



6-12 Assistants Certificate Course

Subject: Theory

Topic: Human Needs And Tendencies

HUMAN NEEDS AND TENDENCIES

The Needs of Humans

The theme of needs is a central theme in many areas of Montessori work. We look at the needs of plants and animals and how they satisfy those needs. We also look at how, when a plant or animal satisfies its needs, it also performs a task beneficial to other organisms and the earth as a whole. We call this its “cosmic task”. When we look at human beings, we also look at needs. We present the human being’s arrival on Earth as that of an “unlikely hero”, not equipped with the instincts and adaptive capabilities that traditionally have ensured the survival of a species. We present instead a creature with other capabilities, potentialities and gifts. The three basic gifts we mention are the “mind that can think”, the “heart that can love” and the “hand that can work”. The actions and coordination of those gifts towards goals we call the “tendencies”. The presence of these tendencies means that human beings not only have simple physical needs, but also what she calls “spiritual needs”. What all spiritual needs have in common is that they involve a quest beyond the immediate world of the senses. We search and we question. We respond to our environment and transform it. This we have done from the time we came on earth. There is a restlessness in human beings that can only be satisfied by creativity and exploration.

The material needs are very familiar to us: food, clothing, transport, shelter and protection (defence). They are the needs of the body. They are basic, but they also vary from geographical area to geographical area. The history of technology can be seen as the history of trying use nature to become independent of nature. At first, the satisfaction of our material needs was dependent upon a clear understanding and cooperation with the forces of nature in whatever areas of the world human beings moved. But technological innovations allow us now to physically survive in places we know virtually nothing about. How many of us have the survival knowledge of our ancestors that would allow us to thrive out in the wilderness?

Our spiritual needs are more complex and dynamic. They seem to have to do with attaching meaning and/or purpose to life. They relate to any activity that does not purely involve satisfying a need for physical survival. They have to do with religion, art, music, decoration, invention, love, beauty etc. Even our technological advancement would not have been achieved without the drive of the spiritual needs. The complex aggregate of human life on earth requires that both physical and spiritual needs must be met. The creation that is each culture and society on earth is what Maria Montessori calls the “sopranatura”.



Maria Montessori believed that human beings were therefore given tendencies rather than instincts to guide us in the satisfaction of our complex needs. A tendency can be defined as a driving force, tending in a certain direction. What all tendencies have in common are the following elements:

- They are fundamental and unchanging.
- They are present from the beginning of life and human history.
- They are what we in the present day have in common with our ancestors.
- They are common to all societies and social strata.
- They are determiners of human behaviour.
- They are the prime manifestation of our humanity.
- They facilitate humans in adaptation and the creation of a way of life.
- They are useful as a guide in studying human behaviour.
- They give direction to human beings, ensuring the satisfaction of their needs.
- They are always active throughout life.
- They manifest themselves differently in the different planes of development.
- They function as “verbs”, imperatives which drive humans to act upon their environment.

The tendencies can function even when there is adversity or obstacles. In fact, sometimes that is when they are the most active! Human beings are hard-wired to be stimulated by solving problems. Their very survival has depended on that fact.

Montessori herself talked about the tendencies, but never stated an exact number of them. In 1956 Mario M. Montessori held a lecture in the Netherlands about the tendencies, which has been reprinted as a pamphlet by AMI: *The Human Tendencies and Montessori Education*.

One of the keys to understanding the tendencies is to look at what Montessori thought about human “adaptation”. He writes:

To her the word (adaptation) meant happiness, ease and the sort of inner equilibrium which gives a sense of security to the child. It is based on the permanency of the spiritual, ethical and economical equilibrium of the group-environment in which his family both lives, and has a very determined social standing....

From this point of view the conditions of our present make it much more difficult for the child to become adapted than formerly. Now-a-days not only in one nation, but in the whole world society seems to be in a state of chaos, due both to the impact of new and conflicting ideas which come from all sides – and to economical, social and spiritual changes that have occurred in the near past.

