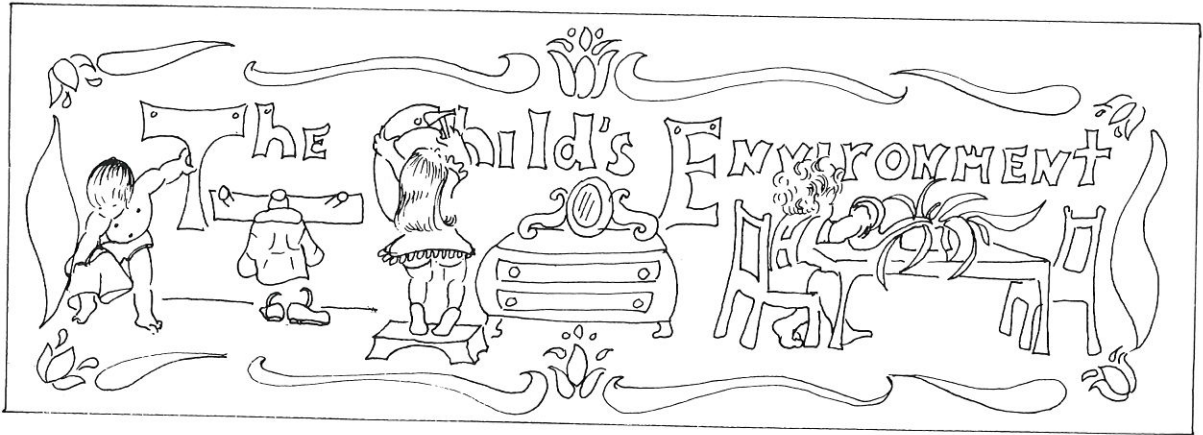


Montessori Talks to Parents I:



by Maria Montessori

The "prepared environment" concept characterizes Montessori's total approach to the child.

In the meantime, there is no environment into which the child fits because he lives in a world of adults. This inequity has certain characteristic consequences in the lives of modern children. For instance, because of the difference in size between the child and the objects that surround him, he sees no relationship between himself and them and cannot achieve a natural development.

If we had to live just one day in an environment such as the one we prepare for our children, I believe we also would find it painfully uncomfortable. We would have to waste all our energy in defending ourselves, battling always with the same words: "No, leave me alone, I don't want to!" We would end up by bursting into tears because there was no other means of defense. Yet mothers tell me: "That child is impossible! He doesn't want to get up, he won't nap even for a

little while, and he's always saying, 'I won't, I won't' No child should say that all the time!"

But if these mothers prepared an environment at home for the child that conformed to his size, to his energy and to his psychic faculties, the child would be at liberty and a great step would have been taken toward the resolution of the educational problem — the child would have his own environment.

A school, a place built for children, must have furniture and equipment scaled to the proper size and adapted to their physical strength, so that they can move it with the same ease with which we move the furniture in our homes.

Here, then, are fundamental principles: the furniture must be light and arranged in such a fashion that the child can easily move it, and the pictures must be hung at a level that permits the child to look at them

comfortably. We must apply these principles to all surrounding objects, starting with the rugs and ending with the vases, dishes and other such things. *The child must be able to use everything he comes across in the house and he must be able to do the ordinary tasks of everyday life — sweep, vacuum the rugs, wash and dress himself.* The objects surrounding the child should look solid and attractive to him, and the “house of the child” should be lovely and pleasant in all its particulars; for beauty in the school invites activity and work, as adults know that domestic beauty nourishes domestic unity. It is almost possible to say that there is a mathematical relationship between the beauty of his surroundings and the activity of the child; he will make discoveries rather more voluntarily in a gracious setting than in an ugly one.

Children intuit these things very well by themselves. A little girl from one of our schools in San Francisco went one day to visit a public school and immediately noticed that the desks were dusty. She said to the teacher, “Do you know why your children don’t dust and instead leave everything in a mess? Because they don’t have pretty dustcloths. I wouldn’t want to clean without them.”

The furnishings that the child will use must be washable. The motive for this is not just a hygienic one; the real reason is that washable furniture supplies the occasion for the kind of work children do very willingly. They learn to pay attention, wash off the marks and in time become habituated to being responsible for cleaning everything around them.

People always tell me to put rubber stops under the legs of the furniture to lessen the noise; I prefer the noise because it signals any abrupt motion. Children do not move in a very orderly fashion and they do not know how to control their movements very well; in contrast to ours, their muscles produce disordered movement precisely because they have not yet learned physical order and economy.

In the “house of the child” every abrupt motion reveals itself by the noise of the chair and the table, and finally the child becomes aware of his body. There must also be a certain number of fragile objects — glasses, plates, vases and so forth. Now certainly adults will exclaim, “Why! Put glasses in the hands of three- and four-year-old children! They will surely break them!” By this comment they place more importance on the glass than on the child; an object worth a few cents seems more precious than the physical training of their children.

In a house that is truly his, a child tends to be as well behaved as possible and seeks to control his movements; in this fashion, he starts on the road to perfection without external prodding. We can see a new joy and dignity in him, and sometimes an ineffable decorum, showing that the road is natural for him and that he loves it. Because, really, what lies ahead for the three-year-old child? Growth. He will become a man; we must do everything to help him perfect himself. In other words, we must exercise him in the things he must do, for exercise gives rise to development. The child is delighted by washing his hands not so much for the pleasure of washing himself as for the work that is necessary for completing an action; already action is life, and this is the source of all of his powers.

