



FREE PRESCHOOL YEAR

St Nicholas Montessori Teachers Association welcomed the announcement of a free preschool year in the April budget. However, following this announcement there has been a huge response from members outlining the difficulties that this scheme presents for them. These issues have been collated and communicated to the Office of the Minister for Children. Following consultation some changes have been made. Please see our website www.montessorireland.ie for latest update or log on to www.omcya.ie and click on the home page Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme Guidelines.



Katherine Dunn Chairperson St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland

DETOXING THE ELECTRONIC VILLAGE



*Sue Palmer
speaking at
St. Nicholas
Montessori
Conference 2009*

In the last twenty or so years, the lifestyle of families in the developed world has changed beyond recognition. Back in the mid-1980s, all-day TV was a novelty, few families owned a computer, and the phone was tethered by a wire to the wall. Mum was usually at home, while children played games outside.

Two decades later, most families have twenty-four hour multi-channel TV coverage, access to the whole world via the web and internet, and mobile phones that also take photos, videos and are regularly used for texting. Mum's more likely to be at work, so children are probably indoors, watching TV or chatting on MSN. Play now happens indoors on a Playstation, games on a Gameboy.

You don't have to be a Luddite, desperate to abandon technological advances and go back in time to some mythical golden age, to be

worried about the effects of too much technology on children's development.

As the eminent neuroscientist Professor Susan



Greenfield has said, a screen-based lifestyle provides 'a gratifying, easy-sensation 'yuk and wow' environment, which doesn't require a young mind to work. We cannot park our children in front of the TV and expect them to develop a long attention span.'



Screens and Brains

The reason I started researching 'toxic childhood syndrome' a decade ago was my concern that changes in our lifestyles might be behind the massive increases in developmental conditions. ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), dyslexia and autism are called 'developmental disorders' because children who seem fine when they're born don't develop as expected. There's a physical explanation for all these conditions - glitches in children's brain structure or the chemical balance of the brain - and often they're hereditary. But most scientists believe environmental influences can add to the problem (in some children they might even create it). There's research beginning to come through

suggesting that an excessively screen-based culture could play a part, particularly in the first few years when neural pathways are forming in the brain. Concern is growing around the world about the effects of increasing screen-saturation on developing minds. Quite apart from the obvious dangers of exposing children to too much screen-based entertainment, it's glaringly obvious that a child zoned out in front of a screen isn't engaging in the healthy 'real play' that's been children's birthright for millennia.

The threat of damage is greatest the younger the child. Indeed, the American Academy of Paediatrics has long

recommended that children under two shouldn't watch any TV and France has recently banned broadcasting to the under-threes. But the message doesn't seem to be getting through in Britain and Ireland. In the UK 40% of 4 year olds and a staggering 90% of 12 year-olds now have TVs and other electronic paraphernalia in their bedrooms.

We are all the richer for the great technological advances of our time - and older children too can enjoy and benefit from them. But that depends on our ensuring that the toxic side-effects of progress don't undermine overall development. The most important step to detoxifying the electronic village is getting the TVs out of the bedrooms! **continued p.3**



Children from Playmates Montessori Preschool celebrating The Chinese New Year



Pancake Fun at Rainbow Montessori Preschool in aid of The National Children's Hospital Tallaght



ST. NICHOLAS MONTESSORI COLLEGE

The new college building in Century Court has become a centre of great activity particularly during the final weeks of term. This long overdue premises proved to be a very successful centre of learning appreciated by all the staff and the students. All students are sitting end of year examinations and I wish them every success. Final year graduates will be presented with their parchments at the St. Nicholas HETAC conferring in October. Have a restful summer.
June Hosford Director

ST. NICHOLAS MONTESSORI SCHOOL

As we near the end of our school year all classes continue to work enthusiastically. The 9-12 class celebrated EU Day on the 8th May. Projects and a flavour of the food of each of the 27 countries were presented by the pupils to their parents. Ms. Gray's class are busy preparing for their production of 'Eddie the Penguin Saves the World' - a play focusing on the topic of the environment and the importance of recycling. Five pupils received Confirmation on February 10th, 2009. Three pupils received their First Communion on 16th May, 2009. The 6-12 years old are looking forward to their school trip to Armagh to visit the Planetarium. Ms. Farrelly's and Ms. Dempsey's classes will visit Glenroe Farm. All classes are singing their hearts out in rehearsal for the end of year Music Concert. During the summer holidays the teachers will be refurbishing two of the classrooms in a similar style to that undertaken last year.

