The Montessori teacher demonstrates key behaviors to implement this child-centered approach:

1. **Make children the center of learning** because, as Montessori said, “The teacher’s task is not to talk, but to prepare and arrange a series of motives for cultural activity in a special environment made for the child” (Dr. Montessori's Own Handbook).
2. **Encourage children to learn** by providing freedom for them in the prepared environment.
3. **Observe children** so as to prepare the best possible environment, recognizing sensitive periods and diverting inappropriate behavior to meaningful tasks.
4. **Prepare the learning environment** by ensuring that learning materials are provided in an orderly format and the materials provide for appropriate experiences for all the children.
5. **Respect each child** and model ongoing respect for all children and their work.

**Respect for the Child**

Montessori believed that “it is necessary for the teacher to guide the child without letting him feel her presence too much, so that she may be always ready to supply the desired help, but may never be the obstacle between the child and his experience” (Montessori, 1967).

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Montessori wanted us to understand that children can't help learning. Simply by living, children learn from their environment. Children are born to learn, and they are remarkable learning systems. Children learn because they are thinking beings. But what they learn depends greatly on their teachers, experiences, and environments.

**The Absorbent Mind**

Montessori believed that children educate themselves: “It may be said that we acquire knowledge by using our minds; but the child absorbs knowledge directly into his psychic life. Simply by continuing to live, the child learns to speak his native tongue” (Montessori, 1966). This is the concept of the absorbent mind.

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Early childhood teachers are reemphasizing the idea that children are born learning and with constant readiness and ability to learn. We discuss these concepts further in Chapter 5.

**Sensitive Periods**

Montessori believed there are sensitive periods when children are more susceptible to certain behaviors and can learn specific skills more easily:

A sensitive period refers to a special sensibility which a creature acquires in its infantile state, while it is still in a process of evolution. It is a transient disposition and limited to the acquisition of a particular trait. Once this trait or characteristic has been acquired, the special sensibility disappears... (Montessori, 1966).

Although all children experience the same sensitive periods (e.g., a sensitive period for writing), the sequence and timing vary for each child. One role of the teacher is to use observation to detect times of sensitivity and provide the setting for optimum fulfillment.

**The Prepared Environment**

Montessori believed that children learn best in a prepared environment, a place in which children can do things for themselves. The prepared environment makes learning materials and experiences available to children in an orderly format. Classrooms Montessori described are really what educators advocate when they talk about child-centered education and active learning. Freedom is the essential characteristic of the prepared environment. Since children within the environment are free to explore materials of their own choosing, they absorb what they find there. Maria Montessori was a master at creating environments for young children that enabled them to be independent, active, and learn.

**Autoeducation**

Montessori named the concept that children are capable of educating themselves autoeducation (also known as self-education). Children who are actively involved in a prepared environment and who exercise freedom of choice literally educate themselves. Montessori teachers prepare classrooms so that children educate themselves.

**The Teacher’s Role**

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The Montessori teacher demonstrates key behaviors to implement this child-centered approach: