

Montessori At Home

Parents often ask what they can be doing at home to support their child in a way that is in keeping with Montessori philosophy and teaching methods. The following is excerpted from 'The Joyful Child', and 'Child of the World'; from The Michael Olaf Company. More reading material, as well as lots of great toys and materials can be found here: <http://www.michaelolaf.net/>

The first undertaking of a Montessori teacher is to set up her classroom. In Montessori the classroom is called the Prepared Environment. Parents can also create a Prepared Environment at home. A Prepared Environment not only includes the physical materials, it also encompasses the atmosphere and the culture.

Preparing the Environment

During the first three years the child will absorb, like a sponge, whatever is in the environment, ugliness or beauty, coarse behavior or gentleness, good or bad language. As parents, we are the first models of what it means to be human. Quality and beauty of the environment and the books and materials is very important in attracting, satisfying, and keeping the attention of the child. If the child is exposed to beautiful toys, she will help create a world with the same high standards as an adult. Toys, puzzles, tables, and chairs made of wood instead of plastic develop an appreciation for nature and quality and show a respect for the child.

Pictures on the wall, hung at the eye-level of the child, can be beautiful framed art prints or simple posters. Rather than cartoons, which adults assume are preferred by children, we see that children are drawn instead to the great art, which has stood the test of time. Children also enjoy seeing their own artwork framed and displayed on the wall. The children's pictures can be changed frequently, as they create new artwork.

Rather than keeping things in large toy boxes, it is more satisfying to the child to keep them neatly on shelves, hung on hooks, sorted on trays, and separated into baskets. This also makes putting things away much more logical and enjoyable. It is possible to put shelves in the child's room, family room, and wherever else the child may play, before the child is born. Parents can begin immediately to keep the child's things on shelves and continually set the example of putting toys away where they belong when they are not being used.

Here are some things to keep in mind when organizing a child's environment:

- *Have a place in each room –the bedroom, the kitchen, dining room, living room, bathroom, garage, and so forth – for the child's few, carefully chosen belongings.*
- *Think carefully about family activities and the materials used, in all areas of the home, and arrange the environment to include the child.*
- *By the front door, have a stool to sit on to remove shoes and a place within reach to hang coats and place shoes. In the living room, have shelves for organizing a few of the child's books, toys, puzzles, or games.*
- *Don't put out too many items at one time. A few baskets or trays holding tools or toys that are being used at the moment are sufficient. Don't put too many items in each basket. (For example, if a child has 100 legos, that is too many for him to manage. Start out with 10 or 15 in the basket. This way he can learn how to completely put away the legos. As he wants more legos with which to build, more can be added to the basket. He gradually learns how to manage more and more legos)*

- *It is a good idea to rotate books and toys – taking out those that have not been chosen lately and removing them to storage for a time. A monthly rotation works well. An older child can help with this. This is done after observing what the child is actually using, and removing those things which are being ignored, or which have been outgrown. Be sure to leave the favorites!*

Furniture

Shelves are an important component of the child's environment. Shelves do not have to be expensive; they can be as simple as boards and bricks. Solid wood tables and stools, which allow the child to sit up straight with the feet flat on the floor for drawing, playing, and eating snacks are very important. Not only will good posture be developed, but also she will be better able to concentrate and focus in this position. (A Tripp Trapp chair is an adjustable alternative, allowing for the child's feet to be on a hard surface).

Small solid wood benches, useful next to the front door for removing shoes, in the bathroom for removing pants and reaching the sink, in the kitchen for reaching the sink are very important for the child's work and independence.

A low bed is preferred so she can easily climb in and out of it. A comforter makes it easy for the child to make her bed.

The Environment and the Mind

We must not only think of the quality, but the quantity. Visible posters, pictures, toys, etc. always affect the mind. It has been shown over and over in children's environments that cluttered shelves, which are visually blocked out by the adult, are a constant visual barrage for the young child, and can cause stress. Too many pictures and posters on the wall do the same. The Chinese art of placement, Feng Shui, teaches that clutter, even hidden under a bed or piled on top of bookcases can cause stress.

The same hold true for the sounds in the environment. With time the adult brain learns to block out the sound of a TV or radio, but a child is always aware of it. Sometimes a child can become upset by visual and auditory stimulus of which the adult is completely unaware!

