

This month's article focuses on pre-school education and finds that it has much to teach us about education in general:

## Nursery School Madness

The past thirty or forty years have seen an astronomical growth in the number of children attending nursery schools. As recently as the 1960s only a small proportion of children attended any sort of institution outside of the home before their first day of compulsory schooling, but now it is a rare child who has not experienced some sort of institutionalised care before the age of five or six. In fact, many children spend the greater part of each day away from their homes from as young as a few months old. The uncomfortable truth is that there is no way of telling whether this is a change for the better or for the worse other than through the application of common sense.

Much of the theoretical justification for the current approach to childcare is derived from studies carried out in the early days of nursery school provision; these showed that, on average, children who attended nursery schools had an advantage over those children who had not, once they began to attend primary school. They also demonstrated that once the advantage had been established, it tended to be continued throughout the schooling process.

What these studies could not determine, however, was what effect nursery school has on a child's development, apart from their ability to do well in school, and whether in the long term, when *everything* is taken into account, people really benefit from having been sent to nursery schools when they were toddlers.

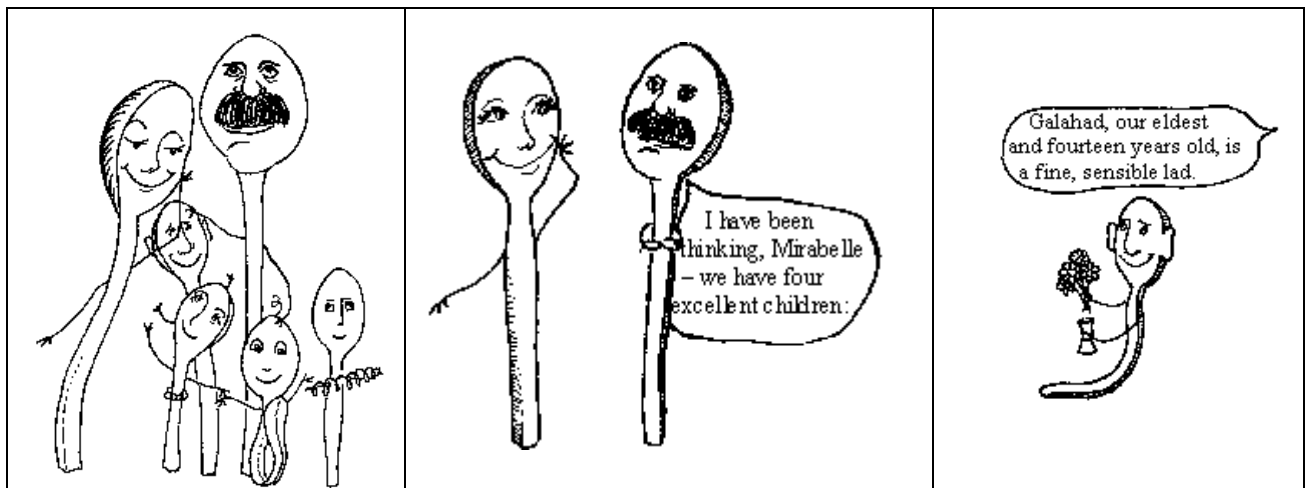
“Parents have simply accepted the idea that there are people more able than themselves to care for their children.”

### Is Nursery School Good For Children? Is Nursery School Good for Parents?

It is now common for young parents to be put under considerable pressure to commit their children to the care of others, instead of looking after them themselves. They may be told that:

- Nursery school is good for children, and it is not fair to deprive them of the chance of mixing with children of their own age.
- Everyone needs a break from looking after their children. Furthermore, being a parent is tedious and unrewarding work and, therefore, if you have any ambition or drive, you will get other people to look after your children while you go out to work.
- It is self-indulgent and irresponsible to be at home looking after your own children. In this day and age, everyone has a duty to go out to work.
- Bringing up children is a difficult business, which is best left to properly-trained experts who know what they are doing, rather than attempting it yourself.