So the general feeling is that no longer is anything permanent. All feel insecure: not only individuals, but also nations



It is not extraordinary therefore that in such conditions children find it more difficult to become adapted than previously. (Mario M. Montessori, "The Human Tendencies and Montessori Education, p.1)

So the task of adaptation, of being a help to life, has become more difficult, because we are uncertain about what to help the children to adapt to. But here Maria Montessori again comes to our aid. She sets for us a vision for human beings. She believes that human beings, through their searching and development have always been moving towards certain realisations:

- That the cosmos is a giant organism in which every detail plays an important part
- That humanity has been unconsciously moving towards unity and that this unity lies both in our diversity as individuals and our universal needs and tendencies
- It is our responsibility to acknowledge our responsibilities towards the earth and other human beings

Realising this type of vision requires changes in every culture on Earth. It requires changes in our attitudes towards nature and towards ourselves. And the agent of these changes is the child. She believed that children who experience an environment that fully supports and aids development will in fact develop a will and a psychological strength that can help them in creating and adapting to a world where human beings see themselves as both a part of nature and a steward of nature and as both unique individuals, members of a particular group, but also members of one human family: la nazione unica (the united nation) Our focus as educators therefore, should always be on educating the human potential of our children.

Knowing about the human tendencies and being able to recognize their manifestation in the children is essential for being able to anticipate what kind of aid may be needed. Some of the human tendencies can be described as follows:

Movement: Human beings came on Earth with new potentials for movement. The drive towards coordination of movement was essential for the survival of the species. Walking on two legs provided new opportunities for movement, but also many challenges. Much of the very young child's energy is fully concentrated on coordination of movement, limited by the process of myelination of the nerves of the body.

Exploration: This tendency was essential for early humans. What is available in the environment? Exploration is an inclination to investigate, inquire, find out and look around. It involves the use of the senses and movement. In the area of food alone, there has been an almost unlimited exploration throughout human history. As life becomes more secure we do not cease to explore but do so beyond the senses: philosophically, emotionally, creatively, artistically, spiritually, etc. This tendency manifests itself very early in the life of the child. At first the fields of exploration are limited, and strongly connected to the senses. Widening of the fields exploration is linked to the maturation of the child. It is also linked to the development of technology, such as transportation and communication.



Curiosity: This impels exploration. We desire to know. Lively curiosity keeps us always mentally and physically active. When we seek out the unknown, despite our fear of it, our independence and self-confidence grows. Curiosity helps to dampen our fear responses.

Orientation: This is the ability to find one's way and to situate oneself, may it be physically, emotionally, intellectually or socially. The word comes from the word 'orient', which refers to the east where the sun rises. Orientation gives us a sense of security. This is also very active in early childhood when the child is trying to establish points of reference in a new and strange world. It is important to think about the dual tendencies of orientation and exploration, the drive towards safety and the urge towards adventure, when we think of our evolution as human beings, and how that evolution is reflected in these parallel urges of child development: independence and connection, individual and group, the excitement of the new and the comfort of the familiar.

Order: Order allows us to put things and experiences in relation to each other according to function, sequence, pattern, shared characteristics or classifications. External order is essential for the child from 0-6 because they are absorbing the environment directly into the brain's structure. Once inner order is established we have the ability to impose order on the environment in more flexible ways and to cope with external disorder.

- An example of the differences between the first and second planes: In the Casa, we tend to put each piece of material needed for an activity on a single tray. We often use colour-coding. The tray contains all the child needs to complete the activity and is arranged in a logical way to suggest how to do the task. In the Elementary, when children are interested in doing an experiment, they must collect what they need from supplies that are orderly arranged, but not by individual activity. The child must always be thinking, planning and reflecting. The success of the experiment may vary according to the exactness of the preparation. The same would be true of art materials, which would also be arranged according to type rather than particular activity. This does not mean there is a lack of order in the Elementary environment, but it is more flexible.

Observation: Observation is necessary for human beings to understand their surroundings accurately and to make correct decisions. We know that infants are extremely observing, absorbing all the details of their environment, while being especially concentrated on the human beings close to them, their faces, their gestures, their voices. Observation is a key prerequisite for any experimentation and is vital to scientific inquiry. Observation of the world around them helped early human beings find out what was edible and what was not, what might make good tools, how to hunt successfully, when to move.

Imitation: Human beings imitate. They imitate the movements and the calls of animals. They imitate the beauty of nature in their drawings. Babies imitate their parents. People learning dance or music



imitate their instructors. Younger children imitate older children. Imitation is not the end of the learning process, but it is often part of the beginning.

Abstraction: Pure observation is not helpful unless there is some other activity of the mind that organizes the information observed and looks for patterns and rules. Imitation does not lead to learning until the action imitated becomes an integrated part of the individual. Abstraction is not only done by the conscious mind, but also by the unconscious. Unconscious abstraction is a key activity of the mind in language acquisition by young children, enabling children to learn language much more quickly than adults. Going from concrete things to abstract images and symbols is an important part of being human and adapting to change. Abstraction provides the basis for classification and comparison and allows for information to be transferred from one cognitive domain to another. This ability gave the Modern Humans a distinct advantage over the other human-like species of the time.

