

# THE HOUSE OF CHILDREN

LECTURE, KODAIKANAL, 1944

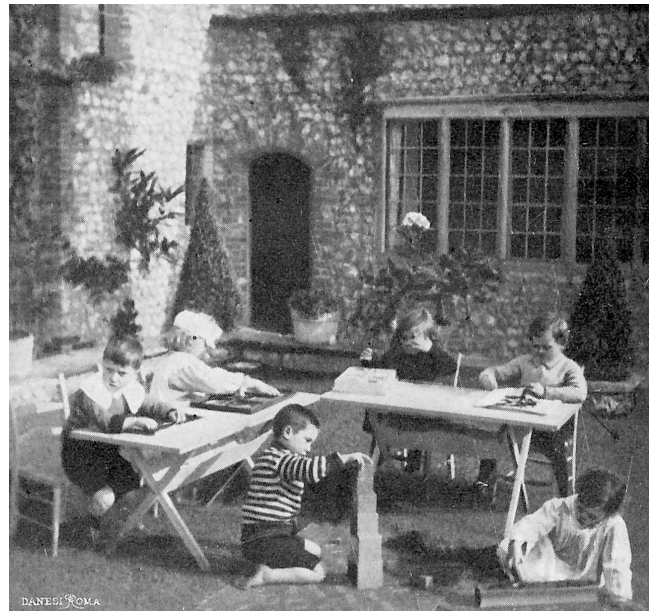
by Maria Montessori

*This article vividly describes the indoor and outdoor components of what Montessori calls Home Sweet Home. Her vision of a domestic Children's House contains many facets: rooms of varied space, beautiful flooring, gardens that educate and evoke collaboration, and places for year-round exercise. This is a definitive yet rare Montessori article that shows the profound overlap of both natural and man-made spaces in a house designed for children.*

The general idea about the buildings of a modern school is that they should be hygienically correct, satisfying the laws of healthy housing, etc. Our idea is to build them so that they are psychologically satisfying, i.e., the building should correspond to the psychological needs of the children.

First, there is the fact of proportion. The size of the building and the whole structure should correspond to the size of the child. It should, thus, satisfy his sense of comfort because children have as much sense of proportion and sensitivity to it and its corresponding comfort as we do. Unfortunately, they are never given the chance for such satisfaction in an ordinary school building where, we know, everything is made to suit the teacher more than the child. And yet a school is an institution where there are thirty children and only one adult!

In English, there is the famous sentimental expression "Home! Sweet Home!" For the adult, the idea of home rings with similar satisfactory notes. But where is the child to find an answer to his need? In the "House of Children," we endeavor to give to the child the relief of feeling, for once, "at home." The question of proportion is one that pertains to psychology: We adults construct our homes with a certain sense of proportion. Our house is not something that simply shelters us from inclement weather. It is a place where we are at ease. The children want the same mental ease and sense of comfort provided by an environment adapted to their size.



Children's House of Mr. Hawker, Runton, Norfolk, England, courtesy of Paola Trabalzini

Considering it from the point of view of economy, the smaller house will cost much less than a big one, just as a child's dress consumes less material than that of the grown-up's. So we can use this fact in our favor in the controversy of expenditure on the child's schoolhouse problem. By following this plan of making the school building proportionate to the size of the children, we save society and ourselves from a great economic error.

When we are in an apartment building or entrance hall that has very lofty ceilings, the ceiling does not seem to be part of the house. It rather appears to belong to the sky or to any other canopy that has nothing to do with our comfort or coziness, and we would feel rather uncomfortable if we had to live in such an open sort of environment. A home should be “cozy,” not a place where one feels lost. The same may be said for the child who has to live in the school building, which is suited to the needs of the adult. For the ceiling will seem as tall, if not higher, to him than did the elevated ceiling of the big hall to us. We have noticed among children of rich families who typically live in big houses with vast empty spaces between floor and ceiling and wall to wall, that, as soon as they had the chance, they make little “huts,” small dwellings made from whatever they could lay their hands on and pretend to live in them. This is a common tendency in the play of the very young. And there could be no surer guide than this manifestation of the desire for a fitting construction for their living-place. We must not think merely of an environment, not merely of a shelter, but of a house.

