

By Cheryl Ferreira

Cheryl Ferreira was born in Mumbai, India. She has worked with children from the age of 17, becoming interested in the Montessori approach while assisting in a Montessori school. Cheryl graduated with a BA Hons. and then received an MA in history from the University of Bombay. She undertook her Montessori training at the AMI Montessori training centre in Hyderabad, India. She then worked in Montessori schools and on AMI courses in different parts of India. In 1998, she came to the Maria Montessori Training Organisation in London (MMTO) as part of AMI's Training of Trainers programme, and in 2000 she became an AMI trainer.



All of us are concerned when we think of the state of affairs in today's world. Suspicion, discord, strife, war; these seem to be common features in many news items. As a result, many of us are often inclined not to read the newspaper or watch the news as we find it "depressing".

All adults, whether parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, teachers or professionals often find ourselves wondering how we can ensure that our children grow up in a better world. We try to save the world for our children, to make it a safer place for them, to provide as best as we can so that they have a better life than we did. So our children can have a better future.

Today we are aware of the fact that the environment is threatened just as much by the effects of pollution as it is by the effects of war. Those of us who are aware of environmental issues try to make others aware of them too. Some go on protest marches, some write articles in magazines, others spend time drawing up blue prints of the changes we can make to slow down global warming, to save the rainforests, to stop the ice-cap melting and so on. These varied activities reflect our efforts to establish harmony between Man<sup>1</sup> and nature.

All of us want war and strife to come to an end. We form peace-keeping organisations to mediate between nations at war. Young adults enlist to fight injustice or join the "peace keeping forces" to intervene in areas where there is conflict. All this is done in an endeavour to establish peace between Man and Man - nation and nation.

Do all these efforts bring about peace? Yes, they do bring wars to an end. In some cases treaties and agreements are signed and peace is established, but this peace is not a lasting peace. It involves a cessation of hostilities, perhaps a withdrawal from the frontline until the next conflict, but then the cycle starts over again!

You may ask "should we not try to resolve conflict?". Most certainly we must, but we cannot stop at resolving conflict. History teaches us that peace treaties do not provide lasting solutions. Circumstances change, people change, and new conflicts arise. So we see that resolving conflict is not enough. We must actively work to establish a more lasting peace, a real harmony, a feeling of "brotherhood" between nations. Dr Maria Montessori tells us: "Preventing conflicts is the work of politics; establishing peace is the work of education." (*Education and Peace*, p 24 )

Education: yes, we "know" that the schools are failing our children – that "Mr X" did not make the right decision, that in "such and such"

place they do not care for peace – and on we go always placing the blame on someone else. But should we really be doing this, can we do more, or rather we must do more than just grumble about it? We must accept our part in this state of affairs, we too must shoulder part of the responsibility. As Dr Maria Montessori continues: "Constructive education for peace must not be limited to the teaching in schools. It is a task that calls for the efforts of all mankind." (*Basic Ideas of Montessori's Educational Theory*, p. 125)

Today all mankind is searching for peace. In our effort to educate for peace we try to draft "inclusive" policies. We try to teach "non-discrimination" via lectures and discussions in high school and in university. We have many organisations where adults work to educate other adults and promote world peace and it seems that our efforts are in vain. True peace comes from within. We seek external remedies and fail to realise that the real cause is within us, in our attitudes, our values, our very sense of self. Those that do realise this strive to "learn" these values and to "teach" them to others, yet despite all our efforts we seem to get nowhere.

If we read Dr Maria Montessori's writings carefully we realise that our efforts are misguided, as we are told: "Character formation cannot be taught. It comes from experience and not from explanations." (*Education and Peace*, p. 27)

We cannot teach people how to live peacefully by holding lectures and making new laws, nor by printing textbooks or publishing articles. In fact, if we start our efforts with children at school level or with adults, we are starting too late. We need to start much earlier. We need to start from birth onwards by preparing the home, family and social surroundings so that our children live in and absorb an atmosphere of justice and peace.