Noreen Tierney Principal



Confirmation Pupils



First Holy Communion Pupils



History Workshop Kilkenny April 2009



Pyjama Fun Day at Chuckles Montessori Preschool, Co. Tipperary

NCIP PROJECT

We welcome Laura Pratt as the NCIP Team Administrator. The team collaborate with the Executive Committee in providing a mentoring and certification support to Montessori Preschools through visits, workshops and network meetings and other events. This also provides opportunities for ongoing professional development. An expansive Programme of Events is planned for 2009/2010. Details can be viewed on www.montessoriiireland.ie. The website is a useful resource for members providing information on Montessori School suppliers and lists of certified Montessori Preschools. Contact us at info@montessoriiireland.ie or telephone 01.2805705

THE IRISH MONTESSORI EDUCATION BOARD

The Irish Montessori Education Board Trust Limited (IMEB) continues the work of accreditation of Montessori schools. Protocols are in place which describes what must happen and in what order from when a school completes the registration process to when the IMEB 3 year certificate is issued. The IMEB is currently lobbying the Office of the Minister for Children and the Early Years Education Unit and Department of Education and Science on issues that have arisen as a result of the introduction of a Free Pre-School Year in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). Contact IMEB at info@imebtrust.org.ie website www.imebtrust.org.ie

Mina Walsh Company Secretary

St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland



Programme

of

Events

2009-2010

For further information on upcoming events log onto www.montessoriiireland.ie

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HOW CAN MONTESSORI SCHOOLS HELP?

Let parents know that when children are plugged into screens in their rooms they're not getting the first-hand, active, social experiences they need for healthy development (the younger the child, the less they'll benefit from screens as opposed to real-life activities).

They're prey to marketers who groom them (via TV ads, internet pop-ups and product placement in blogs) in pester power techniques for everything from junk food to family cars, holidays and even cleaning products.

They often tune to unsuitable TV programmes (violence, sleaze, bullying, cruelty) or gain access to violent computer games which can be emotionally unstabilising and may influence behaviour.

They are probably more likely to meet 'strangers' onscreen and online than they are out in their local area - and many of these strangers (not least predatory marketers) do not have their interests at heart.

Parents can't monitor and mediate what their children watch and do - they are handing control of their children's minds to these strangers.

Sell parents copies of the excellent little booklet *Children and the Media: learning by example?* info@mediawatch.org

Drip-feed information through newsletters and arrange parents' meetings to discuss specific issues. The short video 'Consuming Kids' on YouTube makes a great starting point for discussion. Often parents are unsure about whether something's suitable for their child, but think 'Oh well, it must be all right - everyone else is doing it.' Unless people get together and discover everyone else is uneasy too, the situation can only get worse.

But if we can help parents to collaborate, and thus exercise 'parent power' to detoxify their children's lives, the next generation can look forward to an exciting future in what really could be a brave, new world.

Toxic Childhood and Detoxing Childhood by Sue Palmer are both published by Orion Books

SOME THOUGHTS ON WORK AND PLAY

Michael O' Connor

Do you allow children in your school to make fences out of the colour spools? Do they sometimes pretend that the shorter red rods are cars? Do they stir the rice in the spooning bowl and pretend that it's soup? Should we be concerned if children find alternative ways of using the materials? Are we less pure Montessori teachers if we fail to stop the above variations? And when children engage in such activities, are they working or playing? Montessori was, as far as I know, the first educationalist to dignify the activity of the child as *work*. She wanted adults to realise that the child's activity was as important as the work of the adult. From birth, children work at the job of becoming an adult, and it is the adult's job to facilitate that work. Other educationalists, however, say that play is the most important activity of the child. Who is right?

Really, it seems to me, it is a question of definition. In her book *Early Childhood Education*, Tina Bruce gives useful definitions from a Froebelian point of view. Work, she says, is something the child is required to do by an adult or teacher, while play is something that the child initiates for him/herself. I suppose these definitions are useful up to a point, but they're also a bit confusing: when a child decides to sweep the floor or build the pink tower, the definition says it's play, but I would say it's work. I'd be less certain though, about the activities mentioned in my first paragraph. Obviously, according to our definition, they are play, but would I characterise them, along with sweeping the floor and building the pink tower, as work? I'm not sure: there's something more, well playful, about pretending.

There's another question about these questionable activities: can we be certain, when we gently redirect the child to more serious work/play, that the pretend play is less beneficial for the

child than the serious work? We can't be certain. But children do play. We can be certain of that because we have all seen it. There's a strong impulse in children - some of the time at least - to do non-serious things. Adults also show the same impulse. I think it's universal. Is it necessary? According to Michael Mendizza, in his book *Magical Parent, Magical Child*, it is part of Nature's plan: Because the economy of nature rules out random or wasted action in the formative period, the child's driving intent to play all the time must logically be a major part of the biological plan.