Concerning proportion, there have to be limitations of size. If the room is too small it acts as a restriction and causes disorder. If it is too big it disperses attention. The proportion of a room, therefore, should not depend only on the possibility of ample circulation of air, or, in other words, its cubic contents, but it should be adapted to what I call “psychological proportions or needs.” Hence, we must measure the psychological contents of the room, too, not just the cubic feet of the room. The windows should be small and low in proportion to the children. There should be other means to circulate air than windows alone. Windows should essentially serve the purpose of being “look-outs.” In short, the windows should be “psychological windows” and not merely aerating windows.

When we consider a Training College having a House of Children attached to it, we should not have the students or visitors going and hovering over the children at work. Proximity is a great disturbing factor. Instead, there should be a visitors’ gallery where the children could be observed without being disturbed. In Rome, certain big buildings—ancient ones—were given for the use of children. These were reconditioned suitably by having a low hanging gallery built all around which

reduced the height of the building suitably for the children. Also if the rooms available are too big, they must be partitioned off with little low walls. These could serve as stands for plants, aquariums, terrariums, etc....The walls should be of the height of the three- or four-year-olds. This separation of space by such low walls is a psychological separation. They are not to separate one class from another or a “higher” group from a “lower” group. They are meant to give that limited space necessary to lessen children’s distraction. With such separations, the children are free to circulate. Hygiene also is taken care of, as air definitely circulates better with low walls than with complete separations by walls from room to room.

Children sometimes feel the necessity of being alone and all by themselves. Hence, little side rooms are to be provided, too. Now and then, when they feel like it, they can retire to these side rooms where appropriate activities should be provided or they can take the work they are interested in with them.

There is yet another factor to be considered in the construction of the House of Children. We know that all the children living in city dwellings are forced to grow within rooms that are rectangular “prisms.” Hence they grow to be “prismatically-minded.” If we look at great temples and monuments, they are built in different forms—round, etc. They symbolize the need of man to escape from the ordinary, humdrum, prismatic prisons called houses in his efforts to create other forms of environment. In



Placing plane geometrical insets on their relative cards, courtesy of Paola Trabalzini



Greek art, the temples are round and the pillars are fluted in structure. In royal palaces, the dance halls are elliptical in form. Public places of pleasure are not rectangular. Hence we have experimented with other shapes than the rectangle in the construction of our Children's Houses. To give rest and pleasure, we have shaped our buildings with elliptical, trian-

gular, and circular shapes, etc. In Amsterdam, where a rectangular building was at our disposal, we put up partitions in the corners and created triangular rooms—four of them in the corners and the central room itself was hexagonal. Thus five rooms out of one were available for the children's use. The different corner rooms were utilized for different purposes:



Workers and observers after lunch show great interest in washing the dishes—and sincere admiration in looking on, a Montessori school in Berlin, courtesy of Paola Trabalzini





Lunch in the open air, the Cloister School, Via Giusti, Rome, around 1911

one for a library, one for a kitchen, another for a laboratory, and so on. To be condemned to reside in a prismatic space is depressing to the spirit.

The flooring should be of shining tiles of different colors. They could be arranged as a mosaic. Or the flooring could be of waxed wood. There is no hard-and-fast rule about it. Of course, there is the psychological basis. If we can get the help of an imaginative architect, he devises something beautiful. The importance of the flooring is very great. Whenever we walk about the room, or when one is seated, we are conscious of the floor. And hence, as far as beauty is concerned the flooring is more important than the walls.

Besides the small windows, there should be glass walls allowing plenty of natural light into the room, as well as communicating with the outer garden.

