

# THE SECRET OF CHILDHOOD

MARIA MONTESSORI



A BOOK FOR ALL PARENTS AND TEACHERS

Dr. Montessori was convinced, from a lifetime of scientific observation, that in the child there are laws of growth in character and disposition as marked as those in its physical life; that adults generally fail to appreciate these laws and force their own ideas on it. This results in oppression of the child's deepest drives and its mind is thrown into confusion, and revolts through manifestations of naughtiness, hysterical crying and sulking. A childhood so full of repression develops into an adulthood full of complexes. Dr. Montessori's main theme in this book is, in effect, 'Find the secret of childhood, and the whole disposition of the child changes. It truly becomes "Father of Man" and achieves a superior, saner psychological development.'

Dr. Montessori's revolutionary method of education was begun long ago; and to-day institutions with her method exist in all parts of the world. This book reaches out to a yet wider horizon — in fact to all those who care for the young, and for man in the course of self-construction.





THE SECRET OF CHILDHOOD

*To*

SARALADEVI SARABHAI

THE IDEAL MONTESSORI MOTHER,  
WHO HAS DEDICATED HERSELF TO  
THE CAUSE OF THE CHILD IN INDIA



# The Secret of Childhood

MARIA MONTESSORI

M.D. (Rome), D.Litt. (Durham).  
Ph.D. (Amsterdam)

*Translated and Edited by*

BARBARA BARCLAY CARTER

Lic es-L. (Paris)



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## *PART I.*

### *THE SPIRITUAL EMBRYO*

“It is too often required of children that they should adjust themselves to the world, practised and alert. But it would be more to the purpose that the world should adjust itself to children in all its dealings with them.”

Alice Meynell, *The Unready*





## THE CHILD TO-DAY

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### THE CENTURY OF THE CHILD

THE amazingly rapid progress in the care and education of children in recent years may be attributed partly to a generally higher standard of life, but still more to an awakening of conscience. Not only is there an increasing concern for child health—it began in the last decade of the XIXth century—but also a new awareness of the personality of the child as something of the highest importance. To-day it is impossible to go deeply into any branch of medicine or philosophy or sociology without taking account of the contribution brought by a knowledge of child life. A parallel, but on a lesser scale, is the light thrown by embryology on physiology in general and on evolution. But the study of the child, not in his physical but in his psychological aspect, may have an infinitely wider influence, extending to all human questions. In the mind of the child we may perhaps find the key to progress and who knows, the beginning of a new civilisation.

The Swedish poet and author Ellen Key prophesied that our century would be the century of the child. While anyone with patience to hunt through historical documents would find a recurrence of such ideas in the first King's Speech of King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy, when in 1900, at the turn of the century, he succeeded to the throne after the assassination of his predecessor. He spoke of the new era beginning with the new century, and he too spoke of it as the Century of the Child.

It would seem that such almost prophetic glimpses arose from the impression produced by the investigations of science in the last ten years of the XIXth century; from the picture they gave of the child in sickness, ten times more exposed than the adult to death from infectious disease, or of the child as victim in harsh schools. No one could have foreseen then that the child held within himself a secret of life, able to lift the veil from the mysteries of the human soul; that he represented an unknown quantity, the discovery of which might enable the adult to solve his individual and social problems. This aspect may prove the foundation of a new science of child study, capable of influencing the whole social life of man.

#### THE CHILD AND PSYCHO-ANALYSIS

Psycho-analysis has thrown open a realm of research formerly unknown, bringing to light the secrets of the unconscious, but it has brought no practical solution to the urgent practical problems of life. None the less, it may help us to understand the contribution to be found in the hidden life of the child.

Psycho-analysis has, one might say, broken through the cortex of consciousness, which psychology had previously considered as a *ne plus ultra*, like the Columns of Hercules in ancient history, which for the Greek seamen, were limits beyond which superstition set the edge of the world.

Psycho-analysis has sounded the ocean of the unconscious. Without this discovery it would be hard to explain to the public at large how the child mind may help in a more searching study of human problems. As is well known, psycho-analysis began as a new technique for the cure of mental diseases and was hence a branch of medicine. It made a

truly illuminating discovery in establishing the power of the unconscious over human actions. It has been, as it were, a study of psychic reactions behind consciousness, of responses which bring to light hidden factors and unsuspected realities, revolutionising accepted ideas. They reveal the existence of an unknown world of vast extent, with which, one might say, the destiny of the individual is bound up. But psycho-analysis cannot fully explore this unknown world. In Charcot's time, in the last century, psychiatry discovered the subconscious. Just as in a volcano the seething elements in the core of the earth force their way to the surface, the subconscious was seen to manifest itself in exceptional cases in the graver states of mental disease. Hence its strange phenomena, conflicting with the manifestations of consciousness, were considered merely as symptoms of disease. Freud took a contrary path. By a laborious technique he found the way to penetrate to the unconscious, but till recently he too tended to confine himself to the domain of pathology. For how many normal persons would willingly submit to the painful tests of psycho-analysis? To a kind of operation on the soul? It was thus from his treatment of the sick that Freud deduced his psychological theories, and the new psychology was in large measure built up on personal deductions drawn from abnormality. Hence Freud's theories have proved inadequate, nor has his technique of treating the sick been wholly satisfactory, for it has not always led to a healing of "sickness of the soul". As a result, social traditions, which are the deposit of ancient experience, have risen as a barrier against certain generalisations of Freudian theory. Perhaps, the exploration of the vast reality of the unconscious requires something quite other than a technique of clinical treatment or theoretical deductions.

