

# Family Connection

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I have found that in his development, the child passes through certain phases, each of which has its own particular needs. The characteristics of each are so different that the passages from one phase to the other have been described by certain psychologists as ‘rebirths.’

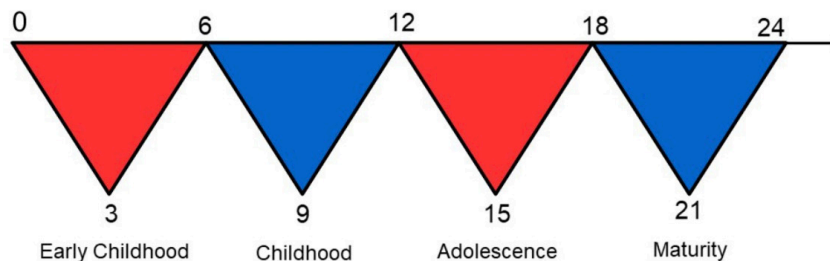
—Maria Montessori, *Citizen of the World*

## The Philosophy Behind Multi-Age Groupings

by Cynthia Brunold-Conesa

One of the most foundational features of Montessori education is the three-year, multi-age programs. These configurations are not arbitrary, but are based on the planes of development, or four distinct periods of growth: 0 – 6 years; 6 – 12 years; 12 – 18 years; and 18 – 24 years. Maria Montessori (and other developmental theorists, like Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson) confirmed that children develop through a series of observable stages, each with specific needs and predispositions—cognitive, social, physical, moral, and emotional. Montessori’s developmental model is represented in the following illustration:

Montessori’s developmental model



The red periods represent rapid growth and hormonally-driven changes (think of infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and adolescents); the blue periods represent quieter, more stable periods of development. Each plane is divided into two sub-planes, on which the Montessori multi-age classrooms are based:

First Plane	Second Plane	Third Plane
0 – 3 years (Infant/Toddler)	6 – 9 years (Lower Elementary)	12 – 15 years (Middle School)
3 – 6 years (Early Childhood)	9 – 12 years (Upper Elementary)	15 – 18 years (High School)

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In Montessori's words (2019):

*With regard to the child, education should correspond to these stages, so that instead of dividing the schools into nursery, primary, secondary, and university, we should divide education in[to] planes, and each of these should correspond to the phase the developing individual is going through.*

The fourth plane, of course, is early adulthood and, as such, is not associated with Montessori classrooms.

### The First Plane of Development (Early Childhood)

Montessori refers to the first-plane child as being endowed with an *absorbent mind*; that is, they learn spontaneously by actively absorbing elements in the environment. The environment of the Early Childhood classroom fulfills the young child's needs through a series of Sensorial, Language, and Math materials, as well as Practical Life activities.

### The Second Plane of Development (Lower and Upper Elementary)

The child at this stage reflects and reasons about their observations. Not only is the child able to explore topics of their own interest, but they engage those intellectual faculties to which they are developmentally predisposed along the way. The well-prepared Elementary environment gives the child the tools to imagine big ideas, ask big questions, and extend their thinking beyond the classroom to the wider world.

### The Third Plane of Development (Middle and High School)

Adolescents experience a period of tremendous physical and neurological growth. They experience self-awareness, self-criticism, and emotional ups and downs. Adolescents seek solidarity with peers and crave greater independence from adults as they establish their own identity. They are concerned with human welfare and dignity, and may exhibit novelty-seeking and risk-taking behaviors as a response to a tendency to express courage and creativity. The Montessori environment at this stage is rooted in hands-on, experiential learning. Your adolescent may have an opportunity to start a business, complete with developing a business plan and securing funding, or work as an apprentice to an expert in a field they love.



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## Three Tips to Instill Confidence

- 1 Regardless of the age of your child, allowing them to do things for themselves that they are capable of doing is a great way to show that you believe in them—whether it’s making a sandwich at age four or riding the public bus as an adolescent, teaching children how to navigate the world in which they live and allowing them to do so goes a long way towards building confidence.
- 2 Showing patience when a child is learning something new is key. For example, planning for extra time to leave the house when learning to tie their shoes allows them to practice a new skill stress-free.
- 3 When the urge strikes to tell a child “good job,” instead try asking a question that leads them to evaluate what is “good.” Ask things like, “What is your favorite part of your picture?” or “Do you think you were even faster today than yesterday?” This will teach your child the ability to reflect on their own work, value their opinions, and recognize their growth.



## The Value of Practical Life Work

By Cynthia Brunold-Conesa

Practical Life exercises are a hallmark of Montessori education.

Practical Life activities help the child in Early Childhood work toward physical autonomy; the Elementary child work toward social competence and intellectual independence; and the adolescent strive for social and economic independence.

### EARLY CHILDHOOD

Walking into a Montessori Early Childhood (EC) classroom for the first time, the visitor may be surprised by a number of activities taking place: small children sweeping the floor, polishing the leaves of a plant, scrubbing a table, or washing dishes. In a different area of the classroom, a child may be preparing their own snack or arranging a vase of flowers. Another child, getting up from a chair, carefully tucks it in under the table. Even more surprising is that the children, so engaged, carry out these activities with purposeful movement and independence.

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Much of Practical Life at the Elementary level is not on the shelves—it is part of a chemistry lesson in preparing the garden soil to receive seeds...

Young children are highly motivated to engage in those activities they commonly see at home; anyone who has ever had a small child in the household knows that they frequently ask to help with cooking, washing dishes, folding clothes, or laying the table. To this end, many homes and schools provide items like toy kitchen sets with which the child imitates the chores of older siblings, caregivers, and parents.

### ELEMENTARY

Much of Practical Life at the Elementary level is not on the shelves—it is part of a chemistry lesson in preparing the garden soil to receive seeds; it is knitting a scarf for a local clothes drive; it is peacefully solving a conflict or leading a community meeting.

Given that the second-plane child has, in large part, gained these basic skills, the Practical Life area at the Elementary level shifts in its purpose. The Elementary child has gained their independence by learning practical life skills at the Early Childhood level, and is now ready to embark on the next step.

Children at this stage now explore:

- writing a class newsletter
- first aid and safety
- woodworking, sewing, knitting, crocheting, weaving, embroidering
- community service projects

- planning the logistics of field trips and other going out excursions
- creating a classroom library check-out and maintenance system
- organizing personal work into binders or portfolios

### SECONDARY

Practical Life is inherent in many, if not most, areas of the Montessori Secondary curriculum. In Montessori’s vision for the adolescent, she called for an education which provides both an understanding of society as well as the skills with which the adolescent will use to contribute to that society as an adult. Some of the Practical Life activities you will see at this level include:

- elective programs offering a wide range of courses in personal and creative expression, humanities, and STEM areas
- year-long senior projects wherein students explore individual interests through interdisciplinary research
- interstate travel, cultural exchange, trips abroad
- off-campus service learning and internships (including occupational and career education)
- environmental stewardship
- intercultural awareness and the development of global citizenship
- regularly scheduled student-led community meetings



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