

# Chapter 3

# The Key Concepts

## of Montessori Education



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## Introduction

We have discussed earlier how Dr. Maria Montessori observed children for their developmental and cognitive needs and scientifically developed a unique system of education. In this chapter, we will discuss and understand the core distinctive features of Montessori education. Montessori method cannot be implemented in its true sense even if any one of these key features is missing. They lay the very foundation of Montessori education. Let's discuss the key features of Montessori philosophy on the following pages.

1. Sensitive Periods (ref to chapter 2)
2. Absorbent Mind
3. The Spiritual Embryo
4. Freedom of Choice
5. Prepared Environment
6. Access & Proportion
7. Focus on Individual Progress
8. No Competition
9. No Reward, No Punishment
10. Mix-age Group
11. Concrete to Abstract
12. Control of Error
13. Montessori's Approach to Discipline
14. Practical Life Skills
15. Importance of Movement
16. Peace Education
17. Work & Play



# 3.1 The Absorbent Mind

## A Key Concept by Dr. Maria Montessori

The “Absorbent Mind” is one of the key concepts in Dr. Montessori's educational philosophy. Dr. Maria Montessori used this term to refer to the incredible ability of children (from birth through approximately age six) to quickly and spontaneously absorb information from the environment like a sponge. This is a time of extreme neuronal activity. At no other time period in life, we learn at such an astonishing pace, and with such great ease, ever again. As we grow older this incredible ability is ultimately lost and the mind undergoes a transition to “The Reasoning Mind” (after age six years).

The concept of the absorbent mind

establishes that the child's mind is very different from that of an adult. Similarly, he learns in a very different way from that of an adult. It also implies that young children should not be treated and taught like older children and adults. Since the brain, during this period, is hard-wired to absorb from the environment effortlessly and indiscriminately, she insisted on allowing them freedom and providing a scientifically prepared environment - which caters to their developmental needs and promotes learning. In other words, if they are absorbing wholly from the environment, the best way to maximize learning is to allow them to operate freely in the best possible environment, rather than dictating



“...the tiny child's absorbent mind finds all its nutriment in its surroundings.” - Maria Montessori

or teaching in traditional ways.

*The Absorbent Mind forms the basis of the society created by man, and we see it in the guise of the gentle and tiny child who solves by the virtue of his love the mysterious difficulties of human destiny.*

- Maria Montessori

The analogies normally used for the concept of absorbent mind include;

- a sponge that soaks any kind of liquid around it.
- a camera storing exact images of everything around.

The absorbent mind lays the foundation of the child's personality. He learns and absorbs all aspects of his culture and surroundings. Dr. Maria Montessori said,

*“The absorbent mind welcomes everything, puts its hope in everything, accepts poverty equally with wealth, adopts any religion and the prejudices and habits of its countrymen, incarnating all in itself. This is the child!”*

The absorbent mind helps him carry out the amazing task of the inner construction. She wrote in her book ‘The Absorbent Mind’,

*“Impressions do not merely enter his mind, they form it, they incarnate themselves in him.”*

Without the absorbent mind, normal adult life would not be possible. As Montessori said, “Child is the father of man”. It is only this amazing ability of the child's mind, and his relentless efforts that create and construct the man.

The child is born without language, but simply absorbs languages around him.

Learning a language is a tiresome and complicated process. However, the child learns the native language seamlessly and painlessly. The child also absorbs a second language very easily if it is present in the environment. Similarly, the child is born with just a few survival skills, but soon masters hundreds of complex skills like sensory discriminations, motor skills, social and cultural norms, etc. effortlessly. He is born without the ability to take care of himself, but soon becomes an independent and a contributing member of society. The child is also good at making generalizations. Once he learns something, he is quick to apply it to another scenario.

Dr. Maria Montessori divided the Absorbent Mind into two sub-phases:

Age	Absorbent Mind
Birth to 3 years	Unconscious Absorbent Mind
3 to 6 years	Conscious Absorbent Mind

### Unconscious Absorbent Mind (Birth – 3 years)

During this phase, the child absorbs everything and collects imprints from his environment unconsciously and unknowingly. This sub-phase is a period of construction. The child constructs his movements, language, intelligence, memory, emotions, and creative faculties unconsciously without a choice. He also begins to construct his identity and self-image.