Before we actually step into the garden from the Children's House, there should be a raised verandah all around. It should be closed and sheltered. In the garden, there should be "kiosks" or bowers to go into. Kiosks can be helpful for processions and marching. The usual idea of an "educative garden"

in the sense of one being divided into individual strips for each child does not appeal to us as anything convincing. The garden should be the result of the collaboration of all the children. There should always be collaboration in protection (weeding), collection of fruits, harvesting, and so on. The garden should be, psychologically, a place that allows each one to do what he feels like doing.

A House of Children should have 20 to 40 children, but not more than 40. Less than 20 does not give results.

## ON GYMNASTICS

Among the many programs adopted in the USA, are societies for entertainment<sup>1</sup>. Those who came to these gatherings were interested in explaining the Montessori materials. Each one explained how the different senses were developed in the children with this apparatus. The Ambassador of China blindfolded himself and tried to recognize Mr. Montessori. It was only the Italian Ambassadors who said that this method was not for the Italian children. They were reminded that Dr. Montessori was an Italian herself and so the method must be Italian.

<sup>1</sup>What Montessori describes as "societies for entertainment" might be similar to the Chautauqua phenomenon, an adult education movement in the United States, highly popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Chautauqua assemblies expanded and spread throughout rural America until the mid-1920s. The Chautauqua brought entertainment and culture for the whole community, with speakers, teachers, musicians, entertainers, preachers, and specialists of the day. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chautauqua>)

Returning to the topic of the House of Children, everything was all right except the question of the proportion of the house itself. The house must be different in order to suit the climate of the different places. They should be built in such a way as to take full advantage of available sunlight and circulation of fresh air. In the tropical countries, we must protect the children from too much sunshine and light. Similarly, we require a special type of building to suit the temperate climates.

External environments, such as gardens and games—these also vary according to the climate. In Holland, where the winter is prolonged and where there is a great deal of ice and snow, ice-skating is very important as a pastime. Ice-skating has to be taught to the children. Gymnastics also change according to the country. These exercises have become so interesting and exciting for the children that special halls have been built in order to teach these sports to the children (skiing)...It is the environment that creates the sport and the gymnastic ability, and agility takes different forms. In Holland, in order to go from one place to another they skate or go on bicycles—even the children of three or four years. These children will naturally not be interested in basketball or tennis, etc. English games, which have spread all over the world, appear senseless when the environment is different from what is found in England. The same can be said of other forms of gymnastics. Where there are no trees, people fix poles to teach climbing. Since there is nothing to climb, it is only an imitation of movement. Exercise ought to be for adaptation to the environment.

In some places people ride on rocking horses and think they have learned how to ride. There was an idiot<sup>2</sup> child who was told by a psychiatric specialist to ride horseback for an hour each day. The child sat on the horse, without riding, for an hour, but nothing happened. So the same is the case with the rocking horse. Sometimes we limit the movements of children by giving them these

toys to play with. When the movement that is given has no purpose, the mental exercise is detached from the physical.

In a kinesthetic therapy clinic, people are given certain instruments, which are then moved mechanically, without any effort. Exercises are done with the help of these instruments. In this room, it looks as if these people were shut in a mental hospital and this is of no use.

There are different exercises for the children. What is essential for the child to know? Firstly, there should be plenty of space; secondly, there should be some kind of work that makes the child use his mind as well as his body, thus bringing a perfect coordination between the two. Young people are generally more muscular (when given space) than those who are brought up in closed rooms. With the latter, there is more restriction than development.

In America, when a person dies, part of his legacy goes for education. In one of these institutes, I was greeted by the children who came riding towards me, some without a saddle or bridle. Whatever is possible should be created for the child, but, as far as possible, the child should not be given toys that give an illusion of riding, rowing, etc. Gymnastics, as they are taught today, are only necessary for children who are in closed environments and not for the children who are set free.

