Normalization and Deviation

Introduction

We have been painting a picture of universal human development; the natural, normal process that all humans undergo in their journey to adulthood. We have talked about how the child constructs her mind and personality through her interactions with the environment, and how the sensitive periods guide her in seeking out particular experiences essential for development. We have established that children all over the world follow the same basic developmental patterns and each becomes an individual of her time and place, never existing before and never to come again. Every child comes into the world with a universal plan for development; if that plan of development is supported, she will grow into a healthy, beautiful child- healthy and beautiful in her own distinctive way.

Environmental Influences

Although all newborns share a universal plan of development, by the age of 3 there are vast differences between children. Development does not always go according to plan. Young children absorb experiences that will support their development, but they are also completely vulnerable to experiences in their environment that may thwart their development, both physical, and as you will see, psychological.

Our understanding of the environmental impact on physical human development is relatively recent. Not that long ago in human history, we used to think that children were just born the way they were, and some were just lucky, and some were not. Some of us thought birth defects meant that babies were cursed, or the parents had angered the gods. Now we know that adverse environmental conditions have a direct effect on physical development. We learned that babies born with missing limbs were not just “unlucky,” this was a tragic result of thalidomide poisoning in their environment. We learned that during pregnancy, vitamin deficiencies, alcohol and drug abuse, or smoking can have a direct impact on a baby’s physical and mental development. We have also learned that the right intervention can realign many atypical developments. A cleft palate can be surgically reconstructed. A prosthetic limb can offer independence to a child born without a foot. A child born mentally retarded can learn to live a happy and useful life. We also know that these circumstances are never the child’s fault, and that all children deserve, as their birthright, to be completely accepted, loved, and supported to their fullest potential.
Advancements in our understanding of physical development have opened the door towards greater understanding of environmental impact on children’s psychological development. We are beginning to understand how the mind and the body are connected, particularly during the first six years of life, and how recognizing and supporting the integration of physical and mental development is essential in work with young children.

Yet, we adults often fail to support that development. We cannot completely protect the child from the vicissitudes of life. Accidents, set-backs, and regressions occur in the course of life. Life, by its nature, is unpredictable, and so even the most nurtured child finds obstacles in her path that can negatively alter her development. There are obstacles from well-intentioned adults, obstacles from neglectful or passive adults, obstacles in the environment, and even obstacles from within the child herself, in the form of illness or inheritance. Here, we will examine the effects of obstacles to psychological development, and see, just as with physical development, how the right intervention can bring the child back to the healthy, beautiful path of normal childhood development.

**Obstacles and their Effects**

As we have said, obstacles to a child’s psychological development can come from many sources. Well-meaning adults might try so hard to take care of the child—anticipating her every want and doing everything for the child, that they inhibit her independence and foster emotional dependence. Other adults are either unable or unwilling, through ignorance or circumstance, to provide the support necessary for the children’s best possible development, abandoning the child. Some adults do all they know, parenting the way they were parented, and so cycles of unconstructive behavior are repeated over generations. When we introduced sensitive periods, we discussed obstacles created by the environment, by either a lack of stimulation or by children not permitted to interact with the environment. Still other obstacles come from within the child. These might be childhood illnesses that temporarily suspend development, such as ear infections affecting hearing, or more profound disturbances such as the pre-natal effects of alcoholism or drug abuse, or developmental challenges such as dyslexia, autism, or mental retardation.

Sometimes, the very process of adaptation, of becoming a person of your time and place, will deprive children of normal development. Far too many children are born into societal conditions of war, poverty, deprivation, and violence. In order to survive, they adapt to these conditions, and death, depression, and anger are infused into their being. Because of their absorbent minds, they
adapt to their environment, but the characteristics they develop are not those of healthy, normal children. Their environment has caused psychological defects.

