

# THE FOUR PLANES OF DEVELOPMENT

## A CONSTRUCTIVE RHYTHM OF LIFE

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**Y**ou see before you part of a diagram which Dr. Montessori herself had drawn at a lecture she gave at the Italian University for Foreigners in Perugia (Italy) in 1950. We see a horizontal black line which Montessori called 'the line of life'. This line should really begin from the moment of conception, but in this diagram it begins at birth (0 years). The 'line of life' continues indefinitely — it is only interrupted at death. Again for the sake of the presentation Dr. Montessori chose to stop the line at the age of 24. On this 'line of life' she marked regular six year intervals: 0, 6, 12, 18, 24, illustrating the first 24 years of a person's life.

What exactly does this diagram with all the triangles represent? It represents Dr. Montessori's fundamental psychological theory — it represents a metaphor for the sensitive periods which are characteristic of each stage of the development of an individual. Let us examine this further.

A thick black line (representing the sensitive periods which are manifested in the child) departs from zero 'the line of life'. We shall call this side of the triangle 'the line of progression' — the progression of the sensitive periods appropriate to the child's age. These sensitive periods expand, grow and assume their maximum expression (the apex of the triangle) before gradually retreating and regressing until they finally disappear. On the diagram we can see the culmination of this regression represented at the point where the other side of the triangle — the side of regression — coincides with 'the line of life'.

These alternating 'parentheses of life' which open and then close, occur four times because according to Dr. Montessori, the individual goes through four stages of development in order to

reach maturity. Each time the sensitive periods (enclosed in the triangle) reach a maximum point there is a regression — but not a regression on the part of the individual, nor a regression in the Freudian sense — there is a regression of the sensitivities pertinent to each age.

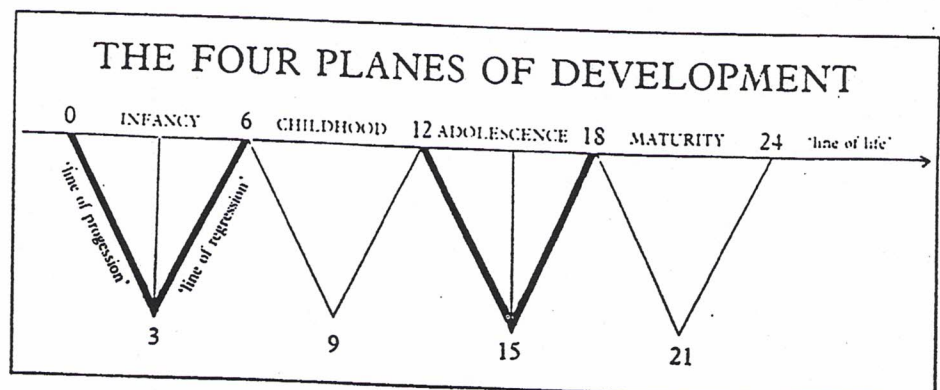
In the diagram we see two triangles with thick lines. These indicate Creative Periods: Infancy and Adolescence. We also see two triangles with thin lines which indicate that this is a period where that which was previously created, is now being developed. There are two Periods of Development: Childhood and Maturity.

This triangular sequence which Dr. Montessori assigns to each of the phases of development is particularly interesting. It means that as regards the sensitive periods in the life of an individual, there is a series of births and deaths which continuously repeat themselves. But what is it that is born? The new sensitivities appropriate to each age are born. And what is it that dies? The old sensitivities die, those which are no longer necessary for this age. These births and deaths tell us that sensitivities are unrepeatable. If, for example, 'I have not received the necessary help to be able to develop specific faculties adequately in my first six years of life, then the sensitive period for the

effortless acquisition of fundamental abilities has been lost for ever.

Therefore, which are the sensitive periods which are characteristic of each age? In the first plane of development (0-6 years) we have sensitive periods which are fundamental for the life of the individual: the sensitive period for movement, which is linked to the sensitive period for order; the sensitive period for the development of the senses connected with that of love for the environment and for details; and most importantly, we have the sensitive period which makes man a living being — the sensitive period for language. Within 2 years, or 2½ years of life (see Dr. Montessori's book: *The Absorbent Mind*) the child learns to talk. This is a process which begins in the unconscious, from a nebula i.e. from something indistinct and it arrives to the point where the child can express himself in an articulate manner and with correct syntax.

It is evident that the help and the means that a child is given in order to arrive at the point of speaking, both come from outside. They come from us who talk and who allow him to move; from us who provide him with the necessary aids and who remove the obstacles; but it is equally evident however that the potentialities for this,





lie within the child.