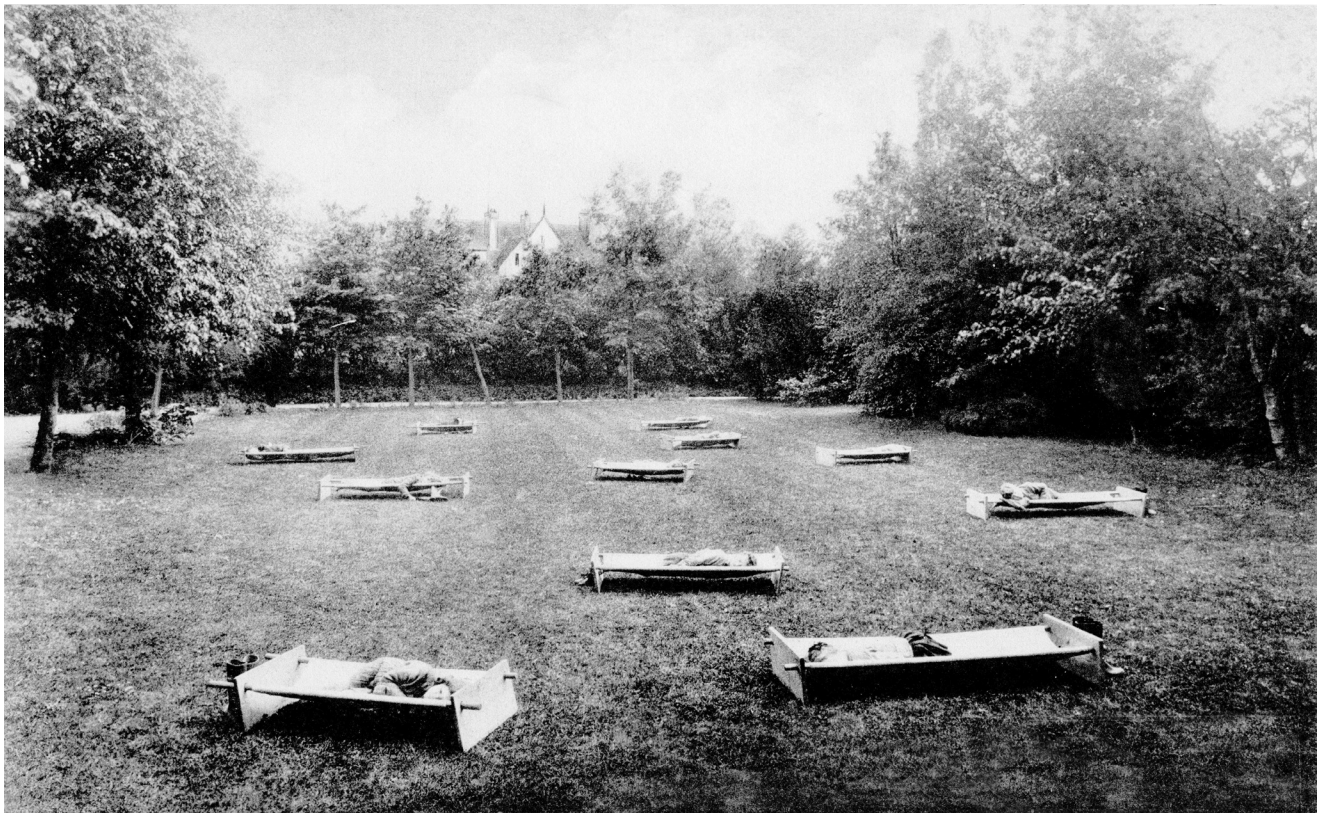
In the USA, there are many playgrounds which are suitable for children from two to four years but which are not suitable for the older children, while there are other things such as parallel bars, etc., which are suitable for the older children. Professor Séguin<sup>3</sup> used parallel bars in order to provoke an instinctive movement in developmentally delayed children. So he thought that these exercises would also be useful for normal children. All these exercises are only partial movements, but swimming develops every part of the body. Today these exercises are done in

