



Middle School Developments

January



Greetings!

This month I'll explain why we pair adolescents with toddlers, and dive into the developmental needs of these age groups. This is a foundational conversation for Montessorians. I hope you enjoy.

News

- If you're thinking about submitting an [application](#) now is the time to do so. We are planning outings for our incoming students. These events will build community and teach skills that will be useful on our campus. You won't want to miss our visit to a venerable goat farm!
- On January 25th at 6pm Jack Graham, our Upper Elementary Guide, and I will talk about the upper elementary cycle and the transition to middle school. If you're already part of our

community, please RSVP via the link in *The Communications*. If you're a prospective family and would like to attend, please [email me directly](#).

- Sam Hall, our Music and Digital Media Guide, made a [promotional video](#) for our program. Feel free to share on social media.
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Calendar

- **Jan 13:** Middle School Campus Tour
- **Jan 25:** Transitioning to Middle School Event (at our Woodstock Campus)
- **Jan 27:** Middle School Campus Tour
- **Feb 10:** Middle School Campus Tour
- **Feb 24:** Middle School Campus Tour
- **March 9:** Middle School Campus Tour
- **March 30:** Middle School Campus Tour

[Learn More & Schedule Your Tour](#)

Questions About Adolescents? Toddlers May Have the Answer

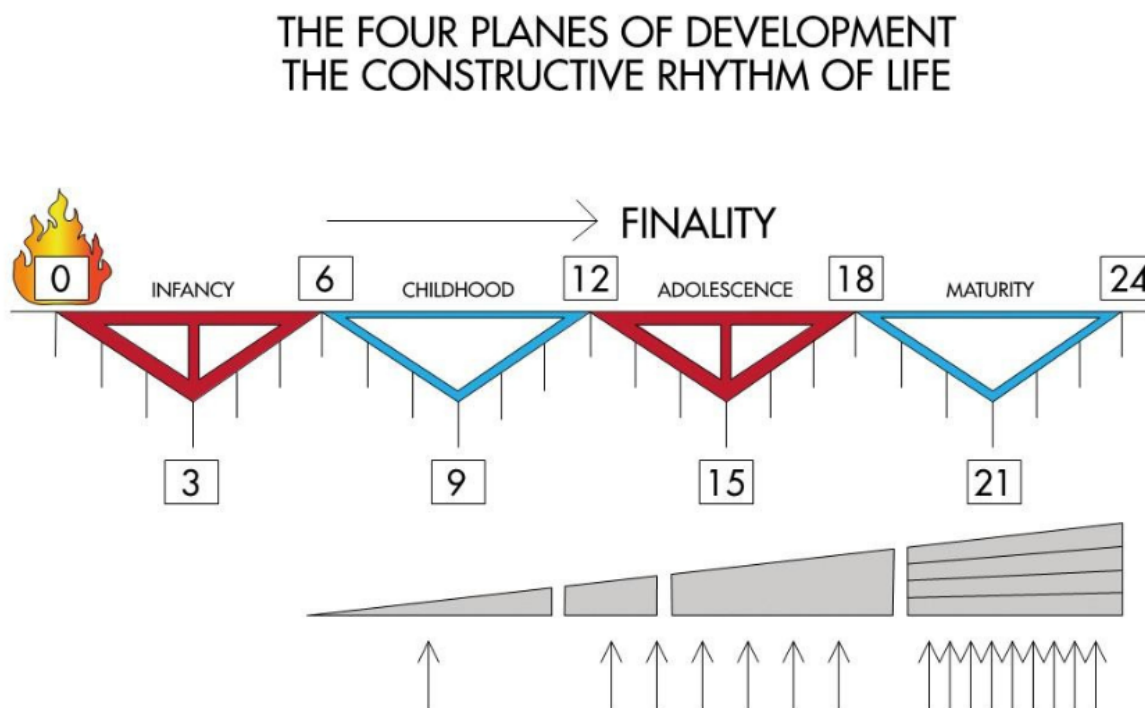
A Montessori approach to education is a developmental approach to education— and there's a good reason for this. Humans have an incredibly long period of development. Our brains are not fully formed until our twenties, and this developmental period [continues to lengthen](#).

Development in the first twenty years of life is remarkable and irreplaceable. Nowhere is this more true than during toddlerhood and adolescence.

Researchers have long studied this extended period of human development. By the early 20th century a group of developmental psychologists identified distinct and cumulative stages of human growth. Working as a young physician, Maria Montessori took notice of these stages. She spent the rest of her life building and refining an educational system that matches the characteristics, needs, and potentialities of each stage.

