

# **A Complement to Lifestyle Assessment: Using Montessori Sensorial Experiences to Enhance and Intensify Early Recollections**

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## **Abstract**

The Montessori and Adlerian techniques of working with individuals have many parallels. The main premise in Montessori education is to "follow the child" and in Individual Psychology to "follow the movement of the client." A difference in the two philosophies is the use of sensory materials. Montessori education uses sensorial materials extensively, whereas Individual Psychology rarely puts emphasis on using the senses in the healing process. This article explores Montessori's use of sensorial experiences as a means to complement the Adlerian technique of lifestyle assessment. The integration of sensorial experiences into the early recollection gathering process enhances the verbalization of feelings and reduces reliance on intellectualizing.

Lifestyle assessment is a cornerstone of Adlerian psychotherapy. Part of the process of conducting a client's lifestyle assessment is the gathering of early recollections. Early recollections are first memories of life events. The two interesting questions at the heart of collecting first memories are: Of the thousands of experiences this individual had at an early age, why did he or she remember these particular early recollections? And why did the individual remember them that way?

The Montessori technique of focusing the learner on sensorial experiences can be a helpful complement to the Adlerian process of collecting early recollections in psychotherapy. Use of the sensorial method has the potential to deepen and expand for the client both the quantity and quality of early recollections that he or she can articulate. In this article, we present the use of the Montessori technique of sensorial focus as an adjunct to enhancing the collection of a client's early memories.

## **The Montessori Method**

Maria Montessori's philosophy and methodology are based on the belief that educators should "follow the child" (Montessori, 1964). This includes watching the child's movement and allowing the child the freedom to develop naturally in a structured and non-competitive environment at his or her own pace according to his or her own capacities.

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For the child to have this freedom, the educator must prepare carefully the environment with certain order, full of options and opportunities to enhance learning and movement. In this way, the child may be successful in naturally achieving inner discipline, individual potential, and a sense of order. The key principles in Montessori education are the child, the aware adult, and the prepared environment (Montessori, 1965).

The Montessori method encourages children to learn independently, to use their minds to identify, understand, and master the materials and concepts present in their environment. Montessori designed the “didactic apparatus” (teaching by using materials) as a means to intellectual, sensory, and motor development through the free exercise of the child’s interests (Montessori, 1964). Each child will respond to the didactic apparatuses in his or her own individual way, with varying degrees of interest and concentration, according to his or her own physical and temperamental make-up. Montessori (1965) stated, “Children reach the goal of self-fulfillment and self-control by different roads, indirectly prepared by the perceptive adult” (p. 12).

At each step in this process, learning materials test the child’s understanding and correct his or her mistakes by the use of error codes. The Montessori method encourages children’s innate abilities to absorb culture. Montessori (1967) stated, “We saw them (children) absorb far more than reading and writing. It was botany, zoology, mathematics, geography and all with the same ease, spontaneously and without getting tired” (p. 206).

Montessori placed great emphasis on education of the senses as part of the complete learning experience. This route to intelligence requires training. According to Montessori, sensory work helps increase the child’s intellectual capacity and also sets the concrete foundation upon which abstract thought can be built in later developmental stages. Sensory experiences are a natural development for the child, giving him or her a sense of self-identity and security. Montessori (as cited in Hawkins, 1976) summarized,

The education of the senses has, as its aim, the refinement of the differential perception of stimuli by means of repeated exercises . . . The sense exercises constitute a series of auto-education, which, if these exercises are many times repeated, leads to a perfecting of the child’s psycho-sensory processes (p. 5).

### **Pertinent Similarities of Adler and Montessori**

The similarities between Individual Psychology and Montessori education are striking. Both Adler and Montessori were born in the same year, 1870, in Western Europe, to middle-class families. Both studied medicine, education, and psychology. Both went on to become leaders in their respective fields with an emphasis on encouragement and work with people.

Like Adler, Montessori believed that mental health problems should be examined primarily from an educational perspective. This aligns with Adler's belief that clients should not be given a diagnostic label. Rather, the individual's discouragement should be addressed in part by education and in part by encouragement.

The fact that pedagogy must join with medicine in the treatment of disease was the practical outcome of the thought of the time. I, however, differed from my colleagues in that I felt that mental deficiency presented chiefly a pedagogical, rather than mainly a medical problem. (Montessori, 1964, pp. 31–32)

In the Montessori model of education, the teacher and parent play very similar roles.

