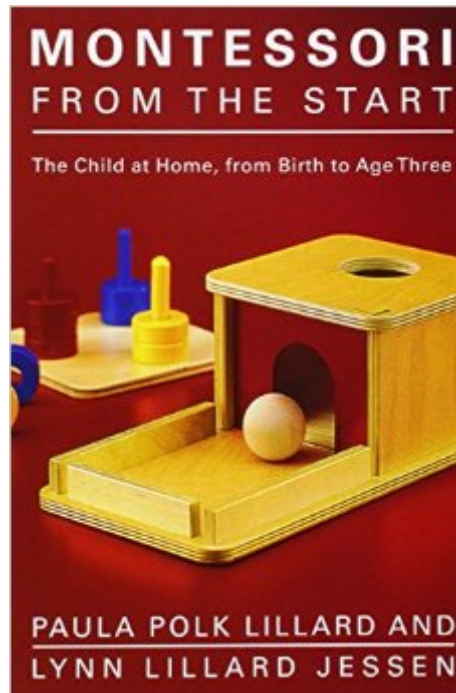


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Montessori From The Start: The Child At Home, From Birth To Age Three



Synopsis

What can parents do to help their youngest children in their task of self-formation? How does the Montessori method of hands-on learning and self-discovery relate to the youngest infants? This authoritative and accessible book answers these and many other questions. Based on Dr. Maria Montessori's instructions for raising infants, its comprehensive exploration of the first three years incorporates the furnishings and tools she created for the care and comfort of babies. From the design of the baby's bedroom to the child-sized kitchen table, from diet and food preparation to clothing and movement, the authors provide guidance for the establishment of a beautiful and serviceable environment for babies and very young children. They introduce concepts and tasks, taking into account childrens' "sensitive periods" for learning such skills as dressing themselves, food preparation, and toilet training. Brimming with anecdote and encouragement, and written in a clear, engaging style, *Montessori from the Start* is a practical and useful guide to raising calm, competent, and confident children.

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Customer Reviews

I postponed buying this book until my baby was 5 months because of the negative reviews. I was wrong. After reading the book, I realized that the negative reviews are mostly due to a shallow cursory reading of the book, rather than due to the subject matter. Here is why:1. The authors do a great job at explaining how the Montessori principles can be applied to newborns. There are NO other books that do so, and the authors are very explicit in stating that the principles are what

counts - the application is up to the parent. (But this can be very hard for parents in our "how-to-manual"-driven culture). The most important concept is that of observing the child closely and paying attention to all his cues so you know what works for your child. I take this to mean that I am the final judge of how I implement Montessori methods for my child, and that suits me just fine.²

The authors recommend the child bed - basically a twin/full mattress on the floor. When I read about this, I thought painfully about the \$\$\$ spent on the crib, co-sleeper, and pack'n play, all of which my child has refused to sleep on in favor of a twin-size daybed we already had. When I discovered that he only wanted to sleep in a big boy bed, I researched a bit on the safety of doing so and other sleep-issues, and found that these authors are not the only ones to suggest a bed on the floor. Dr. Sears (*The Baby Sleep Book: The Complete Guide to a Good Night's Rest for the Whole Family* (Sears Parenting Library)) and Elizabeth Pantley (*The No-Cry Sleep Solution: Gentle Ways to Help Your Baby Sleep Through the Night*) make the same suggestion. And yes, I can co-sleep with my baby, which I could not do in his crib.³

About the breastfeeding/weaning issue: the authors do not suggest early weaning. They suggest following the child but at around 6 months you can start introducing solids to experiment with taste. I looked hard for this because I am a firm believer in breastfeeding for as long as the child wants to - I didn't find anything to offend this belief. In fact, the book advocates breastfeeding as the best nourishment, and suggests retiring to a quiet environment and focusing on the process, playing with the baby while doing so, instead of watching TV and surfing the net (guilty as charged:).⁴

About the early potty training: in my culture babies get potty trained by the age of 12-18 months. There is no pressure of any kind - by the time the baby can sit upright, he is put on the potty at certain times in the day when he is more likely to go. In many cultures (e.g. India, China) infant potty training is the norm. In the US, elimination communication (EC) has been gaining ground, and the proponents of this method start potty training from birth (*Infant Potty Training: A Gentle and Primeval Method Adapted to Modern Living*). This method requires a lot of patience and also a lot of attention to the baby to find out when they eliminate and what their cues are. Sign language is used to communicate the need to go potty since the baby may not be speaking yet. In light of this, the authors are not extreme (in fact quite tame) in their position of suggesting potty training before the AAP recommendation of 2 years old. If the baby can sit upright, that means that myelination of the nerves in the lower part of the body has occurred, which means they can feel when they are wet/dirty and even control that part of their body.⁵

