



The Language Area in Montessori

Sounds and Symbols

by Samantha Pollington, Co-owner and Teacher at Sunflower Montessori

Imagine yourself alone in a country whose native language is different from your own. Sounds and symbols swirl among your sensory intake, thousands, maybe millions of sounds. I am a fairly capable and well-equipped adult but panic sets in at just the thought of not being able to express my needs, my thoughts, and my desires to others. **Language is communication.** Communication is vital to society and largely what sets us apart from the animals. It is mind bending to think that a child just born can begin to absorb and decode these sounds instantly after birth. **Language is not taught but absorbed** or acquired by children from a very early age. Children go through what Maria Montessori called sensitive periods. The sensitive period for language begins at birth and ends around age six. This sensitive period allows the child to unconsciously and effortlessly absorb stimuli from her environment, turning that information into language. **The acquisition of language is based on a strong desire to express oneself.** Humans are born with the tendency to communicate: we are born with special abilities to begin absorbing our native language.

When a child enters the classroom at the age of 2 1/2, she has already unconsciously

absorbed much of her oral language. Reading, writing, and speech are interdependent and work together to create language. **The Montessori environment has already prepared the child indirectly for all forms of language.** For example, the child has been using the pincer grip working in the practical life area of the classroom. She understands the progression of working left to right and top to bottom, skills she will use in both reading and writing.

The Montessori Classroom prepares the child to enter further into the acquisition of her language. Language consists of speaking, reading, and writing. What makes the Montessori environment special in the facilitation of language are the tools we use to prepare the child for a journey deep into the art of language. As mentioned previously, the child is absorbing sensory information at an astonishingly quick rate. It is of vital importance that we communicate to the child in a respectful and proper way, including using correct grammar, syntax, and organization, as well as colorful and vibrant vocabulary. **The child is absorbing her environmental stimuli, it is up to us to make sure we are providing proper stimulation.** Talking down to the child is not tolerated in the Montessori environment and



Sandpaper Letters

A Visual and Tactile material. In Montessori the sounds of the letters are taught before the name of the letter is introduced.



Movable Alphabet

The children build words phonetically at an early age using the movable alphabet.

“cute baby talk” is frowned upon. Talking respectfully and correctly as well as preparing an environment that promotes a spontaneous and organic growth into language is essential to the Montessori approach to language. **We are feeding the sensitive period that she is experiencing.**

Language is all around the Montessori environment. The Sensorial, Practical Life, and Cultural curriculums are built to provide the child with tools she will need to dive into reading, writing, and oral expression. The Sensorial and Practical Life areas of the classroom help the child gain reading and writing readiness in the following ways: hand-eye coordination, sensory motor control, left to right and top to bottom progression and visual and auditory discrimination. The Cultural area provides the child with nomenclature that is of interest to them and promotes sight/word recognition through the use of pictures and words.

The child’s ears are trained to hear the sounds that make up words, those sounds are then introduced as symbols and the symbols used to build words. **Once the child can identify sounds she is perfectly capable of decoding words which rapidly leads to the joy of reading.**

Respect for the child is a founding principal of the Montessori Method. Understanding the child’s sensitive period for language and that it is unconsciously and organically happening allows us to let the child explore language without stress. The language curriculum is built for the child to work at her own pace. **We know that the sensitive period for language is working its magic and that we have prepared a supportive environment that is nurturing the child’s natural tendencies.**



Metal insets develop the fine motor control needed to tackle writing



Building and recording words with the movable alphabet

“The development of language is part of the development of the personality, for words are the natural means of expressing thoughts and establishing understanding ... We discovered that education is not something which the teacher does, but that it is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being.” –Dr. Maria Montessori

Reading and writing are interdependent, some children learn to read before writing or visa-versa, the child is not pushed into one area or the other first. We understand that when one area is in bloom the other will shortly follow. Because we have respect for the child and the process of her inventing herself we can save her from the needless stress of being pushed into something she is not ready for. We look for signs she is ready to begin and **follow the child.**

The child may be working over and over with the metal insets and we notice that her parallel lines are becoming very regular. This is a good sign that we are trained to notice. This means she is ready to write! We may then introduce her to the Sandpaper letters and she will let us know if she is ready or not. **Mastery of Language is therefore built upon positive experiences rather than stressful ones.**

Another set of tools unique to the Montessori environment are the pedagogically designed materials. **When a child is using the Sandpaper letters, she is developing**

the muscle memory of the form of the letter, carefully tracing the shape of the sound with her finger, while absorbing the shape of the letter, hearing the sound and associating the sound to a delightful small object. Children learn very much through their tactile senses, touching the letter is helping her to become involved in language on many levels. Language is first taught by helping the child to acquire listening skills, in such games

as the silence game or “I spy”.

The child then moves on to working with the symbols of the alphabet like the Sandpaper letters and the movable alphabet. Composing words with the movable alphabet strengthens pre-reading and writing. The **“Three period lesson” is an invaluable tool in the Montessori teacher’s arsenal.** The Three period lesson is split up into three concrete steps. This is what the Three period lesson looks like in the context of the Sandpaper letters: The first step is to provide the child with association of the visual and muscular tactile understanding sensation associated with the letter sound. The second step is testing the child’s understanding of that association; this step can be stretched out for as long as necessary for the child to gain true understanding. **This tool creates a fun and fulfilling experience for the child.** The teacher may ask the child to place the “f” sound on her foot or a flowerpot allowing the child to move around the room. When the teacher feels the child has mastered the sound association with the letter itself she will move onto step three: “What is this?”.

Montessori uses a phonetics based approach to language as well as the whole language approach. The whole language approach is immersing the child into an environment of spoken and written words. This approach allows the child to make the most of the sensitive period for language. The environment is spattered with labels of materials, furniture, and other everyday objects. The child begins to absorb the association of the picture and the word together, much as she has absorbed oral expression. Observing the child’s interest and providing a plethora of engaging books that interest her provide the child with a positive relationship to reading. The Montessori classroom provides the child with stimuli that feed her natural tendencies.