

Being a Montessori Parent

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You are the bridge between what your child will learn at Montessori and what your child can learn at home. As a Montessori parent, it will not take you long to learn that every moment can become an exciting learning experience.

Choosing how your child will be educated, especially in the early formative years, can be the most important decision you make regarding your child's future. Research proves that the early childhood school education can have a lifetime impact. The decision you make for your child now will affect his or her academic and social progress through adolescence, university and life.

If you have made or are thinking of making the decision to enroll your child in a Montessori school, you are probably asking yourself a lot of questions, such as: What do I need to know that will help me more fully understand this fascinating approach to learning? What can I do at home to help make the Montessori experience even richer for my child? What makes Montessori unique?

While you may think that Montessori education is a method, it is really more an approach or attitude about life, growth and development. Montessori materials do not create that approach; rather, understanding Montessori principles can help you create the right attitude about your child's learning. Basic to this attitude is to understand that you cannot learn for your child. Only he or she can do that. Your job, as the first educator of your children, is to help them learn for themselves

For 100 years, Montessori has educated generations of children all around the world. Dr. Maria Montessori, the creator of the Montessori approach to education, was a keen observer of children and how they learn. Her methods and conclusions were ahead of her time; but, within the context of today's enlightened educational approach, they are at the cutting edge of where education is heading.

The following will help you acquaint yourself with your child's new learning environment.

Montessori at Home

Remember the first time you walked into a Montessori classroom? The beautiful, imaginative materials and the calm, orderly atmosphere probably enchanted you. That is the same atmosphere you want to create for your home, and it is not as difficult as you may think. After all, if a classroom with twenty or more children moving about can be orderly, certainly your home can be as well.

The principles of Montessori that your child will be experiencing at school all day are important and specific. It will increase the benefit to your child if you can make the transition from school to home as seamless as possible.

Here are some concrete ways you can reinforce the experience for your child by using Montessori principles at home.

Encourage Independence

“A servant does things for a child, while a (parent) should be an educator.”

Maria Montessori

You can continue the Montessori experience for your child at home by helping him learn to take care of his own body, learn the joys of an orderly life, and learn to be a contributor to the family. By doing this, you engender a confident feeling of “I can do it myself!”

To encourage independence, always let your child do things for him or herself whenever he or she shows an interest. If your child wants to help you cook, take the time to show him how to beat the eggs or tear the lettuce. Explain the reason for the process. It is always important when showing a task to explain what the end result, the accomplishment will be. Then enjoy the wonderful experience of working with your child at a common task.

Of course, letting young children do things for themselves—making their own breakfast, putting their clothes on, brushing their teeth—always takes more time and can be difficult in busy families. The payoff is that they learn self-reliance and self-confidence, just as they do in a Montessori school. Of course you have to always be aware of your child’s age, size and stage of development. With this in mind, you can adjust your child’s room so they can access things like drawers and hangers without your help.

If you have questions about something in particular or need some additional general guidance, ask your child’s Montessori teacher. He or she will be glad to help.

Establish Order

The order of a Montessori classroom can also be echoed at home. Establishing order in the home helps children become more independent. An orderly environment helps children concentrate and focus on the tasks at hand. Contrary to what you may think as you gaze about the house, children (like all human beings) actually have a natural affinity for order. The child only needs to be guided in that direction

Take the time to set up the different rooms in the house so that everything your child needs is organized and within reach. This is an imperative, because it makes everything so much easier for her to do things for herself. And when she does, her confidence and sense of accomplishment will blossom as much as her sense of order. It’s not as hard as you might imagine. You can start in the child’s bedroom by using low bins, hooks and shelving that young children can use to put their things away.

Keep clutter to a minimum by rotating some of the child’s toys into storage so that they are not all out at one time. Keeping their room orderly minimizes distraction and creates an environment that supports concentration. For older children, take advantage of some of the new home organization products to keep things manageable—things like CD holders, computer workstations, and closet organizers. Another example of this is to make the entranceway of your home child-friendly by having designated areas for boots and jackets. In the kitchen you can have an easy-to-get-at place to put their bowls and cutlery.

The following are some other examples of how you can set up your home to encourage order, develop self-confidence and independence:

- Lower or install the hanger pole in the closet and towel rack in the bathroom so they can hang up their own clothes and towels.
- Hang a color chart in the bedroom so the child can see for himself what colors go together when picking out clothing.
- Dresser drawers can be labeled with fun pictures or photos of underwear, shirts, socks, etc., and dividers used to organize the drawers better. Print or type the names of the items next to the images.
- Lower shelves are a good place for storing toys, but avoid big toy boxes. They can quickly become disorganized dumping grounds.
- A small step stool by the sink lets children turn on the taps themselves in the kitchen and the bathroom. That means they can brush their teeth, wash their face and hands, and even help with the dishes.
- Keep all their toiletries (tooth brush, toothpaste, water cup, etc.) in a small box on the bathroom counter or in a low drawer so they can be reached easily.
- Place simple snack foods such as cereal and peanut butter on a special low shelf in the kitchen so they can help themselves. Put a child-size jug of milk or other healthy beverage on a low shelf so they can pour themselves a cup and then put it away.

Help Children to be Helpful

In a Montessori classroom, children are taught to be helpful to others and to take care of the classroom itself. They wash chairs and tables, dust, organize shelves and engage in all kinds of activities that help them feel that they are valuable members of the group and raise their self-esteem. Of course all of these activities teach children valuable organization and motor skills, but they are also wonderful at developing empathy and help the child develop the built-in emotional response toward caring for other people. That's why giving children opportunities to help out at home is just as essential as it is at school.