The parent does have an important part in the Montessori plan. It is the duty of the parent to encourage and continue what has been started. That is not asking very much, but only that the parent not discourage. (Crone, 1965, p. 2)

This parallels the role the therapist plays in Individual Psychology, a role of respect and equality.

It is essential that an egalitarian relationship be formed between client and therapist. This allows the two to work in the context of a collaborative effort to create change and movement so that the client, in turn, feels responsible for his or her own life. Adler held strong views regarding the pedagogical roles of his day as well (Corsini & Wedding, 2000).

Regarding competition and striving for perfection, Adler and Montessori held the same view. Montessori (as cited in Crone, 1965) asked,

Does the child learn to compete? Yes. But the child does not compete simply for one-up-man-ship. First, he is his own competitor, and he learns the skills needed previous to the bustle of competition. (p. 2)

Montessori students are taught to collaborate and work together in learning. They strive for their personal best rather than compete against one another for the highest grade in their class. This striving for personal best mirrors one of Adler's main constructs of striving for perfection rather than striving for superiority. Adler (as cited in Corsini & Manaster, 1982) stated:

The striving itself is a movement representing a "growth force," an attempt to be more than, rather than less than, an effort to overcome feelings of inferiority. In the broadest sense, all striving is toward perfection, perfection in becoming "more than" in the eyes of the individual. Striving for perfection means to move in the direction of social interest, toward greater competence. Striving for superiority means to move toward personal superiority in relation to others for personal gain. Movement in these strivings is an effort to overcome the individual's feelings of inferiority. To the degree that one strives for perfection

we can expect positive mental health, a greater sense of well being, and sense of connectedness with others and humanity. To the degree that one is striving for superiority we can expect disease and a sense of separateness. (p. 75)

The Montessori environment is orderly and the limits of social behavior are adhered to strictly. Montessori (1964) believed permissiveness, far from leading to freedom for the children, made them prisoners of their own destructive feelings and acts. This is similar to Adler's concept of the pampered child. Montessori emphasized that parents should raise their children knowing that they belong not to them but to themselves and that the job of parents is one of temporary privilege and responsibility, the aiding and observing of another life as it unfolds (Montessori).

As a physician, Montessori observed that there are critical sensory periods through which all children pass in their own time. In a prepared learning setting, real-life experiences invite students' sensory exploration and facilitate their acquisition of cognitive skills. Montessori believed in trusting the child to reveal his or her own unique learning style and personal needs, which can best be met in a safe and nurturing environment.

All human beings go through a period in their lives from birth to the first few years when their minds are ripe for learning (Montessori, 1967). She referred to this interchanging process of learning and behavior as the "sensitive periods." She stated,

The most important period of life is not the age of university studies, but the first one, the period from birth to age six. For that is the time when man's intelligence itself, his greatest implement is being formed. But not only his intelligence; the full totality of his psychic powers . . . At no other age has the child greater need of an intelligent help, and any obstacle that impedes his creative work will lessen the chance he has of achieving perfection. (p. 33)

During a sensitive period, it is easy to teach children certain concepts that later will be somewhat more difficult for older children to learn. Montessori believed that a child was the teacher in that adults should observe children to know what stage of learning or sensitive period they are encountering. Montessori (as cited in Hawkins, 1976) referred to the years between two and a half and six as the "special epoch for sensation."

Similarly, Adler believed that between the ages of birth until five or six is when a person's lifestyle is primarily formed. For a therapist, watching or observing the individual's metaphorical movement is what reveals the lifestyle. Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) stated

An (Adlerian) "fact" is that the lifestyle is fixed by the age of four to six. By the time a child is five years old, his attitude to his environment is usually so fixed and mechanized that it proceeds in more or less the same direction for the rest of his life. (p. 189)

This classroom experience gives older children opportunities to be role models and teachers to the younger children. When older children teach skills to younger classmates, they strengthen their own understanding of these skills. This model of learning creates trust in the teachers, the children, and the classroom environment. It also encourages a sense of community and encourages long-term friendships.

Individual Psychology and Montessori education share many key concepts. These include choice and opportunity, community or social interest, empowerment, encouragement, intrinsic motivation, movement, natural and logical consequences, and responsibility to self and community. As Montessori (1964) saw things, at the core of learning were experience and sensation. Adler's similar views hold that one's early learning draws a map for his or her conduct as he or she moves toward the future.

