

The First International Early Childhood and Montessori Conference
Childhood: An Evolutionary Vision

Kingdom of Bahrain
May 26 & 27, 2007

Master of Ceremonies: Dr. Julie Hadeed

Opening Montessori film clip with music from Chairvalle, Italy, Opera Montessori Nationale (Centenary celebration, Rome 2007) ([put in link](#))

Welcome Excellencies, Ministers, Educators, Parents, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen to the First International Early Childhood Conference, Bahrain 2007

Special thanks again to our supporters, Dr. Abdul Latif Kanoo, Gulf Finance House, Esterad and many others

It is an honour to have with us such a distinguished panel of speakers:

Mary Krechensky from Project Zero, Harvard University
Mary Jane Drummond, retired from Cambridge University
Barbara Isaacs from Montessori Centre International, London

Special thanks to all those who have traveled from afar to make this journey to be with us on such an important occasion. We have guests who have come as far as Hong Kong, India, Jerusalem, Turkey, USA, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. Welcome to you all.

We have invited you all here to share—to enlighten—to give to you new insights –a growing awareness about how children learn and how we can better educate our children for the future.

Let's begin with where we are today:

What does our world look like and what are we creating for our children.

Do you think we are creating real risks for our children? Is Childhood really on the brink?

Childhood: On the brink!



Our Earth Our Children

“I beseech you, do not go around speaking of an educational method that has convinced you, nor of having studied the way to make culture for children easy, universal and attractive. Therefore, speak to everyone of the child and his secret; unveil the truth; reveal the powers of this ‘spiritual embryo’ of the human soul; proclaim him for what he is; the father of man; the builder of humanity, the creative and transforming energy which can act on the hearts of men and can offer new elements for the solution of social problems”

Dr. M. Montessori

Initially, when I came up with the title for this conference, *Childhood On the brink*, I suggested it to a few of my colleagues and they all replied, *‘Well it is a bit bold...much too strong, don’t you think so?’*. I thought for a moment and then said to myself, **‘It is not nearly bold enough’**

The title certainly implies a crisis.

Let’s start by looking at the global, environmental picture. Al Gore, the former Vice President of the USA, graphically illustrates in his new film, **An Inconvenient Truth**, that our planet is seriously in trouble from global warming and if we don’t act now, it will be catastrophic—**the damage will not be reversible**.



Already we are witnessing masses of landforms and tectonic plates shifting at alarming rates and our ocean tides and currents changing rapidly. This is serious.



At a more personal level, it appears the whole of the scientific community at large--geologists, biologists, educationalists and psychologists (to name only a few) continue to warn us about the lethal dangers of alienating our children from the **ill side-effects** of our negligent, irresponsible lifestyles i.e., the effects from the bombardment of the media and its capitalistic spin-off technologies; the over-consumption of genetically modified food products, failing symptomatic health care schemes; and the list is growing longer and at an all-time alarming rate. We are warned that even in the best of our schools we are **dumbing-down** our children with approaches that stifle and do not challenge their bodies and minds with **over-testing, physical immobility and cut-backs on creative curriculum subjects**. There's more, plenty more. The experts tell us that we have created a whole new generation of **learning disabilities and problems** and a huge,

profitable industry to support them, which most do not want to talk about. It is worrying, to say the least. **Research tells us that we are not enlightening our future generations but rather missing the mark by not valuing and utilizing the innate potentialities that actually fuel the *real* intelligence to *solve* problems for the future.**

Schools are being sent all kinds of mixed messages. Try this, try that. Every academic year it is a new curriculum to amend or follow. Schools are also being told to do more than just schooling without any clear and grounded knowledge in what that means i.e., **what makes development and learning work. Every year the parameters of responsibilities widens that schools are being held accountable for. It is no longer enough to get the academic grades and standardized testing in place. **That will not do it. It is not nearly enough.** The experts tell us that education systems are doing more to exclude and build mistrust in our children-- and for the students who can withstand the stress, they end up -- the longitudinal studies tell us -- with all kinds of dysfunctions, illnesses, and disorders.**

And it is not just in our classrooms that children and their development is being under-minded and misdirected. **A closer look at the home life has us all spinning with higher statistical rates in all areas of development e.g., un-normalized behaviours (violence, aggression, anxiety, withdrawal, etc.); lethargy; complacency; lack of independence; ineffective communication relationships, and again, the list goes on and on. Our children are tuning-out.** We even have now what the psychologists term **an alliterate society**—it is where we are all literate but **we are choosing not to read!** It is not entertaining enough—we don't have the time!

What to do?

