

2 CHAPTER



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UNDERSTANDING THE ELEMENTARY CHILD

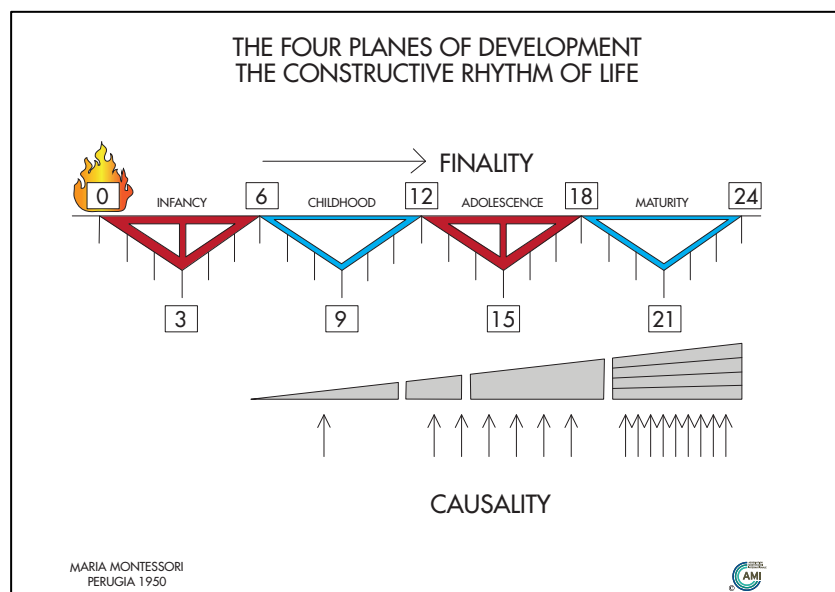


Planes of Development

Maria Montessori described human development as unfolding in the constructive rhythm of life or as we call it - “planes of development,” each characterized by unique physical, psychological, and spiritual needs. These planes—birth to 6, 6 to 12, 12 to 18, and 18 to 24—represent cycles of transformation, much like stages

in the metamorphosis of a butterfly. At the transition between planes, the child undergoes a kind of “rebirth,” shedding the traits of the previous stage and emerging with new capacities and sensitivities. Montessori believed that because the characteristics of each plane differ so profoundly, the environment and educational approach must also transform to meet the child’s evolving nature. The prepared environment, therefore, is not static—it adapts, just as the child does, to provide the right nourishment for growth at each stage.

The second plane of development, from six to twelve years, is a time of intellectual and moral awakening. The child who once absorbed the world through the senses now hungers for reason, imagination, and connection. This “rebirth” brings a shift from physical independence to intellectual and social independence: the child seeks to understand how the world works and how people relate within it. Like a butterfly spreading its wings, the elementary child reaches outward, exploring vast ideas, moral questions, and the interconnectedness of life. The Montessori environment for this plane must therefore expand beyond the classroom walls, offering stories, research, and opportunities for collaboration that satisfy the child’s need for exploration, justice, and belonging.



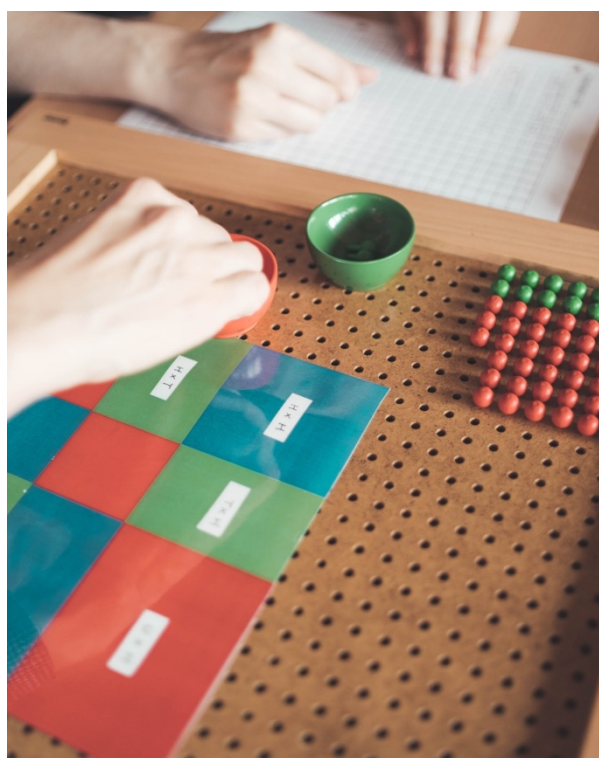
Characteristics of Elementary child

Reasoning Mind is a Tool

In the elementary stage, the child's reasoning mind becomes the primary means of learning. No longer content with mere sensory exploration, the child wants to grasp the logic behind things. The reasoning mind allows the child to analyze, compare, and synthesize information, turning learning into a conscious, intentional act. Montessori described this as the age of the *reasoning mind*, where intellectual exploration replaces the spontaneous absorption of early childhood. The prepared environment must therefore provide opportunities for discovery and research that challenge the child to think critically, make inferences, and draw conclusions independently.