### **Sensorial Purposes in Montessori Education**

Montessori (1964) placed great emphasis on education of the senses. She maintained that knowledge gained experientially is extremely beneficial, as it is internalized rather than memorized. After a child has "sensorially experienced" something, he or she is then ready to classify it, categorize it, and name it. This is the time in which language makes sense.

In Montessori terminology, to "educate" the senses is not to try to make the child see better. Rather it helps him or her to know better what he or she sees (Montessori, 1967). She explained,

In a pedagogical (educational) method which is experimental, the education of the senses must undoubtedly assume the greatest importance . . . this pedagogy is not designed to measure the sensations, but educate the senses. The method used by me is that of making a pedagogical experiment with a didactic object and awaiting the spontaneous reaction of the child. This is a method in every way analogous to that of experimental psychology. (Montessori, 1964, p. 167)

With the ability to discriminate between strongly contrasted sensations and variously graded sensations, the child learns to distinguish different sense impressions and put them in some sort of order (Hawkins, 1976). The use of various sensorial elements in the learning environment sets a solid base for further intellectual development. As the child isolates sense impressions and analyzes his or her distinguishing features, he or she is slowly forming abstract conceptions, which are the beginning stages of the development of the intellect (Montessori, 1967). Sensorial materials are the vehicles for educating the senses. For each sense there is an apparatus isolating it: visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and the stereognostic (mixed senses).

Development of the senses in Montessori education has a two-fold purpose. First, the biological aim is to help the natural development of the individual, taking advantage of the critical ages ("sensitive periods" as described by Montessori) in which individuals learn best, birth through age six or seven. Standing (1962) stated, "It must be borne in mind that a sensitive period not only puts the child's mind in relation to certain selected elements in his environment, but it also establishes and perfects a function in development" (p. 129). Biologically, it helps to identify, prevent, and possibly correct psychological defects. In addition, the social aim is to prepare the child for both the world environment that surrounds him or her as well as stimulate the child's intellect through sensorial discrimination and finally abstraction.

Overall, working with individuals on the sensorial level is vital to creating a base with which further intellect and higher functions of thinking and processing can be built (Hawkins, 1976). Sense impressions are long lasting. For example, take a walk through the hallway of your old school and smell the familiar scent the hallway has and become aware of the subsequent impressions this smell provokes. Through the isolation of the senses, a refinement of the senses can be developed. This "sense development" helps individuals proceed from concrete to abstract; develops power of observation, concentration, and attention; provokes auto-education; and provides aesthetic enjoyment. The senses are the pathways to increased intelligence, and they require significant training and practice if they are to become effective in helping the individual to acquire further education (Montessori, 1967).

### **Lifestyle Assessment in Individual Psychology**

Adler referred to the arrangement of our experiences into a specialized narrative as one's "lifestyle," our unique way of being, of coping, and of addressing the tasks of life (Eckstein & Kern, 2002). Early in life, children enter into a larger community, often using the parents as launching points and anchors simultaneously. They move into new parts of experience to what is unknown and unfamiliar and return home to what is known and secure. This movement out into the world and then back home again, this testing of experience and safety, builds over time into a pattern of living, a style of coping, and a unique way of being in the world with others. It becomes the lifestyle (Mosak & Shulman, 1988). Like Adler, Dreikurs (1967) contended that the family is the social organization in which the child, as a unique entity, learns about life:

Personality is the result of the training which is less stimulated by heredity and environmental influences than by the child's own interpretations, conclusions, and decisions. The basic concept of himself and life, the guiding lines which he

has set himself for orientation toward social participation form a fixed pattern—the style of life. (p. 6)

Dreikurs (1952) stated that the family constellation, as the social organization, is a sociogram of the group at home during the individual's formative years. When the family is studied, it can reveal the individual's field of early experiences, the circumstances under which he or she developed his or her personal perspectives and biases, his or her concepts and convictions about himself or herself and others, his or her fundamental attitudes, and his or her own approaches to life which are the basis for his or her character, personality, or lifestyle.

Many current practitioners of Individual Psychology typically use a formal lifestyle assessment interview to gather basic background data and perform a systematic exploration of early formative childhood experiences, early recollections, and dreams. There are many versions of the lifestyle assessment form (Eckstein & Kern, 2002). Each individual therapist will have his or her own method of using these general forms, emphasizing factors that he or she sees as most important and creating his or her own particular way to elicit lifestyle information.

