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Parenting for Independence

"No one can be free unless he is independent."

-- Maria Montessori

Independence is a cornerstone of the Montessori philosophy. At every level, children are encouraged to be as independent as possible. Children have a powerful, inborn desire to learn and achieve independence

It is the role of the Directress to support the child's struggle for independence. The Directress does not impede their efforts but also does not remove every obstacle. Often adults are too quick to help a child. By allowing a child to struggle, the child learns how to solve their own problem. A child may not be able to solve every problem in the time allowed, but, it is important for the child to have time to solve a problem. For example, when a child is changing their shoes it would be quicker and simpler for the adult to change the child's shoes. But, a child as young as a toddler can successfully change their shoes if given the opportunity to practice. Once a child has a sense of accomplishment and completion they are not likely to want the adult to perform those tasks for them.

The Montessori environments are set up with mixed aged groupings. The mixed age groups foster self discipline as well as independence. Think of a three year old new to the Montessori environment. The three year old is going to watch the other children in the room and learn to do what they do. The three year old child may initially ask for help or may attempt to perform the task by themselves. When hanging up a jacket, the three year old may be unfamiliar with placing a hanger in their jacket so the jacket hangs correctly. The child has the opportunity in the multi-aged classroom to see their peers

performing the task. The Directress would also likely break the task down into steps so the child could successfully hang up their jacket.

New children to the Montessori environment often receive many lessons the first few days they are in the environment. Not all of the lessons will be given by the Directress. An older child is often selected or asked to give a new child a lesson. The older child knows the lesson and materials and is capable of giving the lesson. The older child giving a lesson increases their sense of community (I helped someone), builds self esteem, and builds leadership skills. The younger child receives the lesson and now has one more person in the environment they can ask for help.

In addition to being more independent at school, children can be taught to be more independent for many daily home activities. Most important is personal dress and care. Children love to pick out their own clothes and dress themselves. Helping your child by limiting choices is a good idea. In addition to getting dressed, children can learn to brush their teeth, wash their faces, and brush their hair with the help of step stools, accessible supplies, and mirrors.

There are two other benefits to promoting independent life skills. One is that by doing a multi-step task like table washing, a child develops concentration and focus. Another benefit is the satisfaction they get by completing tasks that adults do. Children are usually eager to help and participate in family life.

As a parent you can give your child time to learn to be independent and you can provide independent opportunities whenever possible.



Tips From Teachers: Ways to Encourage Independence at Home:

As a goal, parents want to help their child be independent, but are not always sure how to encourage independence. When in doubt about whether or not your child can do something, let them try it (barring any physical injury). Also strive to help your child learn the consequences of their action or inaction. If your child forgets to take their lunch box to school and the consequence would be that they have to eat school lunch, would you take the lunch to school for your child or let them experience the consequence?

Following are some suggestions for ways to encourage independence at home:

- **Personal hygiene independence** - allow your child to wash himself, prompting when necessary or explain or demonstrate on a step-by-step basis what to do. If possible, let them start or finish tasks on their own, just providing assistance when necessary. Of course, this does not mean leaving a small child in the bathroom, but allowing the child to wet their own hair, apply shampoo and rub it into their hair. What if they don't get every area of their head? Instead of doing it for them, give them a hand mirror so they can see where they missed lathering up.
- **Encourage your child to make choices.** This could mean asking your child to choose between an apple or banana for their lunch. It is best to give limited choices to your child. You want to avoid, "What fruit do you want in your lunch today?" since your child may say fresh pineapple when that choice is not something available.
- **Experience consequences** – Once a child makes a choice allow them to experience the consequence of their choice. If you ask or remind your child to take their mittens to school because it is going to be cold, than a natural consequence will be cold hands. Hopefully the second day the child will be looking for their mittens before you need to offer a reminder.
- **Be aware of praise and how you are using it.** According to Montessori philosophy you want to be careful about using praise to manipulate a child to do something you want them to do. Also praise can be sought out by a child looking for validation from an adult. There isn't anything wrong with praise, you just want to be aware of how and when you are using it. When a child shows a newly finished art work, they often say, "Do you like my picture?" In reply, one could say, "Do you like your picture?" Or, "I see you used a variety of colors in your art piece. Tell me about it." Both responses acknowledge the child's need for attention. Parents should try to avoid personal judgments about a child's work.
- **Ask your child for input** – Ask your child to voice their opinion or share their concerns when the opportunity arises. Ask your child what they want and be prepared to listen and respond. You may have planned a day at the zoo where you could see everything, but your child may be really happy spending the entire day at the aquarium at the zoo. The experience will be more meaningful to the child who feels they have some control over the situation than a child who has no control. Negotiation skills come into play when multiple children are affected by the outcome. For example, a group of 5 students on an outing to the zoo has to communicate needs and desires to decide where to go and how long to stay.