Last year, as I began my Montessori training to work with adolescents, I didn't understand (and was honestly frustrated) with how much time we spent learning about the first six years of life. We heard lecture after lecture on a toddler's need for community, their neuro-development, and how their personalities emerge through sensory exploration. What does this have to do with adolescents, I wondered? Well, it turns out, quite a lot!

This is the first of two charts that Maria Montessori used to depict the four stages of human development:

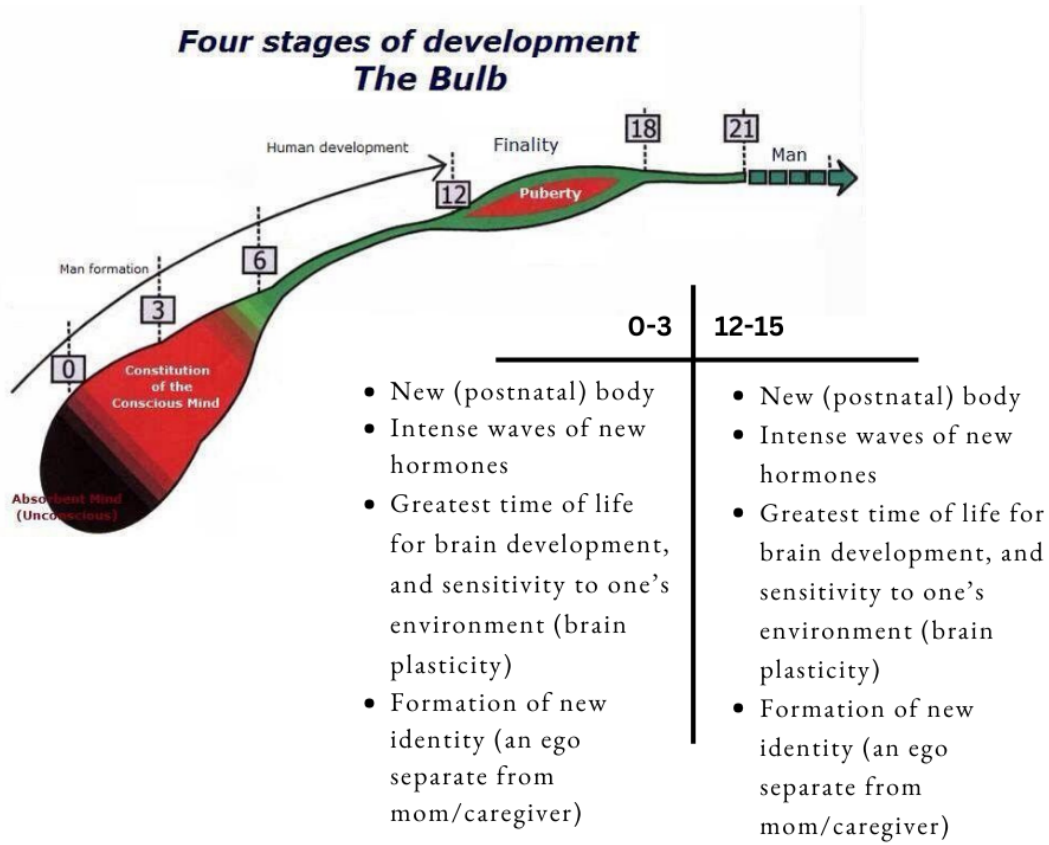


Note the similarity between the first six years of life and adolescence. These are “red” periods, characterized by creativity and rapid growth. As Montessori teacher-trainer Gabriela Velazquez put it, these are times “unlimited in potential” yet “limited on time.” They are periods of life in which change *will* occur, it's just a matter of how, and to what extent.

From birth to six, Montessori famously said, a child has an “absorbent mind.” During this time, children absorb stimuli in their environment in immense and unbelievable ways. With great potential, however, comes great risk. Children do not choose what to absorb: without a filter they soak up everything in their environment, the good and the bad (this is why constant stressors associated with childhood poverty, for example, are so [detrimental](#)). Worse still, if left unstimulated, children can miss out on this incredible feat of evolution.

As Montessori stressed, each plane of development, while filled with amazing sensitivities and capabilities, has a closure. Around age six, a child no longer has an absorbent mind. Likewise, when adolescence ends, much of our adult identity, including confidence and self-image, are in place.