### **Early Recollections**

Adler believed the significance of early recollections was one of the most important findings of Individual Psychology (Mosak & Shulman, 1988). He said,

Among all psychic expressions, some of the most revealing are the individual's memories. His memories are the reminders he carries with him of his own limits and of the meaning of circumstances. There are no "chance memories." Out of the incalculable number of impressions that meet an individual, he chooses to remember only those that he feels, however darkly, to have a bearing on his situation. Thus his memories represent his "Story of My Life," a story he repeats to himself to warm him or comfort him, to keep him concentrated on his goal, to prepare him, by means of past experience, to meet the future with an already tested style of action (Adler, 1932/1962, p. 57).

Gathering early recollections is a powerful projective technique to view personal meanings and elicit statements of how the individual views life, self, others, and the world (Mosak & Shulman). The technique reveals insight into a person's private logic. Early recollections are treated as metaphorical statements; therefore, neither accuracy nor completeness of recall are critical to the technique. It is important to note that practitioners of Individual

Psychology are not trying to ascertain clinical information with which to diagnose a disorder as one kind or another. Rather, they seek to help the client assess core personality dynamics (Mosak & Shulman).

As used as a projective tool, the early memories are viewed as descriptive metaphors about the past, relating to the individual's emotional situation in the present. These metaphors reveal the person's strengths and creativity and also where he or she may feel stuck in life (Bettner & Shifron, 2003). The memories are used by the client to select present and future choices of behavior, and they also influence the direction of goal movement (Mosak & Shulman, 1988).

Analyzing the lifestyle of an individual does not mean that the therapist has diagnosed the client with a clinical disorder. Adler advised caution when interpreting or analyzing early recollections and dreams. Adler held that a dream or early recollection cannot be explained outside of the context of the individual client and how it relates to the client's private logic (Adler, 1938). He maintained there should be no set rules for interpretation except that "everything can be different." It is dangerous to pigeonhole an individual's memories or dreams into mere types and universal symbols. The contents of these memories and dreams should be discussed at length with the individual to elicit as many of his or her own associations as possible (Eckstein & Kern, 2002).

In collecting early recollections, visualization and imagery can be used as techniques in which the client places himself or herself in the early recollection (Kopp, 1999). Dushman and Sutherland (1997) contended that integrating visualization and imagery into the early recollection process creates a deeper understanding of the meaning that individuals give to life events by tapping into an individual's feelings, unknown thoughts, and lifestyle convictions.

### **The Integration of Sensorial Concepts into the Early Recollection Process**

According to Montessori (1964), individuals who have not been adequately prepared sensorially may struggle to adapt appropriately to the demands of living. Adlerian psychotherapy focuses on helping clients who are struggling with the demands of living, helping them to move from the useless side to the useful side of life (Mosak & Shulman, 1988). It logically follows that proper use of the senses would help to guide this movement. Montessori (1964) summarized, "A profound error existing in education today is overlooking the education of the senses at the very period when this education is possible. The life of the adult is practically an application of the senses to the gathering of sensations from the environment. A lack of preparation for this

often results in inadequacy in practical life, in that lack of poise that causes so many individuals to waste their energies in purposeless effort" (p. 371).

During the early recollection gathering process of Adlerian psychotherapy, the client is asked to remember vivid incidents occurring during the sensitive period, and then the team of therapist and client work with the memory to highlight mistaken beliefs. Through these mistaken beliefs the client's movement, or lifestyle, is revealed, thus helping the client and therapist to see the purpose of the behavior and what changes need to be made.

Newcombe (2000) found that there is evidence to suggest that nonverbal memories exist from preverbal years of childhood and that they may affect behavior, thoughts, and feelings years into a person's future. These early memories are stored by a sensory process rather than a narrative process because the prefrontal cortex of the brain is not fully formed in the early years of the child's life.

This portion of the brain is the verbal center as well as the portion that is involved in memory storage and retrieval. Newcombe found that 3- to 5-year-olds have measurable neurophysiological responses when shown photographs of people they once knew but do not consciously recognize. When attached to instruments that measure perspiration and skin conductance, children responded more often to photos of former preschool classmates than to children they had never known. Newcombe's (2000) findings support the conclusion that individuals have a sense memory that can be accessed through nonverbal means to highlight feelings and recognitions derived from the "sensitive periods" of life.

In therapy, the client can be directed toward the five senses as a means to elicit an early recollection or add detail to a memory already recalled. For example, the client may have a smell in his or her mind which provokes an early memory. Alternatively, the therapist could provide a selection of smelling jars (apparatuses used in the Montessori classroom) for the client to smell in order to spark associations.

