

Sensitive Periods

After years of observation, Dr. Montessori realized that there are certain periods during a child's life where learning is effortless and hyper-focused. These times, called sensitive periods, are universal in all children and manifest themselves as an intense interest. Other educators have also researched these sensitive periods. Froebel called these periods "budding points," and other scientists have noted "critical periods" or "windows of opportunity." Though different names, all agree that there are small windows of time during which the brain is hardwired to do or learn certain things. The sensitive periods include spoken language, writing, reading, numbers, order, tiny details, sensorial relations, tactile sense, weaning, social graces & customs, movement, and toileting (see chart below for the general ages when periods occur).

How can I tell my child is in a sensitive period?

A child in any given sensitive period may appear to be obsessed with some aspect of the environment that satisfies his or her development, to the point that they may lose interest in everything else for a short time. A child may seem stuck on a certain activity, choosing to repeat something many times every day. For example, a baby in the sensitive period for weaning is fascinated by watching others eat, reaches for foods, and mimics chewing with his mouth. A toddler in the sensitive period for toileting may show interest in flushing, dressing, undressing, and watching others use the toilet. An older child in the sensitive period for numbers might be seemingly obsessed with counting, quantifying, and talking about everyday math.

What happens when a child misses out on developmental opportunities during a sensitive period?

One of the most researched and easily observed sensitive periods is the sensitive period for language, which lasts for the first six years of life. During this time, children absorb spoken language effortlessly. Adults who have learned a second language later in life can't help but marvel at the ease with which a child picks up new vocabulary as well as grammar, syntax, and all the idiosyncrasies of language. One of the most famous examples of a missed sensitive period is that of the Victor of Aveyron, a young boy who was discovered living in the woods around age 12 with no discernible speech or receptive language. He was adopted by a young medical student, Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, who worked extensively with him for 5 years, but failed to gain more than a rudimentary understanding of language. Recognizing that this sensitive period is short-lived allows us to maximize exposure to diverse and accurate language during this critical period of life.

How does a Montessori classroom take sensitive periods into account?

Understanding the different sensitive periods allows us to catch the child at just the right time (neither too early nor too late) to teach a certain skill. Through careful observation, the Montessori guide prepares the environment with materials that match each of the sensitive periods. Our unique approach allows for each child to work at just the right level outside the confines of a schedule. The guide helps match the child to the materials that fulfill his unique developmental needs, and children are allowed to repeat a lesson for as long as they like. The adults are careful to not intervene unnecessarily, allowing for the deep concentration which leads to self-construction, confidence, independence, and a passion for learning.

What can I do at home to support my child's development during a sensitive period?

Recognizing the different sensitive periods provides a unique lens for understanding your child's development. It's important to allow your child the opportunity to follow his own inner guide, giving outlets for behaviors and understanding your child's deep need to explore his environment. For example, a toddler splashing in the sink is likely in the sensitive period for sensorial acquisition. Understanding this developmental need to gain sensorial feedback can help you observe your child's current needs and find appropriate outlets (e.g. a water table, helping with dishes, etc). Conversely, trying to push something on a child outside of a sensitive period is often a futile effort. Although a child not yet in the sensitive numbers could learn to rote count or recognize symbols, the learning would be more difficult and frustrating than if it was presented at just the right time.

FIRST PLANE SENSITIVE PERIODS

Spoken Language: 7 months in utero to 6 years						
Writing: 3½ to 4½ years						
Reading: 4½ to 5½ years						
Numbers: 4 to 6 years						
Order: 6 months to 2½ years						
Tiny Details: 1 to 5 years						
Sensorial Acquisition: Birth to 3 years						
Sensorial Classification: 3 to 4½ years						
Sensorial Refinement: 4 to 6 years						
Tactile Sense: 2½ to 3½ years						
Weaning: 6 to 12 months						
Social Graces and Customs: 2½ to 6 years						
Movement Acquisition: Birth to 2½ years						
Movement Refinement: 2½ to 4 years						
Toileting: 12 to 18 months						
AGE (IN YEARS):	0	1	2	3	4	5

SECOND PLANE SENSITIVE PERIODS

Socialization: 6 to 12 years						
Imagination: 6 to 12 years						
Moral Development: 6 to 12 years						
AGE (IN YEARS):	6	7	8	9	10	11

THIRD PLANE SENSITIVE PERIODS

Social Relations: 12 to 18 years						
AGE (IN YEARS):	12	13	14	15	16	17