Obstacles to development, and how children respond to them, are as different as the individuals who encounter them. The obstacles that children face during their development are like debris in a river; smaller pebbles and sticks can get swept along with the force of the river, and we may not even be aware of them unless they are deposited further along the riverbanks downstream. Larger obstacles, like larger rocks or boulders, cause the flow of the river to detour around them, sometimes creating a divergent stream going off in another direction. If there are too many obstacles, large rocks and boulders can build up and create a dam; inhibiting the flow of water so that even the smaller sticks and pebbles get caught up in the barrier. What was once a natural stream of flowing water backs up upon itself and floods the banks; spilling out in all directions, sometimes altering the landscape forever.

We can compare the flow of the river to the child’s horme—her vital life force. When the child’s mental and physical energies are integrated and can work in harmony; when she is free to move and interact within a safe and stimulating environment, her development can flow unhampered. When the integration of mental and physical energies is thwarted by obstacles, these energies can scatter or become unfocused, causing negative effects on her natural development. (Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, p. 160, Ballantine)

The obstacles that children encounter vary in significance according to their severity and the child’s age. Difficulties or obstacles that occur during pregnancy can be much more difficult to overcome than those that happen during the first three years of life. The years from 3-6, when the child is still forming her personality, can be a time to remediate those negative experiences, but those that are not corrected not only remain, they worsen. The child crystallizes negative experiences in the same way as positive experiences. The effects of the obstacles can become a permanent fixture in her personality. Later, it is much more difficult and requires conscious effort to work through these blockages. (Montessori, The Absorbent Mind, “Character and its Defects in Childhood,” p. 195, Kalakshetra)

**Deviations and How They Manifest**

Children who *continually* encounter obstacles to their development begin to exhibit predictable, consistent behaviors and characteristics. Montessori called these behaviors and characteristics “deviations.” She did not label or blame the child; the children are not “deviant.” They have simply *deviated*, or *turned off course*, from their path of normal development.
While there are a multitude of ways each individual child could react to obstacles and be turned off course, Montessori summarized them in two basic categories: the behavior manifestations of strong children - those who resist obstacles, and weak children - those who submit or surrender to obstacles. The strong children will fight and defend themselves against conditions that thwart their development. They exhibit defensive behaviors of aggression, disobedience, uncooperativeness, and often scream and have tantrums. Weaker children will surrender to obstacles and become passive. They may be lazy and bored, wanting others to entertain them. They may be whiny, clingy, and cry to get what they want. Sometimes they lie or steal; passive defenses to get what they want. (Montessori, The Absorbent Mind, “Character and its Defects in Childhood,” p. 196-7, Kalakshetra)

In another way of describing the same characteristics, Montessori also used the terms “fugues” and “barriers” to explain children’s reactions to obstacles.¹ These were psychological terms used in her time, and you will come across them when you read her work. Although the terms are not currently used, we still recognize the behaviors and characteristics they describe. Fugues and barriers occur when the child’s mental and physical energies are separated.

Fugues might begin when a child continually tries to interact with her environment, but is prohibited from doing so. She seeks certain experiences but is unable to find them, or act on them. Eventually, such children flee from reality into fantasy - think of the related word “fugitive.” To varying degrees, these children cannot interact meaningfully with their real world, and so retreat into a fantasy world, a world of pretend. (Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, pp. 160-162, Ballantine) I remember working with a little girl who so engrossed in her fantasy world that she was unable to connect with any of the real materials in our classroom- everything became something else- a castle, a plate of cookies, an animal. Another little guy refused to answer or acknowledge his real name; he was, “Space Boy.” The interesting thing about this little boy was that his parents supported this behavior. They thought it was cute and imaginative- of course, this reinforced his disconnect from real interactions.