## THE SECRET OF CHILDHOOD

The task of sounding this ocean of the unconscious remains for other branches of science and demands another approach—the study of man from his origins, in an endeavour to decipher in the child soul its development through conflict with its environment, to learn the dramatic or tragic secret of the struggles through which the soul of man has remained disfigured and darkened.

Psycho-analysis touched this secret. One of the most impressive discoveries due to its technique was how a psychosis may originate in the distant age of infancy. The memories evoked from the subconscious proved that in infancy there were sufferings other than those commonly known and which lay so latent in consciousness, so far from accepted ideas, that their discovery was the most impressive and perturbing of all the discoveries of psycho-analysis. Such sufferings were of a purely psychic order, slow and constant; they had never been recognised as facts liable to lead to psychic sickness of the adult personality. They sprang from the *repression* of the spontaneous activity of the child by the adult who had authority over him, and were therefore to be associated with the adult whose influence was greatest—the mother.

We must draw a clear distinction between the two planes of enquiry covered by psycho-analysis. One, the more superficial, covers the clash between the instincts of the individual and the environment to which he must adapt himself. This conflict may be resolved; for it is not difficult to bring to consciousness the disturbing causes that lie below consciousness. But there is also another, deeper plane, that of infant memories in which the conflict is not between man and his present social environment, but between the child and the mother, or, we may say generally, between the child and the adult. This conflict may lead to diseases far harder to cure.

In all diseases, physical as well as mental, the importance of events that have occurred in infancy is now recognised. But here some other method than psycho-analysis is needed. The very technique of sounding the unconscious that allows discoveries to be made in the case of adults, becomes an obstacle in the case of the child. The child, who by nature is not a fit subject for such technique, has not to remember his infancy. He lives his childhood. He must be observed rather than analysed, but observed from the psychic standpoint in an endeavour to ascertain the conflict through which he passes in his relations with grown-up persons and with his social environment. It is clear that this approach will lead us away from psycho-analytic theories and technique into a new field of observation of the child in his social existence. It is not a case of the tortuous labyrinths of a sick mind, but of the wide expanse of human life in its reality, centring round the psychological life of the child; for the practical problem embraces the whole life of man as it develops from birth onwards.

The page of human history that tells the adventures of man as mind has yet to be read—of the child whose sensitivity encounters obstacles and who finds himself involved in insuperable conflicts with the grown-up who is stronger than he, who masters him without understanding him. Here was a blank page that had yet to receive the story of the uncalculated sufferings that convulse the intact and delicate spiritual existence of the child, organising in his subconscious a lower man, different from what nature had intended.

This complex question psycho-analysis illuminates, but does not solve. Psycho-analysis deals mainly with disease and remedial treatment. The problem of the child psyche contains a prophylactic where psycho-analysis is concerned; for it will affect the normal and general treatment of infant humanity, a treatment that helps to avert obstacles and con-

flicts and hence their consequences—the psychological diseases dealt with by psycho-analysis, or else those moral maladjustments which extend to nearly the whole of humanity.

Round the child, therefore, a new field of scientific exploration has come into being, distinct from psycho-analysis, its sole parallel. It implies essentially a form of assistance to the psychic life of infancy, and is concerned with normality and with education. Its characteristic is therefore the ascertainment of psychological facts as yet unknown with regard to the child, and at the same time an awakening of the adult, who, in regard to the child, adopts mistaken attitudes that have their root in the subconscious.

## ACCUSATION

The word *repression* as used by Freud to indicate the deep-seated origins of psychological disturbances in the adult explains itself.

The child cannot expand in the manner required by a being in process of development, for the adult represses him. "The adult" is an abstraction. The child is isolated in society, so if the adult influences him, that adult is a given adult, the adult closest to him—his mother first, then his father, then his teachers.

Society attributes to adults quite another role, giving them the credit of the education and development of the child. Now, on the contrary, the sounding of the depths of the soul brings to light an *accusation* against those who have been recognised as the guardians and benefactors of humanity. But since almost all are fathers or mothers and many are teachers or entrusted with the care of children, the accusation covers the adult world in general, the society responsible for the children. This startling accusation has something apocalyptic about it; it is mysterious and terrible like the voice of the