A neat, attractive, enjoyable, organized, and uncluttered environment can help create a more peaceful life for the whole family.

Selecting Toys For the Home Environment

When picking out a toy for a child, imagine just what she will do with it. Does it invite purposeful activity? Decision-making? Imagination? For how long will my child play with it? Will it encourage the child to explore, to spend time with it?

Imagination is a wonderful tool of humans, but it cannot be created out of nothing. Creative imagination is based on, and directly related to, the quality of sensorial experiences in the real world. A rich imagination enables one to picture a solution (solving a puzzle, for example) and to work toward it. The more experience a child has with real information, purposeful activity, and solving problems, the more useful, creative, and effective her imagination will become.

Materials

There are special materials or sensorial puzzles in the 3 – 6 class, such as the “pink tower”, the “color tablets”, and the “sound boxes”; which give very clear experiences of important concepts such as “large and small”, “darker and lighter”, “loud and soft”, and so on. These sensorial materials are not necessary in the home, where parents can find other ways of introducing these experiences in the daily life of children – feeling the temperature of the bath water, exploring tastes while baking, and color or size with toys, clothes, etc.

Whether a toy is a “puzzle toy” with a specific way of using it, or an “open-ended toy” such as blocks and dolls, the child wants to know the procedures connected with it. We can show her where the toy is kept when it is not in use, how to carry it, and the basic possibilities for its use.

The most important result is that the child combines her mental faculties with the work of the hands, enjoys the experience of focusing and concentrating, and finds joy in the activity.

□ **Cooperative Games**

In environments where children work and play independently and cooperatively, they learn the most valuable kind of socialization – helping each other. In the home, or in the classroom, cooperative games help to lay this groundwork. In other games, we find that competitive play often stifles unity. Most competitive game cause players to feel isolated or left out. The action is secretive and the results can be hurt feelings or arguments. In cooperative games, children and adults feel good about each other because they enjoy sharing, helping each other, and making joint decisions. In short, the challenge shifts from defeating each other to helping each other. After a group of children or a family learns to play cooperative games, it becomes easy to change the rules of any other game to make it less competitive. We consider this real ‘socialization’ and preparation for positive interactions throughout life. (In addition to what you may find available through The Michael Olaf company, see also <http://cooperativegames.com/>)

□ **Blocks**

Blocks have been a favorite of children the world over forever. They can be made from simple stones, clay bricks, pieces of tree branches, or polished hardwoods. The attraction is that the imagination of the child is set free to create relationships between these physical objects. Many mathematical and geometric relationships and architectural concepts are discovered, and physics principles are discovered as the structure gets too tall or too heavy. The child can also work out personal problems by playacting with blocks, animal models, and little people. In our experience, next to doing real family work (helping with or independently doing household tasks), playing with blocks has been the greatest aid to developing concentration.

□ **Puzzles**

Puzzles provide visual discrimination practice as the child figures out exactly how the elements fit together visually, and eye-hand control as the pieces are fitted together. They teach the child that work/play is not just open-ended but can have a beautiful and logical structure. They more easily give practice in the beginning and ending of an activity and the satisfaction of completion. The progression of puzzles is first 1, 2, or 3 piece knobbed puzzles, then multiple-piece knobbed puzzles, simple jigsaw puzzles in frames with gradually increasing numbers of pieces, then cube puzzles, and regular cardboard jigsaw puzzles.

Just as a child is eager to know the exact techniques for using a kitchen tool, a woodworking tool, a gardening tool, or the technique of playing a musical instrument, she wants to know the exact ways to use “puzzle toys”. A short demonstration on the use of the toy or activity prepares the child to be successful in its use. The child also learns respect for the materials when they are

taught to use them properly. Playing with open-ended toys, such as dolls, blocks art materials, and so forth, is made infinitely richer by the child's knowledge of exact techniques in handling any toys or materials. We would be doing a child a disservice if we allowed her to use anything – blocks, a violin bow, a hand mixer – as a hammer, for example. This does not stifle creativity, but facilitates it!

Through the use of all good materials, the child learns how to think, to concentrate, to complete a train of thought and a cycle of activity, and to solve problems. She learns to bring the use of her body, and especially her hands, under the control of her will, to be self-disciplined. This is the foundation for the creativity of a professional artist or composer, and for the creativity of a child at any age.