Barriers are the opposite type of separation of mental and physical energies. While fugues development when the child cannot interact physically, barriers form when the child’s mental life is not supported. When a child’s intelligence is suppressed or squelched by discouragement, he may protect himself by putting up a kind of mental curtain to hide behind. He protects himself

¹ See Chapter IV “Psychic Deviations” in The Secret of Childhood for more details about deviations.
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from further discouragement. This child may at first appear stubborn or unwilling to try, but eventually he becomes unable – perhaps convincing himself that he cannot learn. These barriers can persist into adulthood; just think of how many adults say, “Oh, I am terrible at math,” or, “I could never draw.” The intelligence and creativity once existed, but were derailed at an early age. (Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, pp. 162-165, Ballantine)

The behaviors and attitudes of deviation have become so commonplace in children that they are often thought of as normal characteristics of childhood. Just think of some of the words we have used: overactive imagination, inattentive, messy, lazy whiney, clingy, destructive, bored, selfish, aggressive, untruthful… aren’t these words that many people would use to describe typical, normal childhood behaviors?

While they may be commonplace, it is important that we recognize that these behaviors are not normal. We cannot accept, or worse, expect these deviations in children, just because they are widespread. Being two years old does not have to be terrible. Boys don’t have to be aggressive and love guns. Adolescents do not have to be withdrawn or angry.

I’m going tell you a story about widespread deviation that was considered normal. In the Swiss Alps, there was a time of widespread goiters- grossly enlarged thyroid glands -and a very high percentage of children were born with severely stunted physical and mental development. Early alpine explorers came across entire villages affected by this condition. No one knew what caused it, it was just thought to be hereditary, or “just the way things were.” Eventually, it was discovered that these physical and mental conditions were the result of prolonged iodine deficiency. Something missing in their environment caused their mental and physical development to deviate from the normal path. When the iodine deficiency was corrected, the occurrences of physical deformity and mental retardation disappeared.

Just as the people in that remote village in the Swiss Alps developed common physical and mental deformities as a result of their environment, many of the common negative behaviors and characteristics, what Montessori deemed deviations, have evolved in response to obstacles in the child’s environment. Obstacles block the normal, natural path of human development.

And, just as what was once considered “normal development” in that Swiss village dramatically changed with the right intervention, so too did Montessori see the children’s deviations disappear with the right intervention- an environment that supported normal development. This phenomenon was what captured the world’s attention. This was the “Miracle in San Lorenzo.”
“What They Showed Me”
What makes this so incredible is that it was completely unexpected. Montessori had no intention of changing children’s behaviors and personality characteristics. She just wanted to see what “typically developing” children would do with the materials and techniques she used with the children in the asylum.

The children that came to the first Casa in San Lorenzo exhibited all of the same kinds of deviated behaviors that we see today in children. In the same way that many adults view children today, Dr. Montessori thought the children’s behaviors were typical and so, were perfectly normal. Weren’t some children just clingy and whiney? Weren’t boys just messy and destructive? Didn’t all children fight over toys, and need treats and rewards in order to get them to do anything? She did not set out to change these behaviors and characteristics, she did not expect to change the children, she only wanted to appease the building owners by keeping these little vandals and ruffians from destroying their buildings, and do a little anthropological study in the process.

Consider the circumstances of that first Casa. At that time, there was a wretched area of Rome where 30,000 people were crowded together living in dire conditions. There were unemployed workers, beggars, prostitutes, former convicts, and children living in partially constructed shelters. A social reform group, the “Association for Good Building,” was created with the intention to reform the slums of Rome by building modest apartment buildings and providing in each, the “admirable idea of gathering together all the little children under school age (from 3 to 6) in a kind of ‘school in the house‘.” In addition to the school in San Lorenzo, there were immediate plans to open about 16 such schools in the apartments or tenements. (Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, “The History of Methods,” p. 31, Kalakshetra, 1966, Johnstone trans.)

What this means for us in terms of our topic today, is that in a relatively short period of time, Montessori’s observations of what happened in that first Casa were replicated all over Italy, and shortly thereafter, all over the world.