Magnificent Montessori Materials: Independence and Practical Life



- Place setting** These are examples of place setting puzzles used in the 3-6 year old environment. Above are two different puzzles (this set by HelloWood) that reflect a simple and a formal place setting. The blank chart behind the puzzle is the control chart. A child may also have the opportunity to use real items to create a place setting. The child is asked to help set up their place for snack and lunch time. In one 3-6 year old environment, 2 children worked on the place setting. When they set up their places, they placed a peace candle near their work and the Directress lit the candle. It was obviously very meaningful and important to the children. Under the Directress' supervision one of the children then blew out the candle.

- Napkin folding**



Napkin folding is a work wherein the child learns the art of napkin folding. At a very young age the child learns simple folds (fold over, fold diagonally...). As the child ages, they are introduced to more elaborate folds, similar to those used at fine dining establishments (such as the rose shown below).



Rose

- Polishing:** This is a great time of year for a child to learn polishing work. As children enter a holiday season, polishing of silver (or other metals), wood and dining table is necessary.
 - Silver:** Children can be directed to polish silver using a polishing mitt or polish cream if supervised (many polishes are toxic). Children may work to polish every detail of a fine piece of silver. Many schools invite parents to bring silver items from home that need to be polished.
 - Wood:** Wood polishing can be polishing wood objects (apple, animals, book ends) or even wood molding and casing. As with silver polishing, children are shown a step-by-step lesson on how to polish.
 - Table:** Children learn the art of polishing a table from top to bottom and left to right (always preparing the mind and the hand for reading and writing). Depending on the table surface children may use soap or another detergent or an actual polish (for a wood table).





Q & A

Q: Montessori doesn't seem to allow for social development and interaction with each other. Is this something I should be concerned about? Should I seek out other social situations for my child?

A.: The Montessori Method of education does offer children many opportunities, including cognitive as well as social. Depending on the age of the child, it is typically up to the child to determine how much or how little they want to interact with other children. As is true in all areas of the Montessori environment, a knowledgeable Directress observes each child to determine their strengths and areas of improvement.

Let's think about your question in a slightly different light. In your work place, you are expected to get some things done independently. You may be asked to do team projects. Would it be acceptable if you spent all or most of your time at work socializing?

A Montessori environment is remarkably similar. Each child works on his or her own material. One child could certainly invite another child to work with them. Many times the lesson is presented to more than one child and is ideally repeated with a partner. Are children in Montessori environments allowed to spend all of their time socializing or visiting? Not typically.

The Montessori Method of Education encourages, to a high degree, children to learn to get along

with each other and to learn how to function in society. This was one of Dr. Montessori's goals: to educate the whole child so as to help future generations work and live in peace.

A strong component of the Montessori environment is the grace and courtesy lessons. In a classroom, one can frequently hear the children (young children) speak to each other in a very respectful, civilized way. This is one of many ways that the Montessori method encourages social interaction and development.

If you have the opportunity to observe in a Montessori classroom you should find that the children flow back and forth from working independently to working with a friend or a teacher. Typically, the children relate to each other in a very normal, non-aggressive way on the playground (as recently reported by Dr. Angeline Stoll Lillard in Science magazine (September 2006).

Hopefully your own personal observations and the preceding information will reassure you as to your child's ability to grow and develop socially in a Montessori environment.

Any Montessori/education related questions can be directed to the editor at:

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