Further on in *Education and Peace* Dr Montessori says: "The Child is both a hope and a promise for mankind. If we therefore mind this embryo as our most precious treasure, we will be working for the greatness of humanity." (*Education and Peace*, p. 31)

When we read this statement we are doubtful, optimistic and even slightly mystified at one and the same time. "What can Dr Montessori mean?" we ask ourselves. What is the "hope" that each child brings to the human race? This hope lies in the untouched greatness of human potential in the depths of the human psyche, a potential that only the child can easily tap into.

What then is the promise of which Dr Montessori speaks? The promise is that if we would only help the child to live his<sup>2</sup> life as a child, true to his nature, he would actualise these nebulous riches and reveal to us the grandeur of human nature. When we think of the nebulous riches, the potential within the child, we are (each of us) eager to embrace the idea of our child being a potential genius

1. Man is used to refer to the adult human being.

2. The child is referred to in the masculine for ease of reading.

possessing a "boundless intellect", becoming a brilliant surgeon, a scintillating artist, a scientific genius, a mastermind in mathematics and so on.

We look around us at our now grown-up children and we begin to ask ourselves "are we not already doing this? Are there not some of us who have actualised this potential? What about all the leaps and bounds we have made in the technological and scientific world?"

We have explored the depths of the oceans, the heights of the mountains, the bowels of the earth. We have conquered space! Why then is our world still so troubled?

It is because we have not gone deep enough. We have but scratched the surface. Our efforts at human development have been one sided. We, the human race, have developed our intellect and our physical strength but have neglected our spiritual development. We lack strength of character. We need to seek the richness of human values trapped in the depths of the spirit. For example, kindness, consideration, helpfulness, honesty, generosity, perseverance, patience, respect, responsibility, co-operation, a sense of justice and fair play, a conscience. To sum them up we could say moral values and a social sense.

We cannot teach these values like we can teach reading and writing; mathematics and science; however the child can create them for himself. So the question we must ask ourselves is: How and when can the child do this? Dr Montessori gives us the answer that we seek: "When the child lives in an atmosphere congenial to his vital needs, he proves to have character traits quite different from those we usually consider him as having. He provides living proof that mankind can change and improve from its very origin." (*Education and Peace*, p. 87)

In considering the period from birth to three years we have seen that, just as the human embryo has the power to use the tremendous potential hidden within the zygote at conception and, within the three months of the embryonic period, create the human body - so also, the newborn baby has the special powers needed to actualise the immense nebulous treasure of psychic potential hidden within his apparently helpless body. In doing so, within the three years of psycho-embryonic development after birth the child lays the foundations of the human personality with all its positive characteristics.

Thus Dr Montessori speaks of the child from birth to three years as a "Spiritual Embryo" and it is this "embryo" that she asks us to care for, to cherish, to nurture if we wish to build a better tomorrow.

Just as the human physical embryo needs the specially prepared environment of the womb, so also the psychic embryo needs a specially prepared environment after birth. An environment where the child can work at his psychic self formation just as independently as the pre-natal embryo worked at forming the human body. The child needs this prepared environment not only at school but also at home and in society. Dr Montessori says that in order to provide this environment: "The world of adults must change. We must unite; we must reach out to the child, have faith in him, construct the proper climate for him and change our very selves." (*Education and Peace*, p. 87)

We need to constantly be aware that from birth onwards every child begins the process of "Humanisation". In this process the child needs a good human role model. An ideal that he can aspire to, after whom he will model himself.

We as parents, family members, neighbours, as adult human beings must provide the role models that the child needs. We cannot leave it just to the teachers or to the school. We, you and I, each of us as

individuals must create those spiritual values within ourselves that make us worthy models for the child. We must strive to practice those values we would like to see in our world.

Thus the child provides us with the incentive for self-perfection. We work at becoming better human beings for the sake of our children. In return our children create these values in themselves and we work together towards a better tomorrow.