Montessori described those first children as “timid and clumsy, apparently stupid and unresponsive. They could not walk together and the mistress had to make each child take the pinafore of the one in front...they wept and seemed to be afraid of everything...they did not answer when spoken to. They were really like a set of wild children. (Not) like the wild boy of Aveyron, but (wild) in a forest of people, lost and beyond the bounds of civilized society.” (Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, “The History of Methods,” p. 31-32, Kalakshetra, 1966, Johnstone trans.)
At this point, there was no “Montessori Method.” She simply wanted to observe what the children did spontaneously. Perhaps she was thinking, “Let’s just live together here, and be safe and happy, and try to get along, and let’s just see what happens…”

Almost immediately, she began to see changes. Much to her surprise, their personalities began a transformation. The whole range of negative behaviors and characteristics, previously thought to be normal, disappeared, and in their place, grew a new set of positive characteristics. The children who were messy became orderly and careful in their movements. The children who were once whiney and lazy enjoyed working hard. The children who were aggressive developed a calm and loving disposition towards each other. The dependent child became independent and wanted to do for himself. The shy became confident and persistent in their abilities. (Montessori, “The Two Natures of the Child.” AMI pamphlet, reprinted from Communications, 1961)

The news spread about this miraculous transformation. Visitors were frequent- the King and Queen of Italy, the daughter of the Prime Minister, an Argentine Ambassador, authors, and the press- no one would believe that children could be any different until they saw for themselves the “New Children.” The phenomenon was repeated over and over in the early Casas, with children from different social classes and civilizations. The world took notice. (Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, “What They Showed Me,” Ballantine)

There were the Messina orphans. Following a devastating earthquake in Sicily, sixty children were discovered among the ruins. These children were severely traumatized. They were numb, silent, and lost in sadness. They didn’t want to eat, and awoke in the night screaming and crying. The Queen of Italy made them her personal concern, and built them a beautiful Children’s House, taught by nuns in the Montessori manner. (Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, p. 148-9, Ballantine)

There were children of privilege in America- their teacher wrote to Dr. Montessori “The children snatched the apparatus from each other; if I tried to show something to one child, the others dropped what they were doing and noisily, without any purpose, crowded around me…They ran around the room without any end in mind…they took no care to respect things; they ran into the table, upset the chairs, and walked on the apparatus.” (Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, p. 152, Ballantine)
A teacher from Paris wrote, “I must confess that my experiences were really discouraging. The children could not concentrate on any work for more than a minute. They had no perseverance and no initiative...Sometimes they rolled on the ground and upset the chairs.” (Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, p. 153, Ballantine)

Although the types and reasons for the negative behaviors and characteristics of the children were very different from each other, all of the teachers reported the same phenomenon. These deviations fell away and were replaced by a consistent, predictable set of new positive characteristics that were very much alike. The children became kind and caring, they loved to work and didn’t need rewards or punishment, they wanted to be independent, they were confident and capable, they could concentrate for long periods of time, they chose materials and real activities over toys and pretend play. They were happy and satisfied. Montessori wrote, “The disorderly became orderly, the passive became active, and the troublesome disturbing child became a help in the classroom. This result made us understand their former defects had been acquired and were not innate. But all these disturbances came from a single cause, which was insufficient nourishment for the life of the mind.” (Montessori, The Absorbent Mind, “Character and it’s Defects,” p.199, Kalakshetra)

“True Normality”

Montessori’s conclusion was inescapable. These “new” behaviors were the true normal behaviors and characteristics of children. These positive, life-affirming characteristics reflected the real path of normal childhood development. Montessori wrote, “It is now apparent that every defect of character is due to some wrong treatment sustained by the child during his early years... Such deviations cannot be attributed to the personality itself. They come from a failure to organize the personality.” (Montessori, The Absorbent Mind, pp. 198, 203, Kalakshetra, 1984)

There is a characteristic set of behaviors that reflect optimal or normal human development, but these positive characteristic behaviors remain hidden if there are obstacles to development in the environment, or if the environment lacks the experiences the child needs.

