“Suggestions and Remarks upon Observing Children”
From Dr Montessori’s 1921 London Training Course

It would seem as though to know how to observe was very simple and did not need any explanation. Perhaps you think it will be sufficient to be in a classroom in a school and to look and see what happens! But to observe is not as simple as that.

Any methodical observation which one wishes to make requires preparation. Observation is one of those many things of which we frequently speak, and of which we form an inexact or false idea. It should be sufficient to consider what occurs in all the sciences that depend upon observation. The observers in the various sciences must have a special preparation. For instance, one who looks through a microscope does not see what exists there unless his eye is prepared. It is not sufficient to have the instrument and to know how to focus it. It is also necessary to have the eye prepared to recognize the objects. Thus we might say in this case that a sensorial preparation is necessary. When Fabre describes his observations of insects, he really gives us a description of his long and patient preparation for observation. He also describes the virtues and attributes necessary to acquire in order to be able to observe. He must forget himself, and he must be at the service of the insects. He must rise in the morning at the hour when the insects begin to move. He tells us that he was very fond of smoking. Yet he puts away his pipe, for fear that the smell of the smoke might affect their manifestations.

Then, should there not also be a preparation in order to observe the child? Perhaps the scarcity of observations made upon children is due to the lack of preparation for such observations.

For this reason, I should like, before you begin your observation, to give you some of the principle and fundamental points that illustrate what I have just said.

These points, with which I begin, are not in relation to that which you have to observe, but in relation to the observer himself. Obviously, those who observe children must not disturb them; because the purpose of the observation is to see what the children are doing independent of our presence. The observer should remain absolutely silent and motionless. You will say that this is extremely easy to accomplish and that everyone knows how to do that, but that is not the case. Many times you will be tempted to show your admiration or your annoyance. You will be tempted to communicate your impressions to your neighbour. Thus we find ourselves faced by a real exercise, an exercise which we may call an exercise of conscious immobility, directed by our willpower.

This will also be one of the most valuable exercises to prepare students as educators in this method; because the first thing the teacher has to learn is to master herself, and to remain motionless beside the child.
While you are observing the children, try to imagine that you are in the position of the teacher who is directing the class, and try to examine yourself introspectively.

Try to think how many times, under certain conditions, you would have been tempted to go to the assistance of a child, or would have stepped forward to prevent something happening, which to you appeared harmful. How often would you think, “Oh, the teacher has not noticed that.” How many impulses would you have to step forward, were you free? Also, try to notice how many times you would have the impulse to tell your neighbour to notice something which seems interesting to you. You might try to count all those inner impulses. Thus you will be able to measure the distance which lies between you as you are now and the time when you will be a perfect observer. This quiescence is something which is extremely difficult for some people and much easier for others. It is so difficult for some people that we have to allow for some preparatory exercises to induce immobility. Even these exercises are not always sufficient. We suggested to some teachers that they should tie themselves with a cord to a stationary article of furniture!

We are so accustomed to abandoning ourselves to our own impulses. We are so convinced that our actions are always useful to others. We are so certain that we can do well that which others do badly; so sure that we can perfect that which is imperfect. Because in the world these impulses are considered good impulses, we have never performed exercises in order to control them.

No doubt, from one point of view, these feelings are good, because they show a desire to help others. But on the other hand, they also spring from pride. In relation to the child, they are feelings which come from the difference which exists between the child’s development and our own. That which we see the child doing with great effort, we can do easily. Therefore, we have the impulse to do the thing ourselves instead of letting the child do it. We do it so much more quickly and efficiently. When we see the child struggling so hard to do a thing which is so difficult for him and would be so easy for us, we have the impulse to help him.

Consider what would have happened had Fabre felt these good impulses towards the insects. Let us imagine Fabre watching an insect carrying a large ball that it had made, to the summit of the little mount. The insect allows the ball to roll down and is obliged to begin its journey all over again. What would have been the result had Fabre tried to solve this difficulty by picking up the ball and helping the insect? It is true he would have removed the effort from the insect, but he would have destroyed a science.