About letting children explore on their own: it is invaluable advice. I had no idea how much I was interfering with my baby's independent play and development of focus. For example, I put toys into his hands, offered a bunch of toys all at once without allowing him to fully explore each one, yanked him from

his focused play just so I could kiss him or throw him in the air, etc...- basically, whenever I personally thought he needed a change of pace, I did so. Since letting him be and paying closer attention, I have become more sensitive to his need to explore one thing at a time and at length, uninterrupted. I still kiss and throw him in the air when he is done playing, of course :) One reviewer read this to mean "leave the child unattended", which could not have been more wrong. The authors explicitly advise to observe the child closely as they play to see what interests them and how they are exploring so you can tailor activities to their interests and motor skills. The point is the child should feel like he is on his own, without a parent constantly hovering, interfering, and driving the choice of activity. Sit back, read a book and keep a distant eye on the kid. Also, childproofing an entire room as suggested, allows you to safely leave the child on his own for short periods of time. Since reading this book, I refrain from drawing attention to myself (by cheering and clapping) when the baby does something new. Instead I encourage him, help him along if necessary, and observe his contentment when he manages something on his own. After all, he should achieve things for his own self not to please me. (BTW, this is along the lines of Alfie Kohn's philosophy representing a recent departure from behaviorism that has turned many of today's toddlers into praise junkies - Unconditional Parenting: Moving from Rewards and Punishments to Love and Reason).6.

About the condescending tone: there is some of that in the book, but I found it to be correctly addressed. I found myself among those parents who deserved the criticism and decided to change my ways instead of taking offense. I now think harder about everything I do - what toys I buy (few, simple wooden toys and other natural materials instead of colorful plastic with beeping sounds and lights, no more educational than a TV, regardless of clever marketing pitches). Also, I have de-cluttered my day and do not drag my kid all over town for activities at the cost of his feeding/sleeping/play routine. A child under 3 does not need dance classes, gymnastics, etc. Up to this age, children ignore the presence of other children. In fact, a child of any age, does not need over-scheduling at the cost of feeding/sleeping routine (more on this - NurtureShock - Your Self-Confident Baby: How to Encourage Your Child's Natural Abilities -- From the Very Start).7.

About the cost of the materials: the nursery alone will save you hundreds of dollars if you go with the spartan bare style suggested in the book, rather than the unnecessarily elaborate "must have" styles pushed by baby stores and fellow mothers. Think minimalism. The Montessori materials can get expensive, but no more than the cost of useless blinky blinky noisemaker toys. EVERYONE buys their children stuff, the question is what is the effect of that stuff on the child? The natural toys suggested by the book (many of which you can find on Amazon and Etsy) have no fancy electronic functions or batteries, so are cheap. (e.g. - Flapski - by HABA). Natural materials are also safer than plastic

(lead is legally allowed to be present in plastics. Also, latex allergies can develop from early exposure to latex). Finally, to save costs and avoid plastic junk from making it into your home, give grandparents the Michael Olaf catalog or create a wishlist in so you get help with the Montessori materials (although I must admit this has not worked for me). I have created a couple of lists on with related books and materials.

8. Complaints abound regarding cloth diapering. I cloth diaper, do not use a diaper service, and find the whole thing not a bit more complicated than disposables. Today's cloth diapers have come a long way. All-in-one diapers involve the same amount of work as disposables, and just a load of laundry every other day (see, for, e.g. Gro Baby Shell Set Snap, Vanilla, Dream-Eze AIO. My baby has never had a rash, and it is all due to cloth diapers. (When we use disposables on travel he did develop minor irritations).

9. Finally, to those who suggest that this book is recommending a distant parenting style, you couldn't be more wrong. I practice attachment parenting and find no conflict in this book's recommendations and my beliefs. The book suggests treating the baby as a human being not a pet (would you pick up your husband any time you felt like it???). It advocates respect for the child and for, as Maria Montessori put it, the noble work he is doing in creating man.

UPDATE Now that my kid is 15 months, I re-read the book and have been following it quite closely with some amazing results.

First, letting the child be is invaluable advice - my son can play, "read" books on his own for a good 20-30+ minutes before he wants our attention. This will be very useful later in school, but already helps - he can focus and entertain himself without constantly needing attention/stimulation from the adults. At a dinner party we had over the holidays, people remarked how my boy was the only one of the four kids of similar ages that was not acting up, screaming, throwing food, etc., to seek parents' attention. Don't get me wrong, my goal is not to make my job easier, but I want my child to feel self-content in his activities and not needy to the point of overacting to get attention.