When obstacles are removed and the child’s mental and physical energies can work together, the child is able to return to the healthy, normal, course of development. A dictionary definition for the word “normal” is “physically, mentally, and emotionally healthy.” Montessori used the word “normalization” to describe a return to the normal, healthy course of development.
Montessori makes the point that although the true nature of the child may not be visible to everyone, it was not she who created it- it was there all along hidden within every child. She came upon the conditions necessary to reveal the child’s true nature, by accident really, but the true, normal child was there all along. Just as Michelangelo believed that he did not create his sculptures, he merely liberated them from the rock they were imprisoned in, so too is there a healthy, beautiful child imprisoned by deviations. David was there in the marble, and all Michelangelo did was strip away the parts that were not the David.

Montessori did not create a different sort of child, the normalized child naturally exists, she only discovered what was truly normal and natural. She compares this discovery to that of Benjamin Franklin; he did not create electricity; electricity naturally exists in the world. Ben Franklin merely discovered it. The true nature of the child exists naturally inside, but Montessori discovered the conditions necessary for this normal state to manifest. She explains it in this way: “What the discoverer has the power to do is reproduce the conditions for the repetition of the phenomena he has seen. He does so because he understands what produces them.” (Montessori, “The Two Natures of the Child,” p. 4)

The Conditions Necessary for Normalization
Montessori was able to reproduce the conditions necessary for normalization. She discovered that normalization always followed a piece of work, freely chosen, done by the hands, with real objects, accompanied by mental concentration. She considered this a “cure” – a cure to the deviations, to return the children to the path of normal, healthy development. The change in children was so profound, that she soon considered normalization to be “the most important single result of our whole work.” (Montessori, The Absorbent Mind, “The Child’s Contribution to Society,” p. 204, Kalakshetra, 1984)

As these conditions are essential for our work with children, we must understand ourselves how to reproduce these results. We will introduce these ideas here, and develop each of them more fully as the course progresses.

“A piece of work…”

For the child, the idea of work is quite different than our adult idea of work. For some adults, work is drudgery- something I have to do in order to make a living. Generally, adults try to get their work over with as soon as possible so they can get on to something that’s actually fun. But for
children, work is entirely different. Their work is their life. Their whole being is wrapped up in constructing themselves; towards finding and acting on experiences that will help them develop their minds and bodies. Their work is any activity with this specific purpose, and the activity will be interesting if it serves this purpose. They are born to love themselves and therefore love their work. For the child, “work is love made visible.” (Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet,* “On Work”)

“...freely chosen...” “Freely chosen” does not mean that the child is free to persist in her deviations. “If freedom is understood as letting the children do as they like, using or more likely misusing, the things that are available, it is clear that only their ‘deviations’ are free to develop.” (Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind,* “The Child’s Contribution to Society,” p. 205, Kalakshetra, 1984)

What we mean by “freely chosen” is that the children have the liberty to follow their inner directives, their sensitive periods and human tendencies, and freely choose the activity that will best support their individual development at a given time. Development cannot be taught by another, or imposed upon the children. Each child constructs her own personality with her own efforts and experiences, following her own path. (Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind,* “The Child’s Contribution to Society,” p. 205, Kalakshetra, 1984)

“...done by the hands...”
It is the child’s hands that are the instrument of the mind. It is through work with the hands that the child is able to construct her intelligence. Think of the two streams of energy we talked about previously - the mental and physical. Montessori tells us that if the child’s intellect develops with the help of the hand, the level it reaches is higher and the child’s character is stronger. If however, “the hand moves aimlessly; the mind wanders about far from reality...these separate energies, finding nothing to satisfy them, give rise to numberless combinations of deviations...” (Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind,* “The Child’s Contribution to Society,” p. 203, Kalakshetra, 1984) The hand and the mind are the physical and mental streams of energy, united when the hand is guided by the attention of the mind. (Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind,* “Intelligence and the Hand,” p. 149-151, Kalakshetra, 1984)

“...with real objects...”
In order to hold the mind’s attention so that the hand can act with increasing control and care, it is essential that the activity be done with real objects. Real objects demand real attention and real control of movement. A glass pitcher, filled with water, will spill and break if the child doesn’t pay...
close attention to her movements. An empty plastic pitcher with pretend water will not engage the child’s mind to the same degree. Think of a little child banging wooden pegs on a hammering bench. He can flail the hammer mindlessly, looking all about without any real connection to the task at hand. But if he has a small sharp nail, a real hammer, and a stump of wood, he has to really focus his attention on coordinating the movements necessary to strike the nail in just the right way to drive it into the wood. Real objects facilitate concentration.