If we wish to observe the child, we must observe. If we see that he is working with great effort and difficulty, and if we see that it takes him a long time to do what we could do very easily; then we are observing. That is the observation. If there is a difficulty which is perfectly apparent to us, but which the child does not see, we leave him thus. That is our observation.

I suggested to some teachers that they should wear a belt with beads attached. Then every time they have an impulse to interfere, they would draw a bead along. This is very useful, because when we have an
impulse we must act, and the re-action with the bead is a help. From day to day, one would make observations upon oneself in this way, until one came to the point of not having to draw any more beads. We should then find that we had acquired a great calm and sense of repose. Perhaps we should have become transformed within. At any rate, we should have learned the following: that almost all these impulses to action are unnecessary.

We shall find that by means of effort, the child yet succeeds in the end although he takes a long time and does the thing with difficulty. He finally perceives the error which at first he did not see. If we had acted, we should not have been able to observe all this. It is evident that the child would have lacked the opportunity to accomplish that work by means of his own force.

Perhaps at first this will give you a feeling of discouragement. You may feel that if you do not conquer yourself, you will be useless and perhaps an obstacle in the way of the child. In this moment of discouragement, it will be a great consolation to us to discover that the child has within himself far greater powers than that we had imagined. Perhaps from that moment, an intense interest in the child will be born in us.

A small and humble exercise of control may develop a great power of meditation, a meditation upon the misunderstanding that exists today between the child and the adult. The adult intends to help the child, but is, instead, a hindrance only placing obstacles in his way. He acts from love, but from error he is only harming the beloved. Thus we begin to have the first vision of this liberation of the soul of the child. This liberation can only be attained by the adult being willing to pay the price, which is to refrain from substituting himself for the child.

There is another principle of observation which we may call physiological. That is, when you are observing one child, you must not cease from observing all the children. We know that the vision is exact and directed towards one point. At the same time we have a vast field of vision. It is not easy to bring our attention to all those things which we see indirectly. When one is looking at one person in a group, one must not let the whole consciousness become absorbed by that one person.

At the same time that all these things enter into our field of vision, they must be followed consciously by an act of will. This is an exercise of our will which must be repeated many times. You can imagine a teacher having to run from one child to the other, observing first one and then the next. Instead we must prepare a person who will be calm, serene but strong, a person who knows how to dominate by her observation everything that occurs. This is observation. She must know how to look and how to master her own impulses. She must know how to wait. She must be a person having a high grade of virtue, eg: patience.

All great observers are fundamentally people having great patience. Here, as in all other cases where observation is necessary, if this does not exist very strongly and we are not prepared, the phenomenon for which we wait will not take place. If we were prepared in early childhood for something which developed
this attribute, we should naturally be patient and have control of ourselves. We should be stronger than we are now. We should not suffer from that which is so noticeable today, boredom or tiredness of observing. As you know, boredom is a form of fatigue. The person who observes patiently, without feeling bored, has acquired an inner strength which must have been acquired through exercise. Thus one of the first exercises will be to attend a class of children, to be silent and motionless, to try not to let yourself be carried away by the actions of one child, and to try to see the whole class. Naturally, in order to observe, we must have something which is worth observing. We must know what it is that has value as an object of observation.

You must also realize that something which is obviously interesting does not need a great deal of preparation in order to observe it. We have to be prepared to observe phenomena which are not obviously interesting. Otherwise, what would happen to those observers, who are waiting, let us say, for an egg to hatch? Or who wait for a physiological phenomenon, not knowing exactly when it will take place? We are entering into a noble field, because we are following in the first steps of the path which leads to science and is the beginning of that which will make us scientists.

I will now say a few words upon the principal things to be observed. I have already said that Seguin gives particular importance to a special form of movement in deficient children, and that is a movement having an intelligent purpose. So you see it is not the movement, not even an orderly movement instead of a disorderly movement, it is a movement which has an intelligent purpose; an action which has a purpose; that is the important and fundamental point. This type of action, which would be a climax with the deficient child, is a commonplace and daily action with the psychically normal child; and this daily occurrence is not merely movement or even orderly movement, but useful action.