---

<sup>2</sup>According to Wikipedia, "The terms used for this condition are subject to a process called the euphemism treadmill. This means that whatever term is chosen for this condition, it eventually becomes perceived as an insult. The terms *mental retardation* and *mentally retarded* were invented in the middle of the 20th century to replace the previous set of terms, which were deemed to have become offensive. By the end of the 20th century, these terms themselves have come to be widely seen as disparaging and politically incorrect and in need of replacement. The term *intellectual disability* or *intellectually challenged* is now preferred by most advocates in most English-speaking countries.

<sup>3</sup>Édouard Séguin (1812-1880) was a physician and educationist born in Clamecy, Nièvre. He is remembered for his work with children having cognitive impairments in France and the United States. He studied at the Collège d'Auxerre and the Lycée Saint-Louis in Paris, and from 1837 studied and worked under Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, who was an educator of deaf-mute individuals, that included the celebrated case of Victor of Aveyron, also known as "The Wild Child." It was Itard who persuaded Séguin to dedicate himself to study the causes as well as the training of the mentally retarded.





Rest time, St. George's Montessori Home, Harpenden, Hertfordshire, 1917

the open air, so that the child gets the benefit of the fresh air. Swimming and climbing—rope climbing and climbing trees—are not only exercises for the child but they also make him sure of himself and have a practical use.

All these activities should be carried out in the open air. Jumping over heights and walking on narrow ledges are also enjoyed by the children. Children are not afraid of anything. We must observe what the children do—sometimes the most dangerous things such as hanging onto moving cars, etc.—we should try and help the child in doing these things and not intimidate him. We should prepare the environment for the children of the future. Children love escalators in spite of the fact that they fall down on them quite often. The tendency of the adult is to stop the child from doing these “foolhardy” things.

In the schools, only certain gymnastics are done but the children are not allowed to do what they like and want to do. If we think that the future generation will be physically developed just by playing

tennis, then we are sadly mistaken. People who are not allowed complete freedom of movement and who have to do sedentary work have created these playgrounds and these playgrounds are reactions to this passivity. The exercises of practical life are more suitable than gymnastics. The children's movements are directed by the material and while the children are busy doing these exercises, the whole hall becomes like a gymnastics hall. These are practical and safe indoor exercises.

### **The Outer Environment**

Specially prepared ground should be given to the children outside where they can skate, cycle, relay, etc. Sheds and resting places should be all around this area. Meadows are ideal places for the different exercises. Picking fruit and preparing baskets for collecting the fruit are useful as well as delightful exercises for the children. These are exercises for control of movement. Children are also interested in preparing raised platforms on the ground and in the trees. The child must be moved to activity in whatever he does.

In scouting, there are exercises that have as their aim the development of the physical and intellectual side of the child and we do the same. We must first look to increase ability, and second, to increase safety by swimming, etc. All these exercises, done well, give great confidence to the child. For the smaller children, spontaneous exercises should be encouraged; for the older children, exercises should be directed.

### SCHOOL GARDENS

The garden we are talking about is not of the usual conception but the entire open space around the school, which should be vitally organized. It forms part of the living environment. The environment is not only the school building, per se, but the garden, too. The garden must also have certain psychological dimensions. Because, in the gardens usually built for the children by the city authorities, only the hygienic (physical) part is thought of and not the psychological part. So, in these great parks for children, as in New York and other large cities, the children can never go alone, because the dimensions are too great and the crowds too big, so that there is the ever-present danger of a child getting lost. Instead, the importance of the garden for the children is that they could have a life of their own with organic activity in the garden, an activity not imposed by adults. The great parks found in the large cities with lawns and lakes are not satisfying to children. On the other hand, the gardens attached to houses are also unsatisfactory. They belong to the parents and the things in them are not to be touched by the children. They are worked by the gardeners, as the children are considered to be too "small" for activity in them. So all progress of late in the construction of public parks or house-gardens does not touch the central psychological point.