Homes must now consciously re-educate--re-create themselves to reflect creative, constructive and enterprising havens for learning.

We need to turn off the media



We need to turn off the media and turn on real learning. Parents-- you need to take charge and create the rich environments that our young developing children need. You need to invest yourselves and engage in real life, meaningful activities with your children. Get out there and take walks, explore nature, study the environment around you---**-first hand and not over the computer screen.** Be with your children 100% when you are with them.

....and turn on the real learning



Some educators fear that we are creating the last generation of children who actually have experienced nature, first hand. In his book, *Last Child in the Woods*, the author, Richard Louv quotes an elementary-aged child as saying:

“I like to play indoors better ‘cause that’s where all the electrical outlets are,” reports a fourth grader. Never before in human history have children been so plugged-in—and so out of touch with the natural world.....

The condition is coined....

“nature-deficit disorder’ which is the measure of the human costs of alienation from nature’”



In some countries, we are even

“criminalizing what was once free outdoor play time for our children”

e.g., in the USA and other countries children can no longer climb trees for fear of damaging them; they can no longer fly kites because lobbyists are saying that it interferes with a certain species of bird flying space and the bird sees the kite as an eagle.

“The secret of good teaching is to regard the child’s intelligence as a fertile field in which seeds may be sown, to grow under the heat of flaming imagination.”



To Educate the Human Potential

Now populations are learning what Montessorians have known and respected for over a century: **there are human costs when we alienate our children from nature—it diminishes the use of their senses at all levels—it creates a fundamental void in critical sensitive development for learning at the very constructive level of brain/social/emotional and physical development.**

Is it any wonder we have rocketing rates of attention deficits and difficulties in learning?

Is it any wonder why we have alarming rates of physical and emotional illnesses and abuse? And who is responsible?

What can we do? This conference speaks to this question—
What can we do before it is too late.

Getting back to our home environments that we create:

- **we need to all re-learn how to listen and communicate more effectively and respectfully our thoughts, ideas, emotions, values and beliefs in a normal, accepting loving and empowering exchange.**

- **Our priorities need to be re-examined, re-set for our families to connect and stay connected, like regular meal times, shared times together.**
- **We need to spend more time exploring, investigating, collecting, recording, discovering by observations taken from nature.**
When Howard Gardner, the father of Multiple Intelligences, looked at the detailed backgrounds of people who made remarkable contributions to our planet such as Mozart, Einstein, Gandhi, and so many others—they all had an affinity—a heightened awareness of their natural surroundings.

Educators,

- **We need to integrate curriculums that are real, hands-on experiences that are meaningful, purposeful and connected.**
- **Our choices need to speak more to balance, wisdom and building intelligence and less to seeing how quickly and efficiently we can get to where we want to go or meet top-down guidelines set by ‘specialists’ some of whom have never been in a classroom.**
- **We need to integrate the decades of research that shows when children are active learners making their own choices in learning in respectful, aware and prepared environments—they learn more—become more—and know how to be respectful and independent. Look to the neuro-psychological studies connected with learning and development, and the GROWING EVIDENCE will convince the even staunchest critic.**

Decades of quality research in Early Learning Environments, tell us that we have not got it right

We are not putting to practice what we know

This early experience is all important

For example, the most extensive investigation studied, throughout the history of ECE which was carried out in the USA, showed results that indicated that [67% of schools studied were not good quality](#) (NICHD study)

During the years of early childhood connections are made in the brain that shape children for life!

Pre-school provision throughout the UK, which has been trying for years to move up the EU ladder in terms of quality provision, was recently shown to be at the **bottom of a 21-country investigation** carried out by **UNICEF**. This study measured [40 indicators of overall quality in children's well-being](#)—[They were at the bottom of the list!](#) (press release, Feb. 14, 2007).

The most important years of a child's education are not the years of high school and university

.....and..... in Bahrain when I investigated and published studies on the quality of pre-schools in this country the results showed that the quality measure doesn't even reach the half way mark for our best performing pre-schools (Hadeed & Sylva, 2000).

The most important years
in a child's education are
between birth and six

We need high quality, pre-school provision for all our children from ages 2.5 years to 6 years old-----not just those who can afford it or for those mothers who can work. Let's veer away from creating more inequalities than we already have.

If we continue on this course—without awareness –without intervention we will have put our ----children at real risk-- --we will have left them a legacy that they can't get out of and we will have confused and stifled their natural wills for learning



“I have noticed it in my own experience that, if we would approach babes in humility and in innocence, we would learn wisdom from them”

Which brings us to why we need a new vision. The vision calls for a paradigm shift that acknowledges what some have quietly known and practiced for some time. The seeds are already there in approaches such as **Montessori, Reggio Emilio, Rudolph Steiner and others.** We need to consider what others have known and practiced for over a century. We need to take a long hard look again at these approaches with evidence to show they really work—work to create a better child—and a more creative, peaceful planet.

