



The Absorbent Mind and the Mirror Neuron System

Dr. Maria Montessori's observations of children around the world revealed a profound and unique ability: the child's innate capacity to absorb everything from their environment with what seems like little to no effort. This phenomenon, which she called the *absorbent mind*, is central to her philosophy and the foundation of our approach to working with children under the age of six.

As Dr. Montessori described it:

"The child has a different relation to his environment than ours... the child absorbs it. The things he sees are not just remembered; they form a part of his soul. He incarnates in himself all the world about him that his eyes see, and his ears hear" (The Absorbent Mind, p. 63).

In the early years, children do not simply *learn* in the way that older children and adults do. They *absorb*—everything around them is internalized, becoming part of their being. This process of absorption occurs with little conscious effort. A newborn begins life unable to move, speak, or care for themselves. Yet by the age of two and a half, they can communicate verbally, understand the world around them, and navigate their environment with growing independence.

The Science Behind the Absorbent Mind

Recent advancements in neuroscience have provided further insight into this incredible ability. Research with monkeys revealed that the same brain cells that are activated when the monkey performs an action, like picking up a ball, are also activated when the monkey simply observes someone else performing the same action. This discovery led scientists to explore the concept of *mirror neurons*—special brain cells that help individuals understand the intentions and actions of others.

For young children, these mirror neurons play a crucial role in developing their understanding of the world. By observing the actions of others, children begin to absorb not only physical actions, but also social cues, emotional responses, language, and cultural norms. They develop an understanding of movement, communication styles, and emotional expression simply by witnessing others. In fact, this process is so essential that by the time a child is two and a half, they are already fluent in their native language, capable of interpreting nonverbal communication, and have developed a strong sense of order.

This remarkable ability to absorb and imitate the world around them is what allows children to construct themselves as human beings. It is through this "absorbent mind" that they acquire not only the language and cognitive skills they need, but also the deeper qualities of their cultural identity, their emotional understanding, and their personal character.

The Role of the Adult: Preparing the Environment

Given the power of the absorbent mind, it is essential that we, as parents and educators, create environments that allow children to thrive. The child is constantly absorbing everything around them—both consciously and unconsciously. This means that every aspect of the environment, whether it is physical, emotional, or social, plays a critical role in shaping the child's development.

Dr. Montessori wrote,

“Every personality trait absorbed by the child becomes fixed forever, and even if reason later disclaims it, something of it remains in the subconscious mind. For nothing that is formed in infancy can ever be wholly eradicated” (*The Absorbent Mind*, pp. 60-61).

Therefore, it is crucial to create an environment that supports the child's natural development. This includes:

- **Physical Space:** A child-friendly environment with accessible materials, open spaces for movement, and organized areas that allow for exploration.
- **Emotional Environment:** A safe and supportive atmosphere where the child feels emotionally secure and free to express themselves.
- **Role Models:** Adults who model behaviors, language, and emotional responses for the child to observe and internalize. The adult's actions and interactions are absorbed deeply into the child's developing mind.

By thoughtfully preparing an environment that aligns with the child's developmental needs, we give them the best possible foundation for growth and self-construction.

How to Support the Absorbent Mind at Home

- **Encourage Exploration:** Provide opportunities for your child to explore their environment safely. Allow them to manipulate objects, ask questions, and engage with the world around them.
- **Be a Role Model:** Children learn by example. Demonstrate behaviors you wish to instill, such as kindness, patience, and empathy. Show interest in learning and growth, and children will naturally follow your lead.
- **Provide Rich Language Exposure:** Use clear, accurate language in all interactions with your child. Describe what you're doing, ask questions, and encourage conversation.
- **Foster Emotional Expression:** Create a space for children to understand and express their emotions. When children see others managing their emotions effectively, they learn to do the same.
- **Create Consistency and Order:** A child's need for order is innate. A predictable routine and an organized environment help children feel secure and build a sense of autonomy.

Conclusion: The Importance of Early Years

In these early years, the child's mind is like a sponge, soaking up everything it encounters. This is a time when they are constructing their own identity, sense of self, and understanding of the world. Through observation and interaction, children internalize their environment and use it to build the foundation of their future learning, behavior, and emotional health.

By understanding the incredible power of the *absorbent mind*, we can ensure that we are providing the optimal environment for our children to grow, learn, and become the best version of themselves. Dr. Montessori's wisdom reminds us of the profound impact we can have in shaping the lives of young children: their environment is where they will form the building blocks of their future. Let's support them in constructing a foundation that will last a lifetime.

References:

- Montessori, M. (*The Absorbent Mind*, 1949). Kalakshetra Publications, 1984.
- Southgate, V. (2013). Do infants provide evidence that the mirror system is involved in action understanding? *Consciousness and Cognition*, 22(3), 1114–1121.