Second, establishing a routine for feeding in the weaning table/chair is very useful (see e.g. KidKraft Farmhouse Table and Chair Set Espresso. My child eats with a fork and drinks out of a glass cup (check for Duralex tempered glass dishes - unbreakable!). He knows that food is only served on the table, so doesn't eat all over the house. He knows that food will disappear from the table once he gets up, so he doesn't get up until he is full. However, when he does leave the table, I don't chase him with a spoon - I trust he is done.

Third, the book suggests getting the child involved in housework early - not as child labor, but because they are really interested in being part of the family. Couldn't agree more - my boy LOVES to help empty the dishwasher, and helps juice fruit (drops pieces of fruit down a juicer). No toy is good enough for him when we are in the kitchen cooking/cleaning. However, our initial instincts were to shoo him away ("go play with your toys") when we were working around the house - instead we now slow

down and give him simple tasks to do to help us in the process. Fourth, the book suggests having a little space/nook in each area of the house dedicated to the child, so they feel like they are part of the family - also, excellent advice. I re-purposed the bottom shelves in existing book shelves, so I have a few toys and books in each room. He knows where his spot is every time he is in a room and is happy to proceed there and pick up his activities. Fifth, when it comes to personal care, the book suggests letting the child help dressing/undressing, washing himself, etc. My boy giggles uncontrollably when he manages to take off his own shoes and socks. I give him a hotel-size soap bar and let him lather his own hands and feet in the bathtub - he also likes this since the squishy feeling is entertaining. He now "brushes" his own teeth (i.e. sucking on the brush). Of course, it takes me forever to wash and dress him when he gets involved, but I HAVE to, if I want him to gain a healthy image of himself as a human being capable of taking care of himself. I still wish I had purchased this book when I was pregnant so I could have prepared the environment more adequately. Finally, one reviewer noted that having kids do things early is just for parents' bragging rights. The point is not to have a self-sufficient toddler. Despite all the above, the kid will still be unable to do many things for himself, or do them adequately. The point is to time the activities to the kids interests and settle the questions of "what, where, when" about the daily routine during the sensitive period for order before the kid rebels and talks back. My boy was too young to refuse sitting on the potty, for e.g., when I started that, so now he just accepts it as part of the routine. Same thing with eating, self-care, etc. In addition, if the toddler is interested in helping around the house, but you turn him away repeatedly, it will not be pleasant when you ask him to do chores 10 years down the road. Overall, it takes monumental patience to take a step back and observe, and let the child try (clumsily of course) to participate in the life of the adults but it is necessary for their feeling of self-worth and belonging.

Update #2 Since my kid turned 3 recently, I figured I'd jot down a few reflections on how this book influenced my parenting for this age group. This book prompted me to question every mainstream idea regarding child-rearing, nutrition, education, etc. We probably appear quite odd to the average parent out there, but we have a child we're already proud of. He is very calm, cheerful, sociable, bright, and well-behaved, in part because he came that way, but also in part because our parenting was highly influenced by this book and the others I linked above. We don't live a rushed life (made hard choices to get to that) - so everyone is less stressed and less hurried. If a fun-activity turns into a scheduling nightmare we don't do it. There are set rules about the daily routine and we stick to the routine as best possible. Regarding discipline, we never do time-outs, do not rely on punishment, do not reward either ("good boy", as if he were a dog). We treat him as a fellow human being, who needs guidance because he is very unexperienced,

protection because he is too young, but just as much respect and understanding as an adult. In terms of self sufficiency: Don't sweat it if your 18-month old cannot put on his shoes like the child pictured in this book. Some shoes are harder than others to put on. When choosing shoes, I look at comfort, flexibility, and materials first, then ease of wearing. So my boy can put on boots and clogs, and helps fasten the sneakers. I'm happy with that. The point is made that he is expected to help with cladding. Regarding feeding: I put the child's utensils and dishes in a low cupboard. Over time he got used to seeing me set his table by taking dishes from his cupboard, so he gradually joined me in setting his own table and carrying his dish of food to the table to eat. Does he always set the table and sit through an entire meal? No, but again point is made - set your table and eat there, not everywhere in the house. He knows the rules, knows how to follow them, and over time he will mature enough for this to happen all the time. About potty training: It happened over a very long period of time, but it was very smooth, no struggles of any kind. He was night-trained by 18 months, without me doing anything other than sitting him on the potty since he was 6 months old. I am convinced that 18 months is the sensitive period for potty training, because he did show a willingness to go potty and hated getting wet. Due to busyness at work, we ignored this somewhat, so we had a big setback. The child got used to the wet diaper and stopped telling. It took until 2.5 years to be completely trained. The book was not lying..... About Montessori materials: buy some, make others, and improvise. Being somewhat of a minimalist, I think some of the Montessori materials have very limited use or are meant for classrooms. For e.g. the boxes where you fit a coin or square peg, can be fashioned out of an old coffee can, with a square cut on the cover. Look at the activity, see the point of it, and figure out what you have around the house to teach the same concept. If you see any Montessori materials that can have an extended use, buy them. Don't fall into the trap of buying more and more Montessori materials because that will somehow make the kid smart. It is you and what you do that matters more than the stuff. (I grew up in a different country where all we had was chalk and chalkboard and I went on to get a PhD. Many of my classmates did get pretty far in life too. Not that this is evidence, but really, stuff does not matter that much). In fact, the child gains more from using real tools than child-sized specially-made, sometimes out-of-context materials. I did grow up in a very Montessori way without any of the specially made materials - for e.g. I learned how to clean, cook, embroider, knit, help paint the house, and take care of my siblings from a very early age. The biggest gain for me was that of integrating my child into my daily life. No need to rush through cooking so I can spend time with my kid - we just cook together (ok, takes a lot longer, but is more fun). If I am cleaning, same deal - here's a rag, help me out. I've taught him how to start the washer and dryer with supervision - so we do laundry together. This way I don't feel