“...accompanied by mental concentration.”

This is the crux of the matter. It is not “occupation,” but concentration. It is not enough just to keep the child busy or occupied, “the essential thing is for the task to arouse such an interest that it engages the child’s whole personality.” (Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, “The Child’s Contribution to Society,” p. 206, Kalakshetra, 1984) The “whole personality” that Montessori refers to is the unification of physical and mental energy. Activities that deeply engage the child and produce concentration have been freely chosen because of developmental interest. In order for an interesting activity to lead to concentration, the activity must meet a developmental need and provide a degree of challenge. Challenge and interest lead to repetition, and repetition leads to concentration.²


Educators and psychologists have long struggled over the enigma of concentration. How can we “teach” children to concentrate? How does a good teacher keep children “on task?” What about the rise in attention deficit disorders? William James, a pioneer in the field of educational psychology, writes that the ability to voluntarily bring back one’s wandering attention is at the very root of judgment, character, and will, and that any education that would improve this ability would be “the education par excellence.” (Montessori, *Advanced Montessori Method, Vol.1*, “Attention,” p. 119, Clio, 1991)

But unlike traditional educators, we don’t think about how to “teach” the child to concentrate. Children are born with a profound ability to concentrate. All we have to do is look at an infant studying a human face, or witness the effort and concentration of a baby working to pull herself up on the coffee table. Montessori writes, “Concentration is a part of life. It is not the consequence of a method of education.” (Montessori, unpublished London lecture #32,

² See the diagram of the “Flow Channel” (p.74) that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi used to illustrate the balance of ability and challenge needed to maintain concentration or “flow” described in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.*
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December 10th, 1946) She observed, over and over, that it was not the adult that facilitated concentration; it was an activity or object that met some particular developmental need that fixed the child’s attention. Left uninterrupted, the child would concentrate on that activity until the inner need was satisfied—much as an infant will nurse at his mother’s breast with utter concentration and effort until he is satisfied.

Far too many children have had their natural ability to concentrate interrupted so many times that they have lost the ability to concentrate. We do a better job with newborns, perhaps because we don’t think what they are doing is concentrating anyway, but by the time a child is three years old, just think of all of the obstacles to concentration she has encountered. In an adult world the child is always being rushed off to someplace else when she wants to stay and look. The TV is on, with its flashing, rapidly changing images. We don’t have time to let children concentrate and learn how to do things themselves, we feed them and dress them and carry them about. As “new educators” then, our task is removing the obstacles to concentration, and returning the child’s natural ability to concentrate.

Instead of trying to coerce concentration to “keep a child on task,” we give the child the time and the liberty to work with an activity as long as she is interested. We learn to introduce the right activities at the right time to match the child’s developmental interest and level of challenge. We learn to recognize the signs of concentration, and protect that concentration.

When a child is concentrating, we will see six observable signs. She will have focused attention on an activity. She will exhibit control of movement, particularly the limited and controlled use of her hands. She will repeat the activity, with increasing exactness and precision. When she is finished, she will show evident pleasure and satisfaction. (Sackett, “The Art of Normalization,” AMI Refresher Course, Houston, February, 2009)

When we see these signs of concentration, we must not interfere with the child— not to correct mistakes, and not to praise. The most important thing is not that the child should do the activity well, but that the activity has captured the child’s interest and attention. The child will correct her own errors by repeating the activity, but if we interfere, then the focus is interrupted and the interest is lost. The same is true for praise. The child who is in this place of deep concentration, where her physical and mental energies are united, who is experiencing challenge, satisfaction and harmony does not need you to come over, interrupt her, and say “good job!” (Montessori, unpublished London lecture #32, December 10th, 1946)
This is the “recipe” for normalization then, a piece of work, freely chosen, done by the hands, with real objects, accompanied by mental concentration.