Organizing and Rotating Toys

Toys should be kept in the area where the family lives, not only in the child's room. A cupboard in the kitchen can be made available to the child with pots, pans, and other items the child can use while parents are working in the kitchen. Adaptations can also be made in other rooms. Shelves are much more satisfying for storing toys than toy boxes. Shelves allow a child to see what is available to him so he may then choose with what he would like to work. When he is finished, it is then easy to put his work back on the shelf where it will be accessible to him the next time he wants to use it. Toy boxes encourage dumping of toys, show disrespect to the child's belongings, and display no order to the environment, as they tend to get lost and/or broken in a toy box.

Having order in the environment creates a feeling of security in the child, and trust in the environment. Baskets, trays, and small boxes neatly arranged on low shelves can be very helpful in creating this order. If the adult carefully and continually puts the pieces of puzzles or toys back in the basket and on the shelf in front of the child, she will eventually imitate and join in the activity. Sometimes the "putting away" into baskets is the most enjoyable part of play. If you watch a child, you will see which toys he plays with most and which ones just get dropped and forgotten. Try to keep only as many toys available to the child as can be kept neat and uncrowded, in baskets on a shelf.

Learning to Put Toys Away

Limiting the number of toys available at any one moment and having a place for every toy, helps with the task of teaching the child to put toys away. But most important is the example set by the others in the environment. In a Montessori community, this lesson is much easier than in the home because the teacher is dedicated to the child completely, all day long. She will constantly put things away, carefully, slowly, and as the child becomes aware of this, he naturally wants to learn to do this – just as he wants to learn everything else.

Of course, it is much easier to get into the habit of putting a toy away right away when it is obvious where it goes on the shelf. It is more difficult when all of the toys are out and all the shelves empty. This habit of putting toys away, if developed early, will be helpful in many ways throughout life. The parent can sometimes make a game of this by playing at "putting away" instead of making it a distasteful chore.

Teach by Teaching, not by Correcting

The most powerful tool parents have for sharing their way of life and their values is the example they set. In every waking moment of the child's life, especially in the first three years, she is learning and becoming more and more like those people she finds around her. She will imitate the way of walking, moving, talking, the vocabulary, the handling of objects, the emotions,

manners, taste, and the respect and consideration (or lack of) for others, and on and on. The first important thing we can do is to surround her with the kind of people we want her to emulate. These are her first teachers.

The second is to avoid correcting when the lesson can be taught in another way. (Of course, if a child reaches for a hot pan we correct!) For example, if a child is continually slamming the door very loudly, the best approach is to: 1) Note that the child needs to be shown how to close a door carefully and quietly. 2) Choose a neutral moment (which means not an emotionally charged moment when the adult is upset by the door slamming). 3) Give an amusing, exaggerated, and interesting lesson, showing the child how to close the door – turning the handle so carefully and slowly that there is no sound whatever. Try other doors, do it over and over, as long as it is being enjoyed by both.

With these lessons you can teach brushing teeth, putting away toys, pouring milk. Manners lessons, like saying “Please” and “Thank you”, come from the culture in which the child lives. We used to practice over a large bowl of popcorn, offering and thanking over and over and sometimes laughing hysterically at the end of the lesson, at the exaggerated and fun manners. When parents and children begin to spend more active time together the need for these lessons comes up often and can be enjoyed by both adult and child. And life becomes more and more pleasant.

Respecting Work and Concentration

One of the most important elements of Montessori philosophy is that of respecting the concentration of a child. When the child is engaged in something safe and purposeful (meaning an activity requiring effort of both the mind and body – not watching TV!) this is considered a child’s important “work” and the adult’s role is to respect and protect it.

“The first essential for the child’s development is concentration. It lays the whole basis for his character and social behavior. Praise, help, or even a look, may be enough to interrupt him, or destroy the activity. It seems a strange thing to say, but this can happen even if the child meekly becomes aware of being watched. After all, we too sometimes feel unable to go on working if someone comes to see what we are doing.”

“The teacher’s [and parents’] skill in not interfering comes with practice, like everything else, but it never comes very easily. What advice can we give to an interesting occupation: they should not be helped unnecessarily, nor interrupted, once they have begun to do something intelligent.”
--Dr. Maria Montessori