Everyone has to make up their own mind about the first of these points; when one visits a nursery school it is hard to see much evidence that the children are really aware of each other's existence,



but it could be that children who do not have brothers or sisters derive some benefit from being with other children. The second and third of the above points seem to contradict each other and both suggest that the well being of the child should be subservient to the needs of the parents to work – which is a highly dubious proposition. Powerful incentives though money and work might be, it is probably the fourth point that is really responsible for the extraordinary growth in childcare provision for the under fives – parents have simply accepted the idea that there are people more able than themselves to care for their children.

### Childcare Experts

It is easy to see how the idea of childcare experts could have gained such widespread currency. Anyone who has had a child is familiar with the feeling of utter helplessness that you have when you are first left alone with your new baby. You suddenly find that you know absolutely nothing about what you are meant to do with it, and, to make matters worse, you find that you want nothing more in the world than that your baby should receive the best of everything. In this most vulnerable of moments you are assailed by a stream of ‘experts’ ranging from doctors to midwives, and health visitors to neighbours, each of whom is prepared to tell you exactly what you are meant to be doing.

What you don’t realise at the time (and certainly what never occurs to any of these ‘experts’, many of whom have never cared for a child themselves) is that your state of absolute ignorance is the way that nature intended things to be: your baby is a completely new individual and needs to be treated as such; the last thing that is required is someone who thinks that they already know what the baby wants.

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### The wisdom that comes with experience

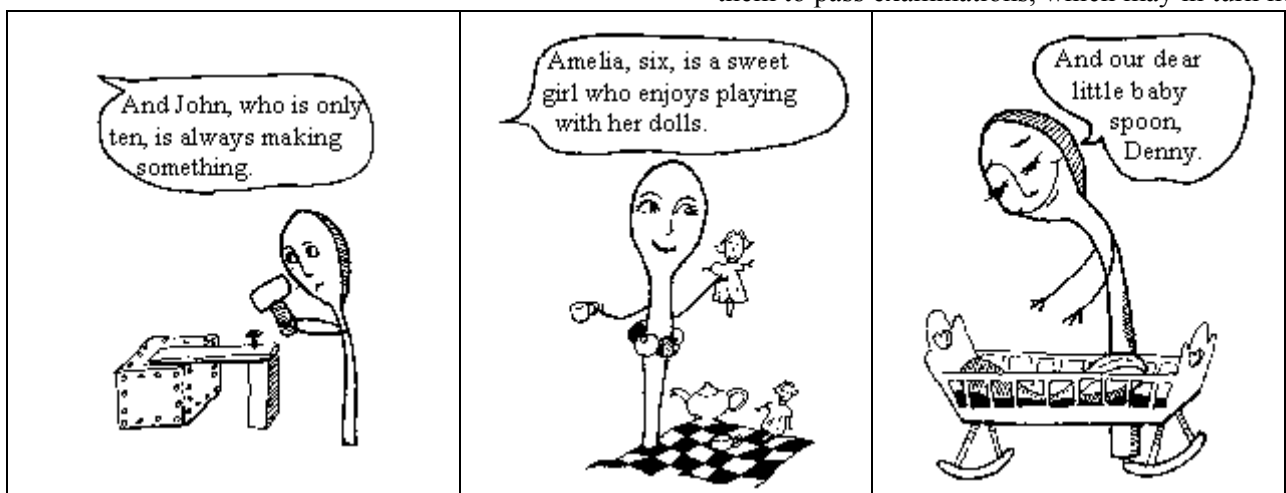
Of course there are people who do know something about bringing up children – not because they have studied childcare, but because they have had children, and maybe grandchildren, themselves. One of the things that one notices about such people is that they are not so keen to interfere in the relationship between parent and child. They may be prepared to offer the odd word of advice, based on their own experience, but they recognise the danger of undermining a parent’s confidence in their ability to look after their own child, and they accept that each child is different from every other and must be treated in its own unique way.

A further point worth noting is that many parents who have a baby after having already raised older children show a striking disregard for the advice of ‘experts’; they are far more likely to do what they themselves feel to be best for their children often in flat contradiction of the accepted wisdom of all the people who make a living out of looking after other people’s children.