In the first six years of life the child lays the foundations of his personality, a personality adapted to the environment in which he lives. During this period, there is within this young child a "social drive" a need to belong to a group. For this drive to work positively within the child he needs to feel included in his social group both at home and at school for as Dr Montessori says: "From early childhood on human beings must have experience of what association is, and only then gradually fathom the secrets of the technical evolution of society." (*Education and Peace*, p. 32)

It is not sufficient that we prepare environments specially suited to the developmental needs of the child both at home, at school and in society as a whole. These environments must provide scope for activity. Within each of these environments the child must be helped to act purposefully, to act constructively and thus to work at his development. To experience the great satisfaction which comes from work that is fulfilling.

This young child (from birth to six years) then, little by little begins to feel that he belongs to the social group. The child participates in the day to day activities of that group according to his own capabilities; absorbs and lives the values of that group day after day. The child is proud of the world in which he lives and shows love, care, concern, respect for every person and everything in his world – this child manifests self-discipline.

Dr Montessori says: "This society by cohesion which I have talked about is characteristic of little children, for they are naturally full of love and sympathy and help for others. . . . This marvellous activity and discipline comes naturally." (*The Child Society and the World*, p. 27)

Children from the age of around seven years onwards are urged to practice this social attitude more deliberately. To consciously, appreciate the value systems, the morals of society by working them out within the dynamics of their peer-group. They instinctively choose a leader and become more externally organised. We as adults must understand and support their efforts as they learn by experience in their peer group how to form a structured society. Thus we see that there are two very different levels of social development achieved by children before the age of twelve.

It is essential that children in each period of development achieve the appropriate form of social development in order to make their contribution towards forming a unified society. Dr Montessori explains why this is important with the following analogy:

"We can compare the two forms to a piece of weaving. When a piece of cloth is to be woven the web is prepared first. All the threads lie close together but parallel to each other. This is like the society by cohesion. They are all fixed at one point but they do not intermingle. The second stage is when the shuttle attaches all the threads together. This is like the work of the leader who attaches all the people together but it is necessary to have the web, the society by cohesion, as a basis or we could not weave a strong piece of cloth." (*The Child Society and the World*, p. 27)

The child participating in the day to day life of his social group must be supported in his urge to become independent. To act independently on his own behalf and in co-operation with others.

If the child can do this he begins to feel that he can act positively within the family, social, school environment and can make his own individual contribution to that group.

The moral and social values absorbed from the environment during infancy (0-6) are consciously thought through and practiced within one's immediate social group during childhood (6-12) and then in adolescence (12-18), they branch outward and are applied to widespread social issues. Thus the adolescents need an additional form of independence. A social life independent of the family; where they have first hand experience of living in co-operation with others of that age group, and also have an experience of an economic independence in society. Then when they emerge into young adulthood (18-24) they are strong individuals who can shoulder the social responsibility that comes with being adult members of society.

Dr Montessori says: "Individuality is the basic unit, the fundamental building block of a society, which is made up of many individuals, each functioning autonomously but associating with others for a common purpose." (*Education and Peace*, p. 55)

The child is born filled with love for his environment. It is this love that draws the child towards the environment and urges him or her to become a part of that environment. If the child feels supported in these efforts at growing in independence and adapting to the environment then he feels that his love is reciprocated and his love for the environment grows stronger, encompassing all that makes up the environment.

"The child who has felt a strong love for his surroundings and for all living creatures, who has discovered joy and enthusiasm in work, gives us hope that humanity can develop in a new direction... The child's psychic energy, once awakened, will develop according to its own laws and have an effect on us as well. The mere contact with a human being developing in this way can renew our energies." (*Education and Peace*, p. 59)

We will then see the grandeur of human nature as revealed by the child and will have a glimpse of what we too have the potential to be. We will find in the loving example of our children the incentive that we need to help us continue to work consciously day after day at developing those traits within ourselves. We will know that our efforts are worthwhile as they enable us to work in harmony with our children.

"The child developing harmoniously and the adult improving himself at his side make a very exciting and attractive picture... This is the treasure we need today – helping the child become independent of us and make his way by himself and receiving in return his gifts of hope and light." (*Education and Peace*, p. 59)