upset that housework is costing me time away from my child. He gets the idea that in this house we all do chores together, that we all are responsible for keeping the environment clean (not the cleaning lady), and he learns how things are done, thus developing motor skills, and life-long skills of taking care of himself. Parenting is hard, and don't get me wrong, we struggle just as much as the next guy, and our kid knows how to throw tantrums. But in the grand scheme of things, I am convinced following this book has contributed to a much better outcome than if we had followed the "everybody does this" path we had initially embarked upon.

I worked as a Montessori teaching assistant many years ago and was already familiar with her ideas, so when my own daughter was born I was eager to put them into practice. I read a review of this book and bought it but although it has a few good suggestions, overall it was of very little use. Though the book is intended for use from birth to age 3, the focus is overwhelmingly on babyhood. If your child is already walking and you didn't use the Montessori child-bed, weaning chair, weaning table, etc, much of this book will be pointless. If you do not have the resources to buy the equipment suggested, this book will also not be of much use, because it rarely suggests inexpensive or homemade alternatives. I also strongly object to some of the authors' suggestions in the chapter entitled "Personal Care". They recommend intensive toilet training beginning at 12-15 months, and weaning from breastfeeding at 9 months, arguing that this will foster the child's feelings of independence. Both of these suggestions are contrary to the latest advice given by childcare experts. Few children show any signs of being ready for toilet training at such a young age -- most are still learning to walk, or have recently learned to do so, and for the parent to begin intensive toilet training at this time interferes with the child's natural instincts to be on the move. Furthermore it is much easier and faster to toilet train when the child is actually ready to do so, which in the vast majority of cases is not before the age of two. The authors' advice to wean from the breast at 9 months is contrary to that of the American Association of Pediatrics, which recommends that breastmilk be the primary source of nutrition for all of the first year. This advice can also be dangerous. On the advice of a (misguided) health professional, I limited my own child's breastfeeds when he was 9 months old to 3 times per day for a period of several weeks, which resulted in a rapid and frightening weight loss, and frequent night wakings due to hunger. The authors actually state that if your child is showing no signs of being ready for weaning, you should go ahead and wean him anyway, because you know best! This is completely contrary to the Montessori principles of respecting the child's natural intelligence. Furthermore, I think there is too much emphasis in the book on the child learning to do things at an early age. They state that if you follow their principles,

the child should be crawling by six months, walking by 10 or 11 months, talking by 14 months -- this seems to imply that Montessori education results in children who are superior simply because they can do things at an earlier age than other children. There were only a few good suggestions for activities for toddlers, which do not merit buying the book. I am still looking for a better book which will enable me to put Montessori principles into practice in my home.

This book could easily be condensed to less than half its size. It contains a few good Montessori ideas for the 3-and-under crowd when it comes to the basics - sleeping, eating, etc - but I still come away from the book wanting to know what to do with/for my child in the Montessori manner on a more daily basis. Half of the book is easily spent talking about the "child bed" and feeding table alone - and that info is spread all over the book. The writing is rather hap-hazard and rambling. I would have much preferred the book be arranged by age (ex: chapter 1: 0-6 months) then subcategorized by subject, rather than by subject alone. The authors seem to be trying to interject Montessori theory into a book about hands-on practice, and the result is a jumbled mess. I've learned much more about child psychological development and age-appropriate ideas from "The New First Three Years of Life" by Burton White. It is chronologically ordered, then each chapter is subcategorized. There's a few other Montessori books on I'm going to try instead, such as "Basic Montessori, Learning Activities for Under Fives", "Teaching Montessori in the Home, the Pre-School Years", and "Montessori Play and Learn."

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