### Learning from Nursery Education

This brings us back to the subject of nursery schools: it is not surprising that young parents, who have been subjected to so much advice about how they should or should not bring up their child, should succumb to the pressure to send their children to nursery schools – but this advice comes from people who have a vested interest in nursery education, and therefore ought really to be discounted.

It has been argued that nursery schooling helps a child to do well at school, which in turn will help them to pass examinations, which may in turn help



them to find a job. However, even if this did prove to be the case, this represents only one aspect of the various hopes that parents have for their children – for example, they hope that they will be able to choose their friends wisely; they hope that they will be able to form lasting, loving relationships; they hope that if they ever have children, they will themselves be caring and loving parents; and they hope that they will grow into mature, responsible adults of whom they can be proud.

Ten to twelve years of school, followed by three or four years of further education are all designed to make sure that a child can get a job, but when does a child learn the lessons about loving and caring that they will need if they are to fulfil all the other hopes placed in them?

The obvious answer could be during the first years of life, when they are most vulnerable, most receptive, and most able to learn about the things that are most important. This is the ideal time for them to experience the unconditional, round-the-clock love of a parent, so that they can learn about the commitment and the dedication that it takes to make a success of those aspects of life that are really significant. Given that these lessons are far more important than learning to read and write, it can easily be argued that it is a mistake to even try to squash them into the first five or six years of a child's life: it would probably be better if there were no compulsory start date for school, and it is absolute madness if the requirements of school are allowed to influence the care received by pre-school-age children.

The immediate conclusion to be drawn from this is that children should only be put in nursery schools, or childcare, if a parent is sure that the child will never be exposed to a situation in which they feel isolated, alone, or bereft of the people that love them.

Once the significance of this lesson has been accepted, it can be extended to provide a basis upon which schools themselves can be judged, because children never reach a stage in which they do not need to be treated with respect, and however old they are, they must still be able to receive the attention of a caring adult whenever they want it.

I believe that all these are things of which we are well aware, and that when we get back in touch with that feeling that we had when we first became parents – of wanting only the best for our children – any idea that nursery schools, schools, or any number of experts, can do the job of bringing them up better than we can, suddenly becomes ridiculous.

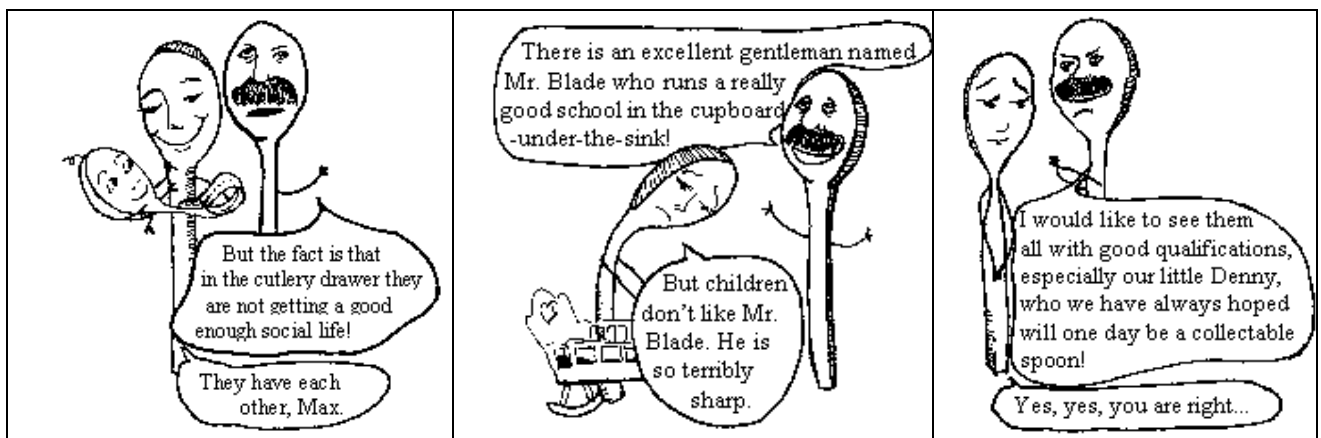
*Gareth Lewis*

### **Maria Montessori**

Maria Montessori is without doubt the most celebrated nursery school teacher of recent times and her career demonstrates the truth of the principle that love and care are more important to young children than anything else.