(Mendizza, 2004, 44) Mendizza's point is that if children spontaneously choose to play, then play itself must be part of the work of the child; it must be necessary for the development of the child. So whether we are talking about work or play, for Mendizza *and* Montessori, the spontaneous activity of the child is what's important. Montessori writes about the distinction between teaching a child how he should act, but leaving him free in the practical application of this freedom, and that which is followed in other systems of education, namely, of imposing the will and power of an adult upon the child, and thus guiding him in all his actions. (Montessori, 1988, 95). The first two phrases above are key: we teach the child how s/he should act, and then we leave him/her free in the practical application of what we have freed the child to do. So we teach the child how to spoon rice; the child learns and gains independence; but if the child then chooses to stir the rice and pretend it's soup, we should allow that freedom, even if we don't understand why the child is doing it - always with the caveat that if the child is damaging the environment or people in the environment, he or she needs to be stopped. Perhaps then, we should allow children to play, to pretend with the materials - and as I write this, I feel a great uneasiness

as if somehow children will stop working in the Montessori sense if we allow them to play, or as if Montessori herself is turning in her grave at the thought of one of her disciples advocating play in her schools. But neither of these is likely: children choose to work every day, just as sometimes, they choose to play; and Montessori never, I think, said that children should *not* play. We should allow children to play, not just as a way of "chilling out", as adults do, (in the course of writing this article I have played FreeCell at least 10 times and Internet Checkers another 10) but also as a way of working things out when the pressure is off. About seven years ago, just after 9/11, I watched my son, aged 4 build a tower with bricks and knock it down with a toy plane. JG Ballard, the writer who died recently, had a traumatic childhood, some of it spent in a Japanese concentration camp in China. He remembered the brutality, but he also remembered that the children played hundreds of games. So let us not worry too much when children play with our material, rather than work with it. Let us observe the play as well as the work. The work of the scientist, like women's work, is never done and it's our job, as Montessorians, to continue that work.

References

Bruce, Tina (2005) *Early Childhood Education* (3rd edition); London, Hodder Education
Mendizza, Michael (2004) *Magical Parent, Magical Child: The Art of Joyful Parenting*; Berkeley, North Atlantic Books
Montessori, Maria (1988) *The Discovery of the Child*; Oxford, Clio Press Ltd.

THE POWER OF CONCENTRATION

In the first lecture delivered by Dr. Montessori at the Montessori Conference in London in 1951 and recorded in the January issue of the St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland Newsletter she emphasized the importance of The Prepared Environment in the development of the inner guide that exists in every child and which needs to be respected.

In her second lecture in this series, Montessori alerts us to The Power of Concentration.

Lecture No. 2.

The Power Of Concentration

"The psychic phenomena of which I spoke are inner guides and as such must be respected. I was not merely speaking of spontaneous activity. It is erroneous to think that all spontaneous activity is good, for if this idea is accepted, all the spontaneous action of the children would be allowed. I insist that not all the children's spontaneous actions are necessarily good: only those that are syntropic are good and only those should be respected. It is essential to be able to distinguish the syntropic phenomena (see footnote) from the others. It was these that amazed me when I first saw them. It was these that showed me that the child was not only different to the child as he had hitherto been considered, but superior.

The syntropic phenomena which I observed in my first children's class were that of concentration. To my amazement I saw that after concentration all the difficulties

Footnote

Entropic Phenomena:

determined from without where cause produces effect

Syntropic Phenomena:

determined from within like a seed that follows a fixed structural plan and results in the formation of a plant.



Lecture kindly submitted by Mrs. Sighle Fitzgerald, President St. Nicholas Montessori Society Ireland

and defects in the children's characters, defects that made life hard for them and for those around them, disappeared. The cure was not the result of my intuition or of any direct action on my part. It came about spontaneously, after concentration, under certain conditions. I was surprised. I studied the conditions and tried to improve on them. Later when I announced my findings people could not understand. They saw the evidence in the children but they kept asking me how I cured lying and stealing habits, tantrums etc. I could only repeat that these disappeared of themselves under certain conditions.

Concentration makes all the undesirable sides of the child's character disappear. Then the syntropic phenomena can take place and it is these that we should respect and encourage. It is these that arouse wonder and faith in the grown-up. They are not dependent on us.



Syntropic phenomenon may be connected with facts concerning morality and the intelligence. Take an example of the first. I saw a very troublesome new child admitted into a well established class. He was a real nuisance. But after some time some of the children came round him and said: "Well you are a little bit naughty aren't you? But don't be unhappy about it. We were all like you once but now we are good."

Here the children showed a sentiment of fraternity, love and sympathy, which no one had taught them. Again we found that the small child was superior to the adult and to the older child in some aspects of the intellectual field. For example, the small child has an amazing memory. Children in the kindergarten learn more easily than older children do. They have a memoric power which is almost a mechanical power.

They can memorize the order of words which have no connection with each other and which they may not have even understood

The syntropic phenomenon shown by the children are different at the different ages. We have come to the conclusion that there are inner forces at work in the children. In the young child these are concerned with the subconscious. There is something within the child at birth that urges him to build his mental organs through environmental experiences. Sir Percy Nunn says that there is a memory much stronger than our weak memory which forgets more than it remembers. He calls it the Mneme. He also declares that there is a kind of strength of will in children that is much greater than the ordinary strength of will of the vacillating grown-up. This he calls the Horme. Will in children is the well of the life force, it is so great that nothing can stand against it. It is a force that remains in the adult, but which is the prevailing force in childhood.

Early on in my work I came to the conclusion that the psychological construction of the child takes place in the first few years of life. So it is the period which I consider to be of fundamental importance. It is the period of the psychological development of man.

Lecture delivered by Dr. Montessori at Montessori Conference - London Whitsun 1951

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