
Practical Applications of Montessori in the Home

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As most of us who are parents of children in Montessori programs discover, our children can teach us a lot. Children who have developed new skills and made new discoveries have a great desire to apply those skills and discoveries in their everyday life. In fact, all of their life is one comprehensive whole within which they exist. All skills and knowledge become a part of their evolving personalities. The challenge for us, as parents, is to provide an environment within which these children can experience continuity and support for their growth and development.

It is important to begin our discussion with a few clarifications about what we can't attempt to do at home. First and foremost, we cannot recreate the Montessori classroom environment in our homes. Our homes are places designed to accommodate the needs of both adults and children. The Montessori environment is designed specifically to meet the needs of a defined group of children, as such, the Montessori environment consists of more than just a willing child and a set of "neat" teaching materials. Even more so the child cannot learn from the materials through mere exposure. This could be likened to sitting in front of a locked box without a key. In the same vein, the trained Montessori guide acts as the key to unlocking the box. S/he is the professional prepared with an understanding of child development and the nature and design of the materials through which they can meet the developmental needs of the child. In addition, a true Montessori experience includes the social dynamic of the child interacting with children of other similar ages – older children there to assist and to be models for the younger children; younger children learning through observation of older children and gaining a vision of the work that is yet to come in their life experience.

So with this said, what can we do? There are many aspects of the Montessori

philosophy of life that can be applied to our life with children. We might call these philosophical attitudes. These could include such attitudes as: 1) respect for life and nature's built-in pattern for unfolding development, 2) a friendliness with error which allows us all to acknowledge our human frailties and developing levels of skill, 3) the freedom to use all the skills and capacities we have even though they may not yet be perfected, generally called functional independence. Any or all of these three can provide a basis for our relationship with our child. They are attitudes used to create a psychological environment for the child.

Let's look at these first. Respect for life can translate into speaking to our child in a respectful manner, avoiding phrases that demean or undermine the budding self-esteem. It can mean listening intently to the child's communications and responding in ways that stimulate a true dialogue with the child. The young child is just learning the intricacies of personal communication and delights in practicing these skills with anyone they meet. Through our communications, we can be sensitive to providing a language rich environment. Children delight in knowing the names of all the objects they encounter in daily life as well as the vocabulary used to describe activities and processes they are engaged in. Specific and accurate vocabulary is a true gift from us to the child.

Friendliness with error is a challenge for all of us. We are programmed to expect something close to perfection within ourselves and in those around us. However, if we really observe our child, we see modeled for us a great acceptance of error as a natural part of life. Think of the young child just learning to walk – do they give up if they lose their balance and fall? Do they stop practicing walking because they aren't too secure in this skill yet, or do they persevere with a tenacity that astounds

us? This same attitude of persistence exists for all challenges in the life of the child. It is only after experiencing the negative recriminations after making a mistake that children develop an attitude that mistakes must be bad, something to be avoided or covered up at all costs. This does not imply that we can't assist the child in developing his/her level of skill, but this can best be done through modeling specific movements for the child. In dealing with the inevitable consequences of error (spilled milk, wet pants, etc.), we best serve the child by calmly and respectfully providing the help to resolve the problem. (A sponge, a dry set of clothes.)

Freedom to apply newly acquired skills, freedom to act on one's own behalf is the battle cry of the young child. I have two posters that I like to put up during the year for my students to ponder. One says, "Help me to do it by myself" the second says, "*as soon as independence has been reached, the adult who keeps on helping becomes an obstacle.*" Stimulating and encouraging functional independence is an essential aspect of a Montessori approach. This brings us to the part that most of us really came to hear. What can we do at home? I will share with you some applications that I discovered in life with my own son, who is now 12 years of age. But I firmly believe that all of you have a wealth of collective wisdom from which we can all benefit. A good way to assess what we can do in our homes is to go room by room, deciding on those adaptations or accommodations that we feel comfortable with and that are consistent with our family situation.

Let's begin in the **child's own bedroom**. Here are some examples of things you can do simply and without much cost.

- Allow children to dress themselves even when clothes don't match and

aren't lined up exactly. It is important in terms of clothing, to choose items that lend themselves to independence. Think of the type of and positioning of fasteners and whether this allows your child to handle them independently.

- Arrange clothing in drawers so it is accessible to the child.
- Provide a sleeping place that allows children freedom to lie down and get up as they respond to their own needs.
- Place a rod low in the closet to encourage the child to take responsibility for hanging up their own clothes. This also allows the opportunity for the child to apply skills with a variety of fasteners found on clothing.
- Provide hooks for coats, sweaters, and jackets as an alternative, so the child can be independent.
- Placing the child's toys on a long shelf instead of in a toy box. One of the important characteristics of the young child is a love of order. This is best described by the statement, *a place for everything and everything in its place*. This sense of external order provides a basis for security of the child and is also the basis for the development of internal mental order. This is very difficult to do with a toy box. It can also be very discouraging for a child to not be able to find the objects of desire within the chaos of the box.

Now let's move to the **kitchen and eating area**. There are a great variety of activities that the child enjoys.

- Use smaller sized utensils (pitchers, serving pieces, plates, glasses, etc.) to allow the child to be independent in pouring his milk, fixing his cereal, serving his own food.
- Allow the child to participate in the life of the family at a level appropriate to their age and skill. It isn't always the most efficient or tidiest manner to set the table, wash and peel the carrots, or do the dishes, but participation by the child helps them experience a sense of community through actively contributing to that community.

What about the **common living areas**? How can we allow the child a way to be near the other members of the family and feel like this is their place too? Having books, puzzles and simple games that are either solely for the child's independent play or interactive with other family members can provide ready activities. Some parents feel a need to "child proof" these common areas, yet most children readily learn to handle art pieces, and special books or artifacts with respect when this proper handling is modeled for them. It inspires them to control their movements.

The **bathroom** also lends itself to independence. A small secure stool serves as a platform for children at the sink or the toilet. A towel hung low enough for them to easily reach encourages the washing and wiping of hands.

Even the **outdoors** can be a space in which we apply a Montessori approach.

- Allow the child who can walk, to walk, but acknowledge and adapt to their pace.
- Provide small easily accessible gardens or planter boxes so the child may participate in simple gardening activities. This also necessitates attention to the size of the gardening tools. Many companies now make child sized implements meant for real activity.

These ideas just scratch the surface of the ideas of things that can be done. The bottom line is to always be sensitive to the developing skills of the child. From very early on in life, the child desires an active participation in life, especially the life of the family. We, as parents, are the most important facilitators and models for the child. Our homes can be places wherein the child feels comfortable, accepted and supported in their process of growth and development. ❖

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