up to puberty) if he breaks the rule and arrives late for school or something it is only an individual [sic], some adult may be upset and there the matter ends. But in organized society no infringement of law can be tolerated because it produces an upset in the whole organization. It is a different form of life that is lived in the group so closely knit together. A higher form of self-control is needed here, which is at the base of social education, and it has to be worked out and actually experienced in the sensitive period during which man is creating his social personality.

The division of labour and the necessities of exchange brings together a group of various persons. Human groups form in the human group such as nations. Not only exchange, connected with the exploitation of the earth links such groups, but they are also bound together by the common factor of speech. Our interest in children leads us to stress this fact.

Language which is so necessary as the means of communication between man and man is the treasure given us by the small child who, during his sensitive period for it, holds and arrests speech and keeps it intact. This language which cements these human groups and of which they are so proud, we owe to the child, so that if only for this fact the child is our collaborator in social life. Like the oxygen jacket in the simile already presented, the small child helps humanity in this way, too. From him we derive the connection with our fellow creatures.

To return to the adolescent, we have certain prejudices about money because we think it degrading for the child to handle it or earn money. We have noticed similar prejudices about the liberty of the child. People have thought liberty hostile to education. But when you understand it, liberty in school makes the child free to grow up, and it is the exercise by which we grow up.

I repeat the same thing about money in order that the immorality and error bound up with it may be destroyed, and we must extirpate them completely.

The consciousness of what money is must be present to the mind of the child. In theory it is taught in all schools. The process is described as first barter and then the introduction of money to facilitate the exchange of goods. Now it is interesting and curious to read the histories of Greece and Rome, but it is a more difficult problem when the subject has to be lived out and experienced. Then the meaning of money used as a substitute for exchange

becomes clear. What is money if not that which corresponds to the product of the worker? Because we have only learned this theoretically, we have to live it out. This is more easily said than done, but actual experience in this sphere fixes the fact, and what was an abstract principle becomes a living truth. It comes to life in the sensitive period in which the child is getting at the idea of justice.

This gives a basis for morality and responsibility which is entirely lacking in today's teaching about money. We treat money itself as an immoral thing, but this is not right. The very foundation of social morality is bound up with money. The child who really lives out this experience which teaches him the nature of money is going to arrive at a clear idea of what money means, of what its function is. Money has to circulate continually as the blood circulates in our tissues if cells and organs are to be fed. So that among the other laws the child is learning now, there is something grand to be grasped here, to realize that this is the most important fact in the organization of society and in social morality. Otherwise we are leaving the rising generation in a state of darkness which becomes increasingly dangerous and we present the youth with contradictions which have no meaning, as when we say it is well that money circulates, but on the other hand it is well to save money. On the one hand we say money is one of the first necessities, and on the other that it is a dirty thing. Because men grow up into life in this state of mental confusion they are ignorant and in darkness about the mechanism of finance which holds in its possession all the world's money, and therefore all the world's work. Because it is master of work, finance is master of life. We want men to be conscious and free, but they are the slaves of their own ignorance of all the forms of organization of social life, and education only comes into it to isolate them from that real life in which they ought to take part. In education, social life in this sense, is left entirely out of consideration. We worry about what we ought to teach in universities and neglect what is essential to life. Most of the people who do the most advanced studies spend the greater part of their time shut up in a room hearing lectures in which everything has about the same importance.

Turning to religion, this is not a study you can teach like other subjects. It requires a method peculiar to itself; just as the constitution of society requires something peculiar to itself. If a child has got the idea of the nature of society and the part he has to play, you have something quite different from taking up one single point and studying that. When we consider God as the director of human affairs it is quite a different matter from teaching, say, Greek religion. We must distinguish these fundamental matters from matters of more detail. It is all different from the wooden objects and the paper the children used to use and more like the

Japanese paper flowers that expand in water. What we do is to thrust on the child one of the paper bullets of which we understand nothing. Episode and essence are confused in such a way that we come to realize nothing, we just give this jumbled compress without knowing how it will open out or what it will show. Whereas we should open out and explain to the child what is waiting for him in life. This is the clarity which is most useful to man, and in order to get this degree of clearness it is necessary to give extensive culture. All the different subjects of life's curriculum have to be understood as forming part of one whole, so that not only in economics must we so explain the meaning of the subject, but we must have centres from which all other subjects radiate. I believe youth is interested in synthesis and in getting a general grasp of things, and afterwards goes into detail.

The fact that youth is capable of earning money is a complex one, but a very important moral fact on which all social morality depends. Social morality has this basis, this is the material part of morality, a real material by which we can understand how an error in distribution is a moral fact which brings a social disease.

Such a centre of social disease will branch out and affect the individuals. We become awful that around the oscillation of money there is an oscillation of public health, and we reach the conclusion that there are some things we do need, and others we do not, and that we may even be physically ill because we possess a number of useless things; so that the normal distribution of money is necessary to health as the normal circulation of the blood to the health of the individual creature. If the blood is unhealthy all the tissues are affected so that it is in the interest of all that we should be closely acquainted with this circulation and exercise control over it.

How would youth earn money? How is it possible when there are so many unemployed, and together with this a prejudice against young people working?

There is only one way of solving this problem. The adolescent must not work in the adult world, nor earn as an adult earns. Society must create for educative ends possibilities of this work for earning adolescents. Youth, as a social being, may be compared to a little child in school whom we educate to do all he can for himself; and in order that he may, we must provide the means. We allow him to dress and brush his hair and scrub the table, and we are aware the child has said to us: 'Help us to do it by ourselves.' In the case of adolescence there is the identical need of help to do it themselves. Society has the duty of organizing the world for childhood and youth. We cannot remedy the terrible ills of our social system today by fine speeches or

painting the schools bright colour. The adult has to realize the importance of the adolescent getting vital experience of life just as the young child does his work in school. The sense of independence gained by the young child who does things for himself reacts to the advantage of the adult. The mother of five children who can dress and wash themselves and get themselves off to school has a different life from the mother of those who cannot. We have also seen the character which develops in these children and something of what it seems to be a normal individual. Psychological normality gives facility in understanding and living out what one is studying. The adolescent's case is such a complete analogy to the small child's need of acting alone that we use it as a means of solving the problem of how he is to earn money and say that every needless help is a positive obstruction to the work of education.

Carrying this criterion into the next period of life we do not suppose that the adolescent is to live exclusively by the help of others in the economic sphere. On the old plan he would have to ask his father for a penny for the tram or for a cigarette paper. It is not the not having these things that is bad for the child. It is the feeling of being dependent on adults for every act of life, like keeping a bird tied by its legs so that it cannot fly.

All this leads to psychological deviation from normality on all the planes of life. The little child dependent on its mother will not develop psychologically, and psychoanalysis has shown how this defect, and the adaptation which follows, leads to psychic diseases. How is youth to arrive at full stature if continually harassed by enquiries of the parents as to why he has not done this or that? But if you realize that he is capable of working for himself and penetrating the labyrinth of life, this leads to the development of the normal personality. the contrary leads to the formation of the inferiority complex, that impotence of will and obscurity of the intelligence that are such a great danger to the social existence of today. This part of the adolescent's training, his economic independence, may be compared to the relief of the mother of five in relation to the adult point of view. Because the adolescent can to this extent help himself economically he is less of a burden to his parent. The world in which this may become possible has to be created for the life of the young so that they may begin to live and not begin to deviate from the normal path of living.

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