

Montessori and the Concept of Normalization

An excerpt from *The Secret of Childhood: Normalization and Deviations*, a lecture given by Dr. Rita Shaefer Zener, on the AMI 3-6 course, Nakhon Pathon, Thailand, April 2006, by permission of the Michael Olaf Montessori Company

At the beginning of her educational career in San Lorenzo, Rome, Dr. Montessori was moved many times by what she observed the children doing. She wondered if their accomplishments were "the work of angels". She would say to herself, *I won't believe this time. I will wait until the next time to believe* (The Secret of Childhood).

After 40 years of work, spreading her scientific pedagogy around the world, Dr. Montessori was willing to say that *Normalization is the single most important result of our work* (The Absorbent Mind, p. 204). She had given up all her other work—medicine, anthropology, psychology, and even prestigious positions to lecture in Universities—in order to concentrate on bringing this message to the people of the world. *Normalization* is a technical word borrowed from the field of anthropology. It means becoming a contributing member of society. Dr. Montessori used the term *normalization* to distinguish one of the processes that she saw in her work with the children at San Lorenzo in Rome. This process, the process of *normalization*, occurs when development is proceeding normally.

When does *normalization* appear?

Normalization appears through the repetition of a three step cycle.

1. Preparation for an activity, which involves gathering together the material necessary to do the activity. The movement and thought involved in the preparation serve to call the attention of the mind to begin to focus.
2. An activity that so engrosses the child that he reaches a deep level of concentration. This step is what all educators and parents recognize as important for education.
3. Rest, which is characterized by a general feeling of satisfaction and well-being. It is thought that at this point some inner formation or integration of the person takes place.

Characteristics of Normalization

There are many personality types of course. However, when children enter the process of normalization the same characteristics appear: (1) Love of work, (2) Concentration, (3) Self-discipline, and (4) Sociability.

1. **Love of Work.** The first characteristic of the process of normalization is love of work. Love of work includes the ability to choose work freely and to find serenity and joy in work (The Absorbent Mind, p. 202). In the fall I like to observe new three-year-olds who were phased in during the month of September. Some of them have six weeks or so in the group and have their little routines of the work that they love. Some still have no clue about "their work". Kindly and experienced adults lead them into various activities. Some of the activities evoke concentration but most of them do not. It usually isn't until the child has learned to do several orderly activities that the missing element of choice will enter the child's work life.
2. **Concentration.** The second characteristic of the process of normalization is concentration. Concentration appears as individual children in a group became absorbed in their work—each one in a different, freely chosen activity. To help such development, it is not enough to provide objects chosen at random, but we [teachers] have to organize a world of 'progressive interest' (The Absorbent Mind, p. 206). We must continue to present the next appropriate challenge. The frequency of continual periods of intense concentration will depend on the child and on the teachers' knowledge and attitudes about guiding the process of normalization.
3. **Self-discipline.** The third characteristic is self-discipline. Self-discipline refers to persevering and completing cycles of activity that are freely begun. Dr. Montessori says: After concentration...come[s] perseverance... It marks the beginning of yet another stage in character formation...It is the ability to carry through what... has begun. The children in our schools choose their work freely, and show this power unmistakably. They practice it daily for years (The Absorbent Mind p. 217).
4. **Sociability.** The fourth characteristic is sociability. Sociability refers to patience in getting the materials one wants, respect for the work of others, help and sympathy for others, and harmonious working relationships among members of the group. There is only one specimen of each object, and if a piece is in use when another child wants it, the latter—if he is normalized—will wait for it to be released. Important social qualities derive from this. The child comes to see that he must respect the work of others, not because someone has said he must, but because this is a reality that he meets in his daily experience (The Absorbent Mind, p. 223). Sociability also refers to the human response to turn to others after finishing a job. If the work went well, then social interactions are colored by the emotional satisfaction of the job.