Below is Montessori's other chart on the four stages of development (people tend to connect with one or the other). I included a T-chart to show the similarities between the beginning of adolescence and the first three years of life.



Toddlers and adolescents find themselves in a similar situation: A new body, a flood of new hormones, and new cerebral sensitivities combine to build an entirely new identity. These biological changes bring common vulnerabilities and needs:

- **A need to move**, and learn about their new and growing body (overcome clumsiness), refine their senses (gross and fine motor skills), and build confidence and identity through handwork, crafts and physical effort (sport, adventure, etc.)
- **A need for a sense of order and safety**, which is a prerequisite for healthy identity formation. Put differently, they need external order to develop internal order.

- **A need to feel belonging in one's community**, which leads to the confidence to experiment freely with language, movement (adventure, sport), socialization, etc.
- **A need to engage in activities that are meaningful to their community**, ranging from learning how to pour water, set a table, cook food, organize events and sell products.

While toddlerhood and adolescence present common needs, the ways in which these needs manifest, and how we respond to them, become age specific.

The Prepared Environment

We've discussed *why* a developmental approach to education is so critical; we now need to address *how* to do such a pedagogy. As Montessorians, we begin with the environment. We prepare specific environments for each plane of development.

An appropriate environment for toddlers will allow them to:

- engage multiple senses
- practice practical-life skills
- be a member of a close-knit and safe community, where trusted adults are present and not overbearing





What About Early Adolescents?

A few key pieces fit together to create an environment in which adolescents will thrive:

Social Organization. Maria Montessori used this term to capture all of the activities within an adolescent program. Students need space (physical and temporal) so they can choose research projects, design and maintain spaces on campus, arrange community events, and so on. Community councils and campus task forces allow students to build social agency. Students don't practice these social skills, they live them!

Production & Exchange. This is one aspect of social organization. Working from the opportunities of the land and the needs of the surrounding communities, students choose what to produce and how to exchange these products. Experientially, they learn about economics; on a larger level, they learn how trade bolsters communities and links people around the world.

Developmentally Centered Curriculum. We design our curriculum for two ends: to prepare students for the coursework that they will encounter after middle school, and to guide adolescents into a healthy and joyful adulthood. To achieve these ends we balance classroom-based seminars with experiential learning. We adhere to the three categories that Montessori said are critical to adolescent development: self-expression (sports, crafts, the arts), communication (math, language, ethics) and knowledge about the world (the sciences and humanities).

The Role of Adults. Adults are a key part of the prepared environment. Adults work "side-by-side" with adolescents. Practicing humility, adults problem-solve along with adolescents. Our advisory program fits into this ethos. Each student will have a trusted adult, with whom to check work progress, learn relationship building skills and solidify social-emotional health.



THE PREPARED ENVIRONMENT

To pull all of this off, Montessori said that an adolescent program should be land-based, and situated on acreage where students can grow food and initiate all manner of projects. Many of you have felt the satisfaction and experienced the therapeutic effect of working the land and taking care of animals. For adolescents, this experience is even stronger.

This was a lot of information! Please come to our middle school transition event on January 25th if you'd like to continue the conversation.

Also, here are some links if you'd like to read more about [evolutionary accounts](#) of human development, especially this one that sheds light on the female [body](#).

Stay Tuned!

This newsletter is written by our Middle School Program Director Peter Oviatt. You can find archived newsletters [here](#) (they include exciting staffing news).

Your thoughts on this newsletter are welcomed: What do you like about it? How could it be more helpful? Please [contact](#) Peter with any thoughts or concerns.

A background featuring the Instagram logo, which consists of a white camera outline on a red-to-purple gradient background.

Follow us on Instagram!

A red-to-pink gradient background with a white play button icon in the center.

Watch us on YouTube

Two overlapping circles, one blue on the left and one pink on the right, serving as a background for the text.

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Our Vision:

Our vision is a community of intellectually curious, independent, and compassionate lifelong learners.

Our Mission:

Sunstone Montessori School develops the whole child by providing an academically strong, emotionally nurturing and, socially supportive environment in accordance with AMI guidelines for Montessori education.

Commitment to Diversity:

Sunstone Montessori School welcomes students and staff of any race, disability, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender identity, color, nationality and ethnicity, religion, and family constellation, to all programs and activities at the school. The school does not discriminate in its educational hiring, admission, or school-administered policies. It is our goal that Sunstone Montessori School reflects the rich diversity of our community, including varied cultures, economic status, and individual or special educational needs.

www.sunstonemontessori.org

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