Concentration: We have the ability as humans to fix our attention on something for an extended period of time, and in doing so can become resistant to distraction. This fixing of attention is the first condition of learning.

Imagination: The mind is driven to imagine what is not there, to see what is not available to the senses. Everything we enjoy today was once the fruit of someone's imagination. It is the wellspring of invention and creativity.

Work/Activity: For any idea to be translated into reality, work is required. For the early human beings, this involved ensuring survival through the work of the hands. Work is a vital impetus in human beings and especially in young children who work incessantly to acquire the basics of being human: upright posture, language, walking and using one's hands, the basics of independence and the culture they live in. The hand as the major instrument of the mind is a key idea in Montessori education.

Work as a tendency is accompanied by other tendencies. Work is not random activity. There is direction. The following tendencies urge us to "try again", not just physically, but scientifically, intellectually, artistically etc.

Exactness: In order to obtain a successful result, exactness of action is needed. Human beings have evolved thousands of techniques of movement, each of which involves accuracy and care in order to be successful and safe, be it fire making, house building, wood-carving, ski jumping or ballet. We also know that precision is important in intellectual activity as well, whether it be finding the right word to express ourselves with, working out an equation or planning a trip.

Repetition: Repetition is necessary for a skill to be internalized. Our brains even repeat activities in our sleep! Learning does not happen when someone is shown what to do. Learning happens when



the individual shown practices until the activity is part of the person's own repertoire. This repetition may be of the same activity over and over as in the child from 0-6, or through augmentation and variation as in the child from 6-12. Some techniques require more repetition than others to be internalized. Repetition leads to memorization, but even memorized things need still to be practiced.

Self-perfection: We have the innate tendency to achieve the best result. We seek to achieve the fulfilment of our potential. This is not the same as what is sometimes described as “perfectionism”, that is, the tendency to give up after a first try that is not perfect. Self-perfection is a process, not a product, and involves mobilizing the will. Young children (0-6) are driven from within towards self-perfection as they strive to acquire coordination of movement, language, and basic independence.

Calculation: This is allied to exactness and problem solving. It is a manifestation of the Mathematical Mind of human beings. Human beings have always had to think in terms of quantity, size, distance, shape, degree, etc. Calculation allows us to hold factors in our mind and weigh them. It helps us to make logical sequences and draw reasonable conclusions from the facts.

Gregariousness: Getting together in a group was essential for Early humans in order to satisfy their needs. The demands of a long childhood put pressure on human beings to cooperate to ensure the survival of their offspring who could not take care of themselves. Learning of a basic thing such as language has been proven to only occur within real human interaction. Cultural knowledge is transmitted through group life. Helping children to extend their trust from their immediate caregivers to others in their environment is a major task of education and is supported by a natural drive towards this, especially in the 6-12 year old child.

Communication: Human beings need each other; therefore they need to communicate. Communication happens on many levels, both verbal and non-verbal. Communication is necessary to work together, play together and live together.

Self-control: This is the ability to integrate body, mind and will in harmony with the environment, both physical and social. It involves controlling impulses, planning, evaluating consequences, and delaying gratification. It is part of the foundation for what we call moral development.

The Tendencies have facilitated human beings in establishing all the cultures that have ever existed. Once certain needs are met, the Tendencies do not switch off or disappear, but continue to operate. They may lead to perfecting, innovation and invention.

The Tendencies are always operative in children; they must also guide our work with them. Children have the potential for change and are a force for change. They are a link in history and transmitters of culture. Education must acknowledge and support the Tendencies at each stage of development.

We cannot stop the tendencies from working, but we can do several things to aid them:



- We can remove obstacles to the full utilization of the tendencies.
- We can adapt the environment to suit the manifestations of the tendencies in a particular plane of development.

We reveal to the child our belief in their tendencies by the way we prepare the environment. This does not mean that we remove natural and necessary obstacles, nor give inappropriate challenges. Challenge is important for inspiring the mind and body to act. When the challenge is appropriate, the tendencies operate without frustration. If the challenge is too little, frustration may result. If the challenge is too much, frustration may result. Getting the balance right is one of the major challenges of education. Being aware of the tendencies helps us put our focus on the children, not the curriculum. This allows them to feel safe enough to reveal their potential to us.