**The Transition from Deviation to Normality**

The child cannot exhibit both the characteristics of deviations and the characteristics of normality at the same time. There is a transition from one to the other, and it can go both directions. Ginni Sackett uses the analogy of two rooms separated by a short hallway. There is the “Room of Deviation” and the “Room of Normality.” We are constantly beckoning the child to leave his deviations behind, and experience what normal, healthy development feels like. We entice the child by providing interesting activities that match his developmental needs and offer opportunities for concentration. We have to believe that all children, despite the obstacles they have encountered, want to experience healthy, happy, normal development, and will want to come to the room of normality. But that doesn’t mean that they will be able to stay there always. Deviations are powerful, old habits are strong, and concentration relies on the delicate balance of interest and challenge. We have to continually observe the children to see what kinds of activities meet their needs at a given time, and change what we offer as development progresses.

In order to demonstrate the course of the children’s transition of normalization, Montessori methodically observed and diagramed children’s work habits, both individually and of the classroom generally. These diagrams are found in *The Advanced Montessori Method, vol. 1*, in the section called “Experimental Science.” There you will see patterns of children’s work, when concentration is weak and transitory, and also when the children’s concentration is strong and more consistent. The goal is that each child is consistently able to choose work that is challenging and can concentrate for increasing levels of time.

This process is dynamic and happens differently for every child. It can happen in a moment, or it can take a long time. One way to think about both the individual child and the group is to observe the children and designate three concentric rings. Those children who generally exhibit most of the characteristics of normalization, most of the time, are in the outermost ring. They can work independently and need from you only to be connected to the materials for development. The children in the middle ring do show characteristics of normalization, but are more fragile, and can slip back into their deviations. They are closer to you, and will need more support and protection. The children in the inner ring are the closest to you. These are the children that need you the most, for they are still under the control of their deviations. These children need your love and patience, and for you to continually look for “the child who is not yet there.”
Vivek

I want to tell you the story of Vivek, a five-year-old boy who came to my class in my second year of teaching. Before Vivek came to our community, his parents warned me that he had had a negative experience at his last school, and he was terrified of school and of teachers, and they only way they could convince him to try Montessori school was by telling him that he could leave at any time. Vivek agreed to come for one day.

His parents were not exaggerating. When Vivek arrived at school, he was the most frightened child I have ever seen. He stood just inside the door, wouldn’t come in, didn’t want to greet anyone, didn’t want to play or sing, or even eat snack. I just tried to appear as friendly as I could, and let him stand by the door. He agreed to come back for one more day.

On a day-by-day basis, Vivek gradually entered the classroom. He watched everything silently, but declined my offers of conversation, lessons, stories, singing… I was starting to feel like I wasn’t doing this boy any good, after all, he was 5 years old, but couldn’t read, write, and I wasn’t making any headway, but his parents were thrilled that he was willing to come to school at all, so he continued coming.

One day, Vivek was watching me shuffle some papers, and he said “I have some of that at my house.” Astonished that he actually spoke to me, I said, “Oh, you have paper at your house?” And he proceeded to tell me how he liked to make paper airplanes at his house. I asked him if he would like to do that here, and he said he might. I quickly gathered together some paper, tape, scissors, and string, and he began to make paper airplanes. He made them for several days. He brought them outside at recess and pulled them in the air by the string.

Meanwhile, he still had not done a single piece of Montessori material. I was starting to worry about what my administrator would think about this boy who just flew paper airplanes alone all day, or that his parents would complained that he wasn’t learning anything. What if the all other children wanted to quit working and make paper airplanes too?