Children are born intelligent



Intelligence is found equally among girls and boys



Children of every ethnic background share the human capacity for genius

And last but not least, we need to invest ourselves. Take responsibility—own it—learn all about your developing child—there are secrets –wisdom there hidden in the child. It is not about the ‘almighty dollar’. That is not enough.



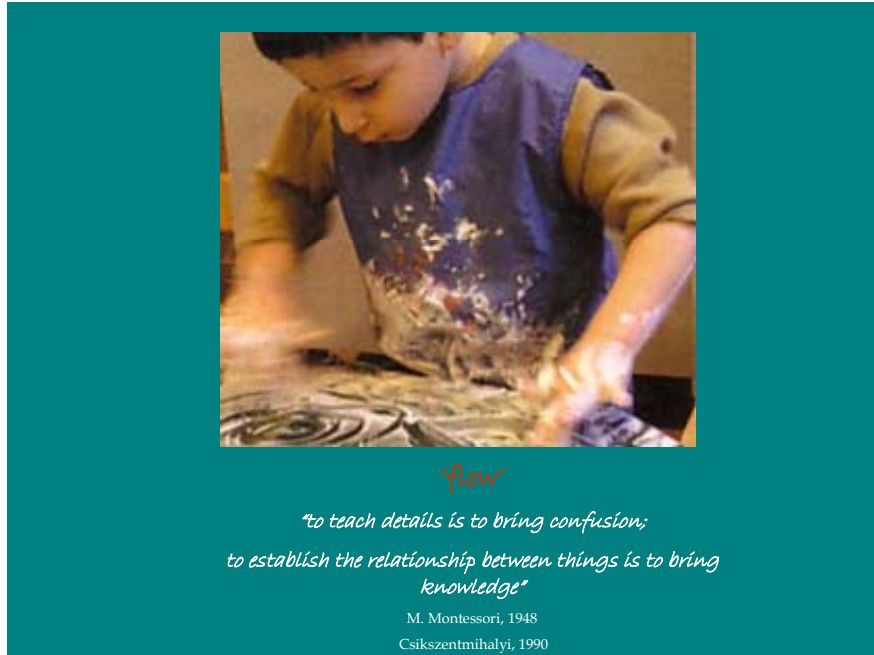
It is found equally among the children of poverty and affluence

The formula for this vision is clear. Professionals, parents, educators, and scholars are quietly making the choice to follow the [creative intelligence](#) path, patterned in many fields of learning and discovery, some of which we are presenting at this conference.

We want all of you, here today on this path.

This vision...this new direction is squarely based on the belief that there exists an innate creative intelligence that works to move us forward in evolution, not through destruction and greed but rather through a [collaboration that uses the positive life energies called for in order to create...to learn. . . to become ever more intelligent.](#) It is the cosmic-educative learning plan Dr. Maria Montessori spoke about over 100 years ago-----it is the creative enterprise of shared learning evident in the Reggio Emilia practices; it is the *collaborative-shared learning* described by Angelina Lillard in her new book, the *Science behind the Genius*; it is the élan vital of the creative energy force, which is described as 'flow' where learning **stays** natural and is renewed by intelligence;...it is the mystery of the perfect order and infinitely precise balance of all living things in our universe. [This is what we need to nurture, engage and cultivate in our early years learning environments.](#)

[We will speak more about this in the Montessori afternoon workshops](#)



We need to halt what Lillard calls, ‘our factories of learning’ that herd children through a meaningless process of schooling. Learning needs to be connected with nature. Understanding. Awareness of the many Multiple Intelligences we all have that are not being utilised. Discover and nurture this awareness and you will have provided the best foundation for learning for our children.

It is high time we realised that it is--

the child that must lead us, not the other way around.

They have the sensitive periods for learning---, the compassionate heart and they are endowed with an Absorbent Mind that learns effortlessly.

IF we follow the child and support with growing awareness their creative energy--- that *will* re-create new meaning and purpose for our world.