Maria Montessori was the first woman to qualify as a medical doctor in Italy. The success which greeted her caring attitude served to embarrass and antagonise her male colleagues to such an extent that in 1907 they attempted to sideline her by making her responsible for day-care provision for pre-school children in some of the worst slum areas of Rome.

Maria Montessori responded by dedicating herself to her new task. She realised that the children were suffering appalling neglect and designed her day-care centres along the lines of little homes for the children – Casa dei Bambini. In them, the children learned to care for themselves, and they also responded to Maria Montessori's belief that education represented their best chance of escaping a life of poverty and destitution. Children in her nurseries made striking progress in areas such as reading and mathematics, which attracted the attention of people around the world, and gave rise to the Montessori nursery movement.



*To be continued...*

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## Letters

### Gifted Children

Our sons 13 and 15 are educated at home and have been for a year and half a term.

Our eldest is very gifted, and in reply to Caroline's letter, I have found that he has gone way beyond the stage where I can "teach" him. However my philosophy is that I will facilitate his learning by providing him with the necessary materials and technology that he needs to further his own education

In response to another point made about the value of qualifications in a modern society: my eldest would be doing GCSEs this summer if he was at school. But as you pointed out some qualifications cease to be relevant when you get further along your route. With my son, we talked together about where he wanted to go with his life, then what he needed to get himself there and we worked backwards. What degree did he want? What A levels would he need? Therefore which GCSEs should

he be thinking about? It turns out that there are some A level courses he can take without GCSEs. So we are thinking of jumping a stage and just getting what he needs, not all the other extraneous stuff!

We have found that once you are out of "the system" there are lots of options available to you, as home education teaches you so much about real life and encourages you to view situations from many different viewpoints.

Your newsletter is always valuable reading, but this month it seemed particularly relevant.

Hope these thoughts are helpful to somebody else.

Best wishes, Sue Carey.

*Please send letters and information to*  
[newsletter@freedom-in-education.co.uk](mailto:newsletter@freedom-in-education.co.uk)

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## News

### UK: Government Report Confirms The Obvious

Research conducted by the Campaign for Learning has found that parental involvement has a greater influence on educational achievement than any other factor – including what school a child goes to and their social or ethnic background.

The report confirms that whether or not a child's parents take an interest in what they are learning, is the most significant factor in how well they do at school.

### US: Product Placement

The pressures placed upon schools to act as agents for commercial products is highlighted by the recent deal offered to some of California's high schools.

Pepsi wants to renew its exclusive right to place vending machines on the school campuses and is offering each school \$50,000 over five years, plus a percentage of each sale, plus 75 free cases of drinks each year, plus free 'sportsline kit' such as cups and coolers.

Administrative staff are urging trustees to go ahead with the deal.

### UK: Scottish Parents Could Teach Their Own Children

A recent survey found that 30% of Scottish parents thought that they could improve on the education that their children receive at school if they taught them themselves at home.

### US: Teachers' Monopoly Threatened

A Minnesota teachers' union has gone to court to try to shut down a state-funded online education program that is popular with home-schooling families.

The teachers do not like the fact that the programme relies on parents to deliver instruction instead of qualified teachers. However, state officials pointed out that teachers had been involved in assembling and delivering the product and a state senator defended the programme on the grounds that, "If you have distance learning, you have to have some freedom at one end."

**The Jamboree** The on line magazine for parents and children.

New this month:

- Christmas cartoons.
- Story from history: 'A Mother's Love'.
- Craft instructions for making a Little Felt Man.
- Recipe: Bread Buns
- Gardening: Broad Beans
- 'School or Home': Featuring a letter from Jacky, a home-educating mother.
- Link of the month: [www.hekids.co.uk/home](http://www.hekids.co.uk/home)

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**The Freedom in Education Magazine**: There is a new page on the website providing information about the Freedom in Education Magazine, which began as an offshoot of this newsletter in January this year and now has over one hundred subscribers.

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This newsletter can be seen online at <http://www.freedom-in-education.co.uk/newsletter/nov03.htm>

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