One day, Vivek was sitting at a table, making a paper airplane, when I presented a cylinder block to a little 3 year old. He watched the lesson, looked at me and said, “I think I could do that.” I jumped at the opportunity, and said of course, he could choose it any time! Vivek took a cylinder block (mind you, an activity usually for the very youngest children), worked with it, and then I offered him 2 blocks, then 3 then all four, and then a blindfold! That was the moment that Vivek finally let
go of his fears and became a child transformed. From that point on, Vivek worked insatiably. He
was chatty, witty, and helpful. He wanted new lesson every day. He taught himself to read, to
write, and raced through all of the math materials. One day he saw me dusting some
encyclopedias on a high shelf and asked what book I was dusting—“This is Volume G,”—he asked if
he could read it, and was engrossed for the rest of the day. After about an hour, he looked up,
eyes shining, and said, “This is a great book!”

The story of Vivek remains with me as a profound example of how a child can hold on to his
deviations as protection, but once those deviations are dropped, the child can immediately return
to the normal path of development.

Outcomes of Normal Development
With normalization, the infinity of negative behaviors disappears and a universal child emerges.
Even though every child is unique and different, they all share the characteristics of:

1. **Self-discipline** (those relating to individual child)
   a. Ability to chose an activity
   b. Ability to engage with an activity under his own direction
   c. Ability to carry this over from one activity to the next
   d. Patterns of repetition over time.

2. **Social discipline** (those relating to how the child interacts with others)
   a. Controlled and purposeful interactions with others- independently control their behavior
   b. Mutual spontaneous respect
   c. A willingness to help others
   d. Spontaneous responsiveness to the needs of others
   e. Evidence of feelings of benevolence and sympathy towards others in the group.  
      Altruism.  
   f. A non-competitive attitude.

These characteristics of self-discipline and social discipline can be applied to any setting, any
environment, and form the new paradigm for how the child and the adult he becomes, interacts
with the world. (Sackett, “Normalization and Deviation,” unpublished lecture, 2008)
Montessori paints a beautiful picture of the child who appears with normalization. “All the while he is a real child, fresh, sincere, gay, lively, shouting when his enthusiasm overflows, applauding, greeting loudly, thanking with effusion, calling and running after one in sign of gratitude. He approaches all, admires everything, adapts himself to everything.” (Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, “The Principles Established,” p. 146, Ballantine) This is no “little clone” or “perfect child,” but a child who embraces life with love and enthusiasm.

Although normalization is “the most important single result of our whole work,” Montessori described it not so much as a point of arrival, but as a point of departure. For now the child is truly free to develop his mind and his personality as nature intends. There are no more obstacles barring his path. The qualities of spontaneous discipline, continuous and happy work, respect and empathy towards others become his regular way of being. He approaches learning and discovery with enthusiasm and confidence. His character is continually strengthened and his intellect is insatiable. (Montessori, The Absorbent Mind, “The Child’s Contribution to Society,” pp. 206-7, Kalakshetra)

Montessori told the students in her 1946 course in London, “There is only one line of development which is normality. If it is disturbed in its path it becomes deviated but each individual, however deviated, has the tendency to return to the normal...so all we have to do is get this energy free...This is not giving freedom to the children in the common sense. What is the use of freedom to children if it is freedom to develop their deviations? When we speak about freedom in education we mean freedom for the creative energy which is the urge of life for the development of the individual. It has a guide, a very fine directive, an unconscious directive, the aim of which is to develop a normal person.” (Montessori, London Lecture #32, London, 1946)

Our understanding of true normality, and the obstacles preventing it, now becomes our own point of departure. We can now frame our discussions of the child’s social and intellectual development, our role as Montessori adults, and the environment we prepare for the children in terms of normalization; either by how we support the child who is still struggling with deviations, or how we work with the normalized child to develop his full potential. Normalization is the “doorway to a new kind of life,” (Montessori, Absorbent Mind, p. 206) and a new kind of education.
Normalization and Deviation

References