Why and How?

The child of this age constantly asks “Why?” and “How?”—questions that reflect their deep need to understand the interconnections of the universe. This questioning is not mere curiosity; it is an intellectual drive that leads the child to explore moral, scientific, and social truths. Montessori education responds to this need by presenting the child with the “Great Lessons,” stories that offer grand, cosmic answers while inspiring further inquiry. The teacher becomes a storyteller and guide, helping the child form a framework of understanding that supports self-driven exploration and a lifelong love of learning.



The Power of Imagination

Imagination is the key that unlocks the elementary child’s ability to explore beyond what can be seen or touched. Through imagination, the child can picture the formation of the universe, the evolution of life, and the invisible forces of nature. Montessori saw imagination not as fantasy but as a bridge between concrete experience and abstract understanding. The prepared environment offers tools—stories, experiments, timelines, and charts—that spark the imagination and allow the child to engage intellectually and emotionally with the vastness of creation.

Hero worship

During the elementary years, children begin to look up to figures who represent ideals of courage, intelligence, and moral strength. This phenomenon, known as *hero worship*, reflects their developing moral sense and admiration for greatness.

Montessori educators can channel this instinct by introducing stories of real heroes—scientists, explorers, artists, saints—who contributed positively to humanity and also unknown heroes that are everyday around us -for example: unseen work of the plants. Through these stories, children are inspired to form their own sense of purpose and values, internalizing the idea that they too can make meaningful contributions to the world.

Big Work

Elementary children are drawn to “big work”—ambitious, complex projects that allow them to collaborate, research deeply, and apply knowledge across disciplines. Big work satisfies their need for intellectual challenge and social connection. It may take the form of group projects, research studies, dramatic reenactments, or community service. This kind



of work develops persistence, independence, and responsibility while integrating academic learning with real-world experience. Montessori educators support big work by providing time, resources, and freedom, trusting the child's inner drive to complete meaningful tasks.

Moral development: Justice and Fairness

Moral development becomes a central theme in the second plane of development. The elementary child develops a keen sense of justice and fairness, often expressing strong opinions about what is right or wrong. This emerging moral awareness is part of their reasoning process—they want to understand the *why* behind rules and consequences. Montessori classrooms support moral growth through community life: class meetings, shared responsibilities, and opportunities for conflict resolution. By experiencing fairness and cooperation firsthand, children internalize ethical principles and develop empathy for others.

Herd Instinct

The elementary child's "herd instinct" refers to the strong desire to belong to a group and collaborate with peers. Social relationships become central to their development, as children learn through interaction, cooperation, and shared exploration. Group work provides a natural context for learning social responsibility, negotiation, and respect for others' perspectives. Montessori environments embrace this instinct by encouraging mixed-age collaboration and shared discovery, allowing children to develop both individuality and social harmony through authentic community experiences.

Environment for Second Plane Child

In Montessori education, the prepared environment for the second plane child (6–12 years) is carefully designed to support their intellectual curiosity, moral development, and social growth. Unlike the early childhood environment, which emphasizes sensory exploration and practical life skills, the elementary environment is expansive, rich in materials, and structured to encourage reasoning, imagination, and discovery. It includes areas for language, mathematics, geometry, geography, history, biology, art, and music, each presented in a way that connects subjects and encourages the child to see the world as an interconnected whole - cosmic education approach. Materials and activities are often arranged in progressive sequences that allow the child to work independently or in groups, follow their own interests, and pursue in-depth projects, fostering both autonomy and responsibility.



Beyond academics, the second plane prepared environment nurtures social and moral development. Children work collaboratively on group projects, engage in community responsibilities, and participate in discussions that promote empathy, justice, and fairness. Classrooms are designed to be orderly yet flexible, providing space for “big work,” dramatic reenactments, conduct research together, and solve problems as a team, learning cooperation, empathy, and fairness in real social contexts. Storytelling stimulates imagination and critical thinking.

Montessori emphasized a dual environment for this plane: while the classroom provides structure, materials, and guidance, outdoor and community experiences extend learning beyond the walls. It is called going out experience, which can be connected with field trips, nature explorations, and interactions with local communities allow children to connect their studies to real-life contexts, deepening understanding and fostering responsibility. In this way, the prepared environment supports not only intellectual growth but also social awareness, practical skills, and a sense of belonging within both the classroom and the larger world outside the doors of the classroom.

The teacher in this environment acts as a guide, carefully observing and introducing resources that meet the child’s developmental needs while respecting their emerging independence.

In this way, the prepared environment becomes a living ecosystem that mirrors the child’s expanding mind and spirit, offering challenges and opportunities that encourage holistic growth.