During this phase, the child is the master of mimicry/imitation. He tries to mimic

whatever adults do around him, and while doing so develops his mental and physical faculties. Meanwhile, he prepares himself for the next phase of the absorbent mind. Montessori infants & toddlers' program has been designed to meet the developmental needs of the 'unconscious absorbent mind'.

### Conscious Absorbent Mind (3 – 6 years)

The second sub-phase of the absorbent mind is called the 'conscious absorbent mind'. The child's mind continues to absorb like a sponge, but contrary to the previous stage, now he pursues various activities more consciously. During this phase, he consolidates, organizes, classifies, and makes sense of the knowledge he unconsciously absorbed during the previous phase. He continues absorbing from his environment but gradually becomes more aware of his choices and the learning process. The child also begins to become susceptible to adult influence and starts to achieve some level of obedience which was almost impossible for him in the previous sub-phase.

He can now move around purposefully, select appropriate activities, and work with concentration. He needs two key components more than anything else at this stage – (i) a suitable environment and (ii) freedom. He strives to be independent and begins to avoid unnecessary adult influence. He yearns to select his activities and make choices. He wants to accomplish his tasks independently on his own. We often hear him demanding, “let me do it myself” or “I will do it myself.” Montessori teachers call it the 'help me do it myself' stage, and

allow children to carry on activities on their own without providing any superfluous help.

Another fascinating feature of this phase is that “the hand becomes his instrument of the brain”. He loves to explore through his hands and is passionate about concrete experiences. The use of hands enhances his learning experience. He can focus on multiple learning areas during this phase such as writing, reading, numeracy, geography, art, sciences, geometry, music and culture along with the refinement of his senses and motor skills.

By the end of 6 years, the child's personality and self-concept are almost completely developed. Studies show that almost 85% of his core brain structure develops during this time.



“Like a sponge these children absorb. It is marvellous, this mental power of the child. Only we cannot teach directly. It is necessary that the child teach himself, and then the success is great.” - Maria Montessori

The concepts of “Sensitive Periods” and “the Absorbent Mind” are interlinked. Each sensitive period allows the child's absorbent mind to focus on one aspect of the environment and exclude everything else. To understand the relationship between the absorbent mind and sensitive periods, we can use an analogy of a spotlight, emerging from the mind, illuminating only certain parts of the environment. The adults should carefully observe the children for their sensitive periods and prepare/modify the environment accordingly so that they can draw maximum benefits from these amazing periods.

According to Dr. Montessori, the child enters the phase of reasoning mind after the period of absorbent mind finishes, which persists and he never returns to the earlier phase. In order to understand the difference between the absorbent mind and the reasoning mind, let's compare a camera photograph with a drawing.



In both the images above, we see a glass. The photograph, taken with a camera, has simply absorbed the reflecting light from the object, its surroundings, and the background with exact details. The photograph is preserved forever, and no changes will ever occur in it. On the other hand, the image showing the drawing of a glass depicts only what the artist chose to draw. It reflects the skill level of the artist, along with the efforts he made. It may not

even be a representation of a real glass, but a glass from the imagination of the artist. The artist may decide to add or remove something in his piece of art. The absorbent mind works more like a camera. During this phase, the child simply absorbs from the environment precisely and flawlessly. It stays unchanged and constructs the foundations of his personality since it goes deep down in his subconscious mind. What goes in the mind at the later stage of “the reasoning mind” is more like the drawing and depends on the conscious efforts made by the learner, his skill-set and development level of the various faculties of the reasoning mind. The later learning also does not contribute much to laying the foundations of the personality.

Montessori classrooms provide a scientifically prepared environment to meet all developmental needs of the absorbent mind. Provision of an environment that is scientifically developed according to their developmental needs, along with the freedom to move and choose activities themselves, can do wonders in the child's present and later life. As development is sequential, future development relies on the foundational development during the absorbent mind. The child may develop serious developmental deficiencies, and face learning difficulties if this period is not utilized properly or wasted away.

*The child has a different relation to his environment from ours... the child absorbs it. The things he sees are not just remembered; they form part of his soul. He incarnates in himself all in the world about him that his eyes see and his ears hear.*

- Maria Montessori