What is lacking for children is an open-air environment of activity that will develop the psychic side. We must study the open-air environment as much as we do the indoor environment and its construction. This is important. It is the principle that is invariable and not the details. Many modifications, as regards to the details, are possible, but the important thing is the environmental activity of the child. The details I am going to enumerate now are based on personal experience, but it is not necessary that all the children's gardens need be as I describe.

The garden should be larger than what is usually planned as a school garden with some flowerbeds only. The garden should be well-sheltered from any dangers, perhaps with an enclosure wall. This is a very important factor, for children will never be free unless the environment is safe, such that there is no danger to the child. If there is any possibility of danger, the children cannot be left alone. This results in lack of freedom and the imposition of the adult personality, in which case the children's feeling of spontaneity is curbed. But the essential part is that children should act by themselves, not alone but in groups. They will need direction in the beginning to lead them to some spontaneous interests. Hence, the garden must be large enough to be satisfying to the needs of their life. It should not be too large, however. For, if even well defended, too large a garden is not satisfactory. For instance, there are the rich farmhouses. These are huge compounds or estates. The children left in them are totally indifferent, for neither adults nor children can know fully a too large and wide environment so no attachment can be made with such an environment. The same principle as for the interior of the school must prevail for the garden, too: that the children know every object and the place of every object. Here, also, the sentiment of "Home! Sweet Home!" should become "Garden! Sweet Garden!" for the child.

Let us now enumerate what the children's garden should be like. Many variations of this are possible. Also the items mentioned by me need not be in the same garden, though it is very desirable to have them.

1. The aesthetic part or the beauty of the garden is the first consideration. The garden is the place where there is an abundance of beautiful flowers, aromatic plants, trees, etc. This preparation should be given to a professional gardener and the children. Part of the education is to respect the flowers, the flowerbeds, and to learn to draw the designs for such. Just as we do for the inner environment—not to soil the furniture, the walls—the same principle is to be observed here. But it does not stop here.
2. In public parks and gardens, no touching is allowed. So in our garden, the active part of the child is also to be considered. There must be provision for the children to take

part in work. Work can be of varied kinds in the garden: preparation of soil, weeding, watering, etc. Children should do a collective piece of work. They should be guided to the technique of such collaborative work. The idea is that they should reach the point of having clear ideas of things. As in many other fields, a real artistic sense must be developed. For instance, there is the painting, drawing, and sculpturing by children. Another venue for the artistic expression of children is the development of their own ideas of laying out the garden and the flowers to be contained in it. This aesthetic part must be emphasized. For it is in the nature of man to add beauty to his environment by his work. On this principle is based the activity of the children indoors of preparing flower vases and similar activities. Generally, traditional educators recommend individual gardens and narrow individual plots, which we think are of no use.

3. Vegetable Gardens: In this there should be two parts (a) the garden of the gardener, and (b) the garden of the children. This is a very exciting activity. The flower garden activity is sentimental, whereas the activity in the vegetable garden is practical. Here also collective work is the basis—collective planting, weeding, and harvesting activity should go on. This stimulus puts into practice the social side of children. The collaboration of the group is developed, because with the group activity one has striking results whereas with individual gardens no results, are seen. With results, the activity becomes interesting. Many applications of activity come by growing different kinds of vegetables according to the different seasons. Then the question of consumption is seen against a real background. To make a field of potatoes has been seen to be very interesting to children of Europe. It may vary here. The collection of potatoes gives great satisfaction. When pulling a plant, one senses the great richness of abundance as the gift of the soil is felt. The special gifts of the earth are felt vividly in this activity. This leads to other activities.