**Just maybe in doing that we will have avoided putting
Childhood on the Brink**

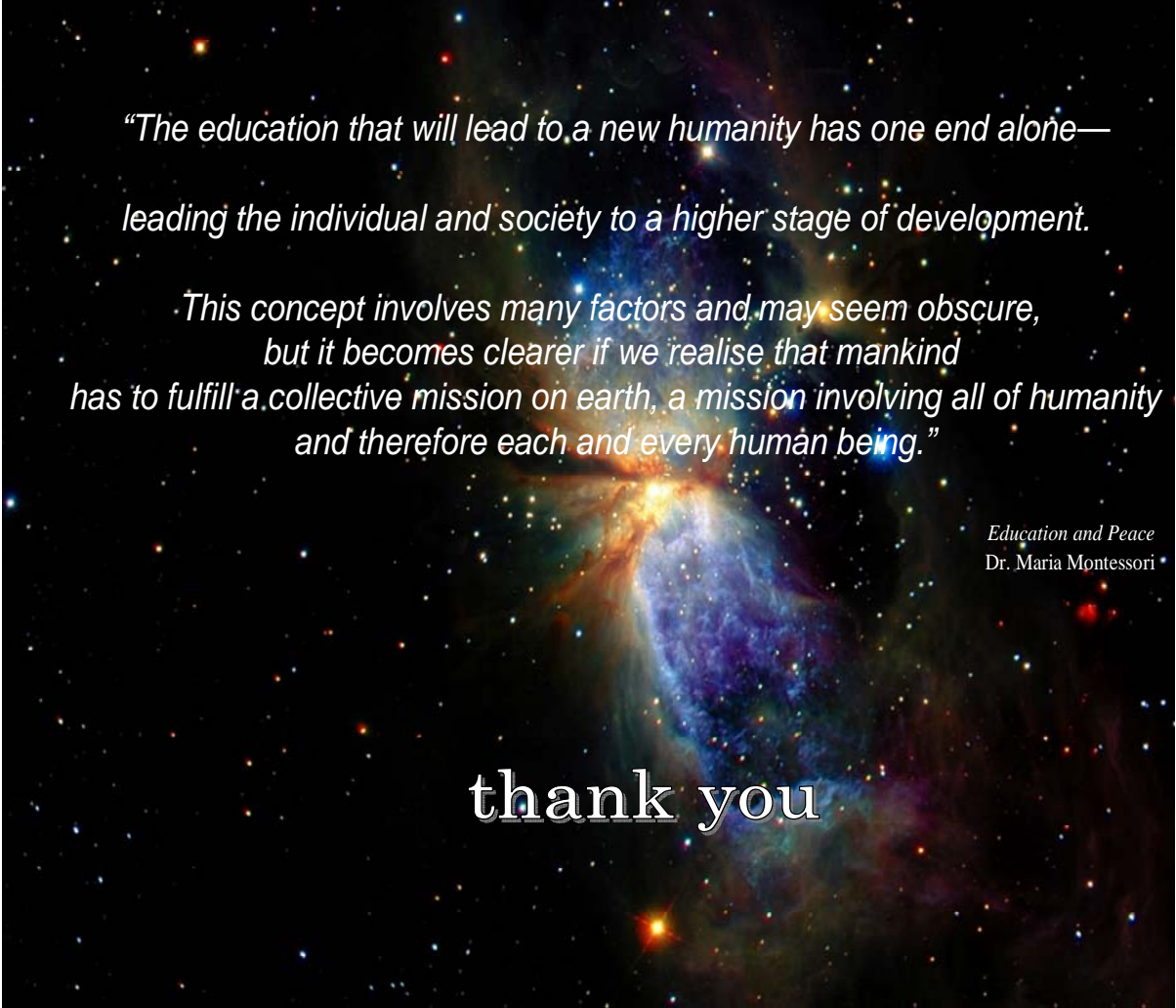


1870 – 1952 Dr. Maria Montessori

“...it is the child that must lead us...” not the other way around

Immediate goals:

- 1. Plan, develop and provide a national, **high quality** Early Years Provisions programme for all children in the Kingdom of Bahrain between the ages of 2.5 years – 6 years old. (only 30 % of our children at this age can afford pre-school).**
- 2. Integrate known and well-practiced early years approaches that are developmentally appropriate and researched based with years of practical evidence to show that they really work.**
- 3. Integrate real learning practices and visible learning into the provision provided**
- 4. Train teachers with a specialty in Early Years Development, Practice and Research**
- 5. Consolidate and build a centre for Early Years Research and Development**



*“The education that will lead to a new humanity has one end alone—
leading the individual and society to a higher stage of development.*

*This concept involves many factors and may seem obscure,
but it becomes clearer if we realise that mankind
has to fulfill a collective mission on earth, a mission involving all of humanity
and therefore each and every human being.”*

*Education and Peace
Dr. Maria Montessori*

thank you

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