We all know that normal child needs to move; that continual and irresistible mobility is a characteristic of childhood. For this reason we say the child needs to run, to jump, to roll about on the grass, but these are not interesting movements. The interesting movement is that which is performing an action with a purpose. It is the movement of the child as an intelligent being. The difference between these two kinds of movement is not intrinsic, but depends upon us, the adults. The child cannot move with an intelligent purpose if he has not the means provided for the accomplishment of intelligent action. He has not the means of carrying out an intelligent action for two reasons; the first is that he lives in an unsuitable environment which is not adapted to him and does not offer him the means; and the second is that the adult impedes the child from accomplishing any action with a definite purpose. So, when the adult observing, sees the child moving without an intelligent purpose, he at once concludes that the child needs movement of this vague kind. And if adults can persuade themselves that they prevent the child from performing movement of an intelligent kind, we shall see them in an ecstasy before any movement of the
child; and we shall see the child moving in a disorderly manner, with the adults gazing at them, thinking “Oh, they need to move.”

Thus, we must observe the purpose of these movements, and all those actions, which have an intelligent purpose, merit observation and must be respected. Even if they are accomplished with effort and difficulty on the part of the children, we must simply observe and try to cultivate within ourselves interest in the observation.

You will realise that we have prepared an environment where the means are given whereby the child may accomplish these actions having an intelligent purpose, there begins to spring up and intelligent activity which does not need the guidance of the teacher; and it is possible to have a school where the children moving in this intelligent way perfect themselves. This process of perfection is worthy of deep consideration; it is not simply a psychic fact, as we generally consider it; the child’s need of definite activity has a physiological anatomical basis.

We know that the child is not born completely developed in all his parts; for instance, the nervous fibres have not yet acquired that part which completes them, and that is the part which involves the nervous filaments. It is with these particular exercises that this anatomical and physiological development is completed, and thus it is a real help to the inner growth of the body of the child.

We all know that at this period the bones are not completely formed, and for this reason we are persuaded that exercise is necessary in order to help the bones to develop.

We must consider also another kind of exercise which helps to develop parts of the child’s body which are far more important than the bones, i.e. the fibres of the very nerves themselves; and this development cannot be given by casual and mechanical exercises. It is the intelligent movement repeated and perfected which brings about this development, which is also a hygienic need of the child. We must penetrate more deeply into this idea of the hygiene of the child. The practical ideas which have today of the hygiene of the child are not only incomplete but they are too coarse, they relate almost entirely to the vegetative life. We must form a concept of these intelligent exercises which are not only casual and help the skeleton, but which are necessary for the growth of the intimate life of the child; and then little by little, we can make for ourselves this picture as we observe the school.

These children who are forming themselves are really creating their bodies as well as their consciousness; the very nervous system itself is forming within them, and they are seeking in the environment the nourishment which they need in order to develop this important part of themselves as though they were little chickens pecking at that which they need in order to nourish themselves; and we are like the hens who take them to the necessary food.

And when we have done this we have done all. We must not disturb the children who are nourishing themselves; we must simply stand by and await the work of nature.
Observation requires careful and individual preparation on the part of the observer. Preparation is necessary in order to render him capable of observing and of understanding that which he observes. It is also necessary to follow certain rules during the observation in order that the object which is being observed – in this case, the child – will be free to manifest the phenomena which we wish to observe.

In order that the children may manifest their actions freely, they must be in such a condition as to be practically unconscious of the fact that they are being watched. For this reason the observer must be able to maintain absolute immobility. From immobility comes the silence which we have practiced collectively. During the period devoted to observation the observer finds a splendid opportunity to practice this immobility and silence. It is also to the advantage of those who are observing, because if this were not carried out, in a very short time there would be nothing worth observing. I impress upon you to remember this, to maintain perfect immobility during the observation. The observer should maintain perfect immobility of the soul, so as not to take part in any manifestations in the actions of the children. There must be no manifestations of enthusiasm, pleasure, or joy on the part of the observer.

Portions of this lecture and related lectures can be found in AMI Communications 2008/2