4. Hothouses: In cooler climates, special houses are naturally needed to grow things that are normally grown in warmer and hotter climates. The question of protection from too much extremes of climate and from pests begins to be noted, studied, and acted upon. The importance of this is to show the difference that the care and intervention of man can bring about. In Holland, which is a country too cold for vines, they are grown in hothouses with hot water pipes running in them to give the plants just the necessary temperature. Big grapes are produced which are consumed all over Europe, though the vine cannot grow normally there. Hot or cold houses ought to be made, though this is not possible everywhere.
5. The Plant Laboratory: It is very important that within this garden a sort of Plant Laboratory should exist to study plant physiology. This is a very interesting activity. Studying plant growth in different soils, the effect of light on plants, the growth of roots, the effect of less or more water, successive drawings of the development of plants...all these can be conducted in such a center. This was the idea, apparently, thought of by the advocates of "individual" gardens but not really achieved. But, by the study of organic physiology, by the careful adjustment of conditions, much of great practical value can be learned by the children.
6. Fruit Gardens: In the fruit orchard, tree climbing, the use of rope ladders, and such similar activities can be brought in easily. This becomes almost a gymnasium. There is the aesthetic value also, as many of the fruit trees are very beautiful in flower. When the fruits are ripe, then we have the activity of groups of children collecting with baskets. Bare and dry sticks and branches suddenly flower and bring forth luscious fruits. Hence, potatoes and fruit trees are very important to impress on the children the gifts of nature.

There is another aspect of the school garden, meant for amusement and instruction. It is the court



and the lawn. Courts are meant for play. There should be a hard court, like the tennis hard courts, but larger and wider. Around this there should be a track for the children to walk around or run or go around on bicycles, scooters—it is something like a racetrack. On this track can be practiced roller-skating, ball play, skipping, pulling wheelbarrows and carts for transporting garden material or the children themselves galloping about for the sheer fun of it, playing the horse, and many other activities can go on both on the court and on the track.

Around this is the lawn. Here the exercise for equilibrium of walking on a beam raised one foot above the ground could be provided for. On one side of this court, on the lawn, can be built up a stepped pyramid. Pairs of steps, each six to nine inches high and deep, and a platform can be arranged in succession up to six or seven layers of steps. Lines should be drawn to guide the steps of the child in walking up and down. This guided walking gives special exercise for grace of comportment.

On the next side of the lawn, a pergola should be built. It should be shaded with some roof protection as a protection from sun and rain. There should be vertical stairs and rung-ladders, slides all around. The pillars should be colored beautifully in different colors. The platform should have seats all around for the children to sit and watch when they feel so inclined. The pillars should be thin enough for the

children to hold and climb up them. The central part, the platform, is the real part for the child. It is meant as a space for mental rest.

On the third side should be built a stall where there should be buying and selling activity going on between the children, using weights and measures. The decimal system should be used. This is knowledge in the aspect of play. The material is based on the sensorial material used by the children. They are to use and handle them. The basic units are the long stairs and the first and last of the cubes of the pink tower. The long stair of "10" is the meter. It is divided into decimeters. The big pink tower cube is the decimeter cubed which is the unit for liquid measure—the liter. The smallest pink tower cube is the cubic centimeter. Filling up the pink tower cubes and measuring water or other liquids with them is the departure for science. The weight of one cc of water is a gram. This play becomes a silent propaganda for the metric system, which is in use in all European countries except England and Russia. This system is not of any one country but of the whole world. It is based on the measure of our earth. The meter is 1/40,000,000 part of the circumference of our earth.

The fourth side of the lawn has different wooden huts, vividly colored, and they contain various tools for gardening, bicycles, scooters, handcarts, wheelbarrows, and play material of various kinds.

---

*Copyright © 1944 Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company. NAMTA would like to express its gratitude to the Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company and the Maria Montessori Archives held at AMI for suggesting this lecture and making it available. Special thanks to Annette Haines for reviewing and updating the article for clarity and historical context.*