The most important part of helping children to be helpful is called "take time for teaching." Children absorb a great deal through observation, but you can't only rely on that. There are certain skills that you have to show them how to do. This teaching should be part of your child's daily routine at home, just as it is in a Montessori classroom. Each skill should be taught separately, with a lot of patience and confidence in the child's ability to learn. This can be a lot of work for busy parents, but keep in mind that if you don't take time to teach, you will spend a lot more of your valuable time correcting a child who doesn't know how to do things, or worse yet, does not understand the value of life and how to enjoy it.

Some tips on how to teach your child include:

- Let them learn at their own speed. Often lessons to young children have to be repeated several times. For this reason, times when everyone is rushed—such as when everyone is trying to get out the door in the morning—are not good times for teaching. Do it when there is lots of time and calm in the house.
- When they try something for the first time and get it wrong (as they often do), don't correct them right away or criticize. The focus here should be on effort, not results. By all means teach them how to put their shoes on the right feet or pour milk without spilling it, but at a later time so that they don't connect the correction with their effort. Remember that criticism lowers self-esteem and motivation. And creates a barrier to learning.
- Don't interfere with children when they are attempting to learn something. They will find it harder to focus if you jump in to correct or explain. Also, children won't learn the skills if we do it for them; and worse, they can learn to become helpless and wait for others to do it.

Develop Concentration

Maria Montessori always said that a focused child is a happy child. Whenever possible, don't interrupt a child when he is engaged and focused on something. You can encourage focus by paying attention to what sparks enthusiasm and interest in your child, and then make sure you provide opportunities and materials to help this happen. Does your child like water? Let him wash dishes or scrub a soapy floor. If she likes to build things (out of toothpicks or wood or cardboard, etc.), make sure you have the materials on hand.

Like every skill, concentration deepens with practice. Young children, even babies have the ability to concentrate, and yet, often, adults will interrupt.. Once interrupted, the child's concentration is broken, and the engagement stops.

You can help develop your child's concentration by limiting the amount of TV and videos your child watches. TV entertains by constantly changing images. This is occupation, not concentration. Furthermore, TV limits your child's ability to create his own visual images. Another way to encourage concentration is to avoid interrupting your child when she is engaged. This is the same courtesy we expect from your children—to wait until we have finished a task. Lastly, create an orderly work environment for your child so that they can concentrate without distracting items such as TV, radio or clutter.

Children can do all kinds of things round the house, including: setting and clearing the table; loading and unloading the dishwasher; making their own lunches; making their bed; feeding and watering pets; dead-heading and watering plants in the house and in the garden; cleaning mirrors and windows; sweeping and vacuuming; sorting and folding laundry; and bringing in the mail. These are not "just housework or chores," they are valuable learning experiences that will imprint areas of the brain regarding small and large thought centers, nerve and muscle control centers.

Even very young children can: bring flyers in from the mailbox; scrape food off of dishes; put cutlery away; fold clothes; and organize shoes at the front door. As they master the tasks, you will find them wanting to accomplish more!

Introduce Your Child to Nature

Maria Montessori believed that nature talks directly to children. Go for walks in the woods with your children to collect pine cones, leaves and seeds, or draw pictures of birds that you see. Encourage them to observe insects (like an ant farm) or animals in the wild. Growing plants from seeds or sprouts from a carrot top are always rewarding for children, and having a backyard garden makes a lot of sense, too. Other ideal places for children to spend time are a sandy beach full of shells and other natural objects at the shoreline, or even just a yard dull of snow.

Do Practical Life at Home

Children learn by doing. Practical Life [see glossary] is all about teaching a child how to take care of the environment and himself. Children enjoy repetitively practicing real-life things. Give your child the real-life experience of folding socks into pairs, polishing shoes, sorting cutlery and folding clothes out the dryer. Children will spend many happy hours with a button box filled with a fabulous array of buttons, sorting them into different colors, shapes and sizes. This is a perfect example of how you can take everyday objects (the more beautiful and interesting the better) to get your child involved. Some of the best learning experiences come from the mundane and ordinary efforts of life, giving children the opportunity to exercise their mind and their motor skills.

Enable Self-Discovery

Children love to discover things for themselves. As a parent, your role is to help create the environment and provide the time for your child to find out for herself. This kind of help can include: asking leading questions, providing a few extra steps in an activity, or giving her time to discover and reflect on what she is seeing or experiencing. It is challenging as a parent not to rush in and provide the answer when your child has a question, but with patience you will enable your child's sense of curiosity and joy of discovery to blossom into a love of life-long learning.

Encourage Choice and Interest in Learning

Adults, like children, learn best when engaged in self-chosen activities. If you want to play a game or share an activity with your child, first be sure she is interested. If you introduce a new game, do so when your child is most ready for a new experience. Usually that means when your child is well rested. Activities your child already knows can be engaged in at any time. Be ready to stop an activity if your child becomes frustrated or does not want to continue. Try to end on a positive note such as, "We'll do this later, when you are ready."

Children enjoy playing games that allow them to build on previous learning. Remember the Goldilocks story: Just the right bowl of porridge, not one too hot or too cold. If a game is too easy or too difficult, your child will not want to play, nor will she learn a positive experience if forced to.

Determining just the right amount of challenge requires knowing your child and assessing the size of the steps to be taken when moving from one activity to another.

Use Encouragement, Not Rewards or Treats

Have you ever offered your child a trade-off if he completed a task? This is often tempting and can have a short-term effect. But consider the message you are giving. When you use external rewards to motivate your child, he learns that there is no intrinsic value to the activity, and the only reason to do it is for the reward.

Encouragement is all that is needed if a task is worth doing. It should have value for its own sake. Comments such as, "You worked hard on this," or "You did this all by yourself," are the reward they appreciate and learn from.