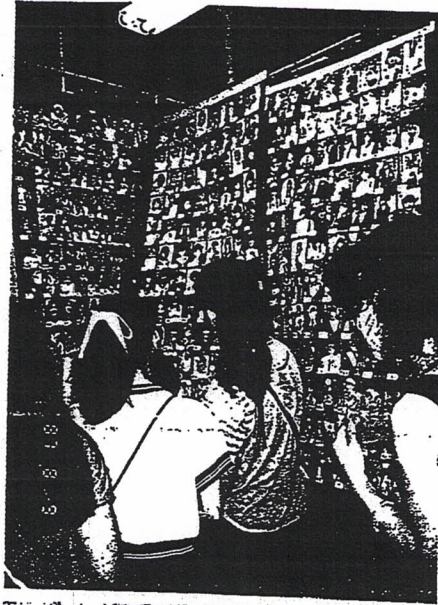
The second plane of development (6-12 years) is characterised by other sensitive periods. Now we arrive at the age of 'Why?'. If in the previous stage the child wanted to acquire 'the things' (by learning their names and by gaining a sensorial exploration of them) now the child wants to know 'the why of things'. Now comes the passage from the sensorial world to the abstract world and the use of the creative imagination comes into play. We now see the emergence of the moral sense, the exploration of that which is good and that which is bad, of that which is just and that which is unjust. There is a consolidation of the child's knowledge and a love for the group to which he belongs — a group of equals, of peers.

We also have the sensitive period for culture at this age. The environment of the child is no longer the limited environment of his daily life (as in the previous developmental stage) but it now becomes the planet on which we live — an immense environment which psychologically measures up to the actual needs of the 6-12 year old. The environment is large because the imagination is large. The strength of the ability to abstract which the child has mastered is vast and the powerful imagination which he has, allows him to travel across time (cf History) and across space (cf Geography).

Let us now move on to the third period of development (12-18 years) — that difficult period of Adolescence — characterised primarily by the onset of puberty. During this stage we identify the sensitive period concerned with sexual identity (together with all the disturbances that may be associated with this). Now comes the search for an ideal model to follow — a model which rises over and above one's friends and companions and which today we can see reflected in the 'poster mania'. I am sure that you can all remember 'your idols' — your actors and footballers, model fathers and mothers, basket ball players, tennis players, etc. The adolescent is searching for the type of society that he wishes to belong to and this choice seems to be free of any moral implication — it can be either good or bad. If this is truly a sensitive period for the adolescent, then the idol which he chooses will not be valued (at least to begin with) in moral terms. So from the hero he chooses he can arrive either at

juvenile delinquency or sainthood!

It is interesting to note how these developmental needs were clearly understood by institutions such as the Church, for the Church offered its young members clear parameters from which to choose their idols — idols which rose over and above the singers, parents, actors, and footballers. The model it gave to young adolescent boys



Teenagers and their idols

was of Saint Luigi of Gonzaga. (Do you remember his portrait — the adolescent saint embracing the large crucifix?) And the model it gave to young adolescent girls was that of Santa Maria Goretti — the martyr who died at the beginning of this century at the age of 12.

The fact that the adolescent chooses a model and needs a pattern and scheme to which he can refer has also been well understood by the fascists, nazis and communists!

Now we come to the last period of development which is that of Maturity (18-24 years). What characterises this period? The main characteristic is that the individual lives fully and expresses himself as part of the society in which he lives, contributing to the construction of a new civilization.

Dr. Montessori assigned to each of these four planes of development a nickname. Thus she called the first plane of development 'Möbel-Kinder'. 'Möbel' means 'furniture' and I discover that these are children of furniture — 'The Furniture Children' — i.e. children who are growing and developing within their immediate home environment.

Dr. Montessori called the second plane 'The Age of Serenity and of Rudeness'. For the third plane she chose yet another German term — 'Erde-Kinder'. 'Erde' means 'earth': the earth as in 'soil', that which I can touch with my hands. 'Erde' is the countryside which the adolescent can cultivate and make productive, in which he can live safely in an almost self-governing community and in which he can grow, by exploring how a society functions on a practical level and by studying the inventions made by man during the entire span of his history. Finally Dr. Montessori named the last plane 'The Age of Happiness'.

One notes that for the Creative Periods i.e. (where there is the construction of the individual personality (as in the first plane) and the construction of the social personality (as in the third plane) — the names are taken from the environment: Children of the Furniture and Adolescents of the Earth. In both cases we provide first an environment which is accurately predisposed, limited and circumscribed to the 'size' of the child and later we provide a natural, agricultural environment, an open environment, curtailed to the 'size' of the adolescent.

The other two periods have instead, names which are mediated from the emotions of man — The Age of Serenity and of Rudeness and The Age of Happiness.

Dr. Montessori's approach to education from birth to maturity was based on her observations of the developing child. The sensitivities and characteristics manifested at each stage of development determined the type of education that she proposed. Her approach was always based on the ability to recognise the needs of the child and to respond to these needs, thereby helping the child satisfy his developmental urges. It is in this context that Dr. Montessori believed that we should always 'follow the child' and let him be our guide in how we can aid in this constructive rhythm of life.

1. 'The Absorbent Mind' by Maria Montessori, Kalakshetra Publications, Madras.

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