

## Sensitive Periods

What is a sensitive period? According to Dr. Maria Montessori, a sensitive period is when the child shows their predisposition to developing new knowledge and mastering skills through their senses. The need to explore everything, to understand and to master necessary skills in order to reach their full potential. Examples of this are; crawling, walking, standing, climbing, talking, socializing, understanding the world around them, toileting, feeding themselves, etc.

### Sensitivity to Order:

This appears in the first year and continues through to the second year. During this time, the child is striving to sort out and categorize all his experiences. It makes it easier for them if there is some kind of order in their lives. They liked to be cared for in the same way by a primary caregiver in a familiar environment. The child needs consistency and familiarity so that they can orient themselves and construct a mental picture of the world. This need is particularly evident in the child about the age of 18 months. During this sensitive period, change can be very upsetting for the child. Even a minor change can feel like the end of the world to them. Providing order in a child's life helps prevent them from becoming disoriented. This is why the prepared environment is so important for the young child. Order helps the child to orient himself and organize his mind.

### Sensitivity for Language:

The sensitive period for language begins at birth and continues throughout the first plane of development (0-6 years). A baby hears his mother's voice and watches her lips and tongue. By the age of six, with almost no direct teaching, children will have developed a large vocabulary, basic sentence patterns and the inflections and accents of the language they are exposed to on a regular basis. They will continue to acquire more complex sentence structures and extend their vocabulary throughout their childhood. If a child has not been exposed to language (reading, listening, singing, writing etc.) regularly, during this period, they will not have the skills needed to communicate effectively. Maria Montessori believed that it was particularly important for adults to converse with children throughout this period, continually enriching their language and giving them every opportunity to learn new words.

### Sensitivity to Walking:

When the young child learns to walk at around 12 to 15 months, they have a great need to perfect the skill. They will walk for a great length before becoming tired of exercising this newly acquired skill. Maria Montessori wrote in her book The Secret of Childhood, “It is underestimated how long a child can walk for, once they are allowed to do it at their pace, however the adult must be aware that they have no concept of time and they love to explore.” During this period the child is moving from being helpless into an active being.

### Sensitivity to the Social Aspects of Life:

At the age of about two and a half years to three years, the child becomes aware that they are a 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 Maria Montessori believed came about spontaneously and was not directed by internal drives. She noticed that at this stage, children begin to model themselves after adult social behavior and they gradually acquire the social norms of their group. This is an ideal time for developing social convention and manners. Understanding and following rules as well as learning grace and courtesy are very important throughout this sensitivity. During this period you may find that children need and want to be accepted by anybody including parents, friends, family, etc. Circle time, group play, conflict resolution, Grace and Courtesy lessons are all extremely beneficial to a child in this period.

### Sensitivity to Small Objects:

When the child reaches their first year and becomes more mobile with a larger environment in which to explore, they are drawn to small objects such as insects, pebbles, stones and grass. They will pick something up, look at it closely and perhaps put it in their mouth. The urge to pay attention to detail that children of his age have is part of their effort to build up an understanding of the world. This sensitive period allows children to become drawn to the Practical Life materials.

## Sensitivity to Learning Through the Senses:

Studies have shown that the 5 senses develop in the womb. Once they are born, their senses continue to develop and become more refined. The child can absorb the qualities of the objects in his environment by tasting and touching them, therefore allowing the neurological structures of language to be developed. Montessori referred to the tongue and the hands as 'the instruments of man's intelligence'. This interest in sensory experience and the activities which they stimulate help to refine the child's senses. Maria Montessori recommended that babies be kept close to their caregivers so they can see and hear everything that is going on around them. Then as soon as the child can move around, they need plenty of freedom so they can explore. The child needs this sensory exploration in order to develop to their potential. This is a good example of the importance of a carefully prepared environment, free of dangers and the need to limit the child's exploration. Preventing this sensory exploration by constantly saying "no" and confining the child to confined places, ie., highchairs, playpens, cribs, etc., for long periods of time, their learning will be inhibited.

These are the main sensitive periods that Montessori believed every child passes through. A child can have other sensitive periods too, for example a child can have a sensitive period for pouring. Throughout this period you may find that a child will repeat this action for long periods of time on a daily basis. This can often be puzzling to an adult, but often the process is more important than the end result to a child. Adults pour things to move them from one place to another, but the child's focus is on the simple act of pouring itself.