The client may visualize the early recollection, experience being the child self in the memory, and then integrate into the experience the smell sensation in order to intensify the recollection. The client may be asked by the therapist to pay attention to and verbalize other sensory feelings connected to the memory, such as sounds (sirens, dogs barking, babies crying, rate and pace of speech, volume, clarity of sounds); tactile feelings (itchy school uniform, warm flannel blanket, dampness, humidity, cold wind, getting hair brushed or braided); smells (baking cookies, fresh cut grass, approaching rain, hot tarmac, beer or alcohol, tobacco); tastes (cough syrup, Popsicles, cotton candy, lemonade, soap, chocolate); and sights (season, foreground and background details, body language, spatial positions of others and self, time of day, location). Each of these sensory relationships deepens and sharpens a client's early recollection.

### Case Study

One of us (Cosgrove) used sensory imaging during a session with a client (referred to pseudonymously as Michael). Michael, an attorney, presented for therapy as extremely verbose, intelligent, successful, superior, and insecure. However, he was making choices that fell on the useless side of life. For example, he was facing criminal charges for stalking his former wife, and he had been disbarred for multiple reasons.

Michael was adept at intellectualizing his useless behaviors and creating distracting sideshows with his verbal diatribes. I enjoyed his verbosity but also remained quite aware of the purposeful nature of Michael's avoidance of feeling-statements and his dedication to stay in his head and have me follow him only that far, as this was a safe place for him.

We continued our sessions and I was intent on gathering early recollection information from Michael. The direction of one of our sessions took an unexpected 180-degree turn when Michael began describing an early recollection involving his grandmother and extended family. Michael's speech slowed, as did his barrage of monologue, and he began to describe his grandmother's apartment by the smells that would emanate from the doorway, out into the hall, beckoning him closer.

Suddenly, no sideshows were distracting the early recollection process. Michael was right back in his grandmother's kitchen, smelling the freshly baked sourdough bread and the sheets upon sheets of gooey chocolate chip cookies that inevitably needed to be sampled in case they did not taste right.

Michael used feeling words that illustrated each frame of the memory, something he had previously been unable or unwilling to do. It was self-directed. If I had insisted that Michael describe his feelings about his childhood to me, I would never have gathered such deep, honest, and emotional recollections that were so important in Michael's memory bank. Using the sensory memory was a shortcut through his chatter which had previously allowed him "to get off the hook" so successfully in life. His senses took him straight into his depth of feeling and emotions. The early recollections that I was able to gather from Michael were essential in highlighting his guiding lines and ultimately his mistaken beliefs, leading us to specific goals to strive for in the therapeutic process.

### Conclusion

In the early recollection gathering process, the therapist can guide the client to sensory triggers that help to enhance the reporting of feelings associated with the memory. These sensory triggers can create an experiential

encounter. This technique helps the client find a deeper understanding of the meaning that early recollections give to life events.

The importance that Adlerian psychologists place on alignment of client and therapist goals is essential in the early recollection gathering process. If the client is in tune with olfactory sensations, for example, it may be counter-productive to try to have him or her focus on the tactile sense. It is essential to follow the movement of the client regarding the sensorial experiences in early memories.

Attention to the senses, as advocated by Montessori, during the Adlerian lifestyle assessment process complements the cognitive focus of the traditional Adlerian approach. The client and the therapist can identify the lifestyle by bringing it to the surface in a more visceral way than discovering it cognitively and verbally. This visceral process may help in the quick identification of mistaken beliefs, formation of therapy goals, and, subsequently, aiding in the success of therapy.

Holism is a main tenet of Individual Psychology. It is essential that the individual be viewed from a biological, social, and psychological framework. Current Adlerian techniques are exceptional in addressing the social and psychological aspects of the triad. However, the emphasis on the biology of the individual is limited in scope. Individual Psychology places great emphasis on organ inferiority, organ jargon, and the overall physical health of the client. The aspect that is commonly overlooked is the function that the five senses play in the assessment of the physiological and psychological functioning of an individual. Just as private logic differs infinitely from one person to the next, so do people's connections with the biological five senses and how they use these to make sense of the world.

Individual Psychology and Montessori education complement one another on many levels. Montessori's sensorial methods and use of the five senses can be viewed as a useful addition to Adlerian early memory investigation.

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