What should we do in the face of this life that is developing and that tries to perfect itself through work and energy? Often we impede its realization with all of our strength. In many schools, for example, desks and chairs are fixed to the floor. The children are lively and often their movements are clumsy, but it does not occur to them that this could ruin the furniture were it not fixed. By fixing the furniture we do achieve a certain order, but the children will never acquire order in their physical activity. We might give a child a metal cup or plate that he can throw to the floor without breaking, but by doing so, we have tempted him diabolically. Thus, we seek to hide that which is bad simply by not looking at it, while the only one truly involved, the child, cannot be held accountable for his inadequacies. And this child, beyond the fact that he will persist in his errors, will also be stymied in his natural development. The child who wants to do something by himself is completely cooperative and animated. If we see that he is struggling, we immediately step in to help him finish the task he started.

Perhaps the voice of temptation sounds like this: “You want to wash yourself and dress yourself, but don’t let it bother you; I am here and can do everything your heart desires.” The child, whom we have robbed of his own will, becomes difficult; we take this misbehavior into account and believe that by doing things for him we will do him some good.

We must think of what happens to the child who, for the first few years of his life, is closed up in a house where there is nothing but things that he must neither break nor soil, where he cannot exercise mastery over himself or learn the use of the common objects of daily life. He will be deprived of much necessary experience and his life will always manifest this lack.

There are also children whom no one ever succeeds in handling well. They are always restless and sullen, they never want to wash, and their parents leave them alone and never interfere. Everybody says that such parents are good and patient for putting up with such children every day. But is this really being good? What an erroneous idea of goodness!

Real goodness does not consist of putting up with every kind of aberration, but of seeking the means to avoid it; it consists of every act that extends to the child the possibility of living naturally. It consists of giving the child what he needs to live.

When we watch a child in an environment that is his and that evokes response in him, we see that he works by himself toward his own self-perfection. The right way is not only indicated by the objects he picks up, but by the possibility of his recognizing his own errors by means of these objects.

And what should we do?

Nothing.

We have exerted the effort to get him the things that he needs. Now we must learn to take ourselves in hand and watch from the sidelines, following him at a distance, neither tiring him with our intervention or abandoning him! He is always tranquil and self-sufficient while he is occupied with something that is very important to him. What remains for us to do other than to observe? □

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The Practical Life Exercises

by Margot R. Waltuch



Margot Waltuch outlines philosophy and practice of the "Practical Life Exercises," their categories of operation, and set up. Parents who often equate sandpaper letters in the home with implementing Montessori at home, can see perhaps a more natural kind of collaboration through the practical life exercises which spontaneously occur in a home setting as well as the classroom.

"A child's work," Dr. Montessori wrote, "is to create the man he will become. An adult works to perfect the environment but a child works to perfect himself." This distinction can be illustrated by looking closely at two people who are shoveling sand on a beach on a hot day. One is a man who is trying to fill a large barrel with sand' the other, a little boy who is filling a pail with sand, dumping it out, and then filling it again. If anyone offers to help the man, he readily hands over the shovel. But any efforts to help the little boy are resisted. He clings to his shovel because the work he is doing can be done only by himself. By constant repetition of motions, he is strengthening his muscles, perfecting his coordination, and gaining confidence in a particular skill. No one tells him that he has to shovel the sand; he is guided by a direction deep within his own nature.

Using the child's natural inclination as a point of departure, Dr. Montessori structured exercises for the classroom to help the child satisfy this need for meaningful activity. We call "Exercises of Practical Life" those daily performed activities which the adult carries out in order to maintain and restore proper conditions or relations. This, for the adult, is purely conservative and utilitarian. These exercises, for the adult, have an "outer aim." The very young child shows a strong urge to associate himself with these activities. He tries to take part spontaneously. He offers his help.

Why is he so strongly attracted to them? For the young child these activities have an important, personal function. They are truly constructive to himself. They are developmental, even creative, activities. When the child carries them out, he is totally engaged. Why?

1. These activities are easily understood from start to finish.
2. They have visible movements.
3. They give direction to his movements.
4. They have an attractive invitation to the child's will.
5. They lead to greater skill and perfection.
6. They lead to self-accepted discipline.
7. They create unity between thought, will, and action.

There are 4 distinct groups of Practical Life exercises:

1. *Care of the Person* (dressing, undressing, bathing, combing, etc.) The young child of 2½ or 3 has one thing to do, and that is, to build himself. First he has to take care of his person, of himself, and then reach out to the environment. In the beginning, he has to construct himself. Now we, to help the child become independent, can provide so that the child is not dependent on mother or someone else for dressing, undressing, taking care of his body, washing, bathing, or combing his hair — for all these things that concern his own person.

I know that preparations for all these different activities are not easy. They are involved, and take thought and time, looking for tiny materials suitable in size and shape for his tiny hand, or for his tiny body.

2. The second point is *Care of the Environment* — cleaning, washing, ironing, polishing, gardening, etc.

3. The third point is the *Development of Social Relations*: greeting, offering, accepting, apologizing, thanking — the “graces and courtesies.”

4. The fourth — and very important part of this group of exercises — is *Movement*: analysis and control of movement. Now all exercises involve this. We said earlier that exercises are attractive to a child because he moves, and moves perhaps more than he does with sensorial material. But here we have exercises that are essentially designed for this purpose: walking on the line, and the silence game.

The analysis of movement is bound up with economy of movement; *i.e.*, to perform only movement necessary for the purpose. This is really the highest degree of perfection. Greek dance movements and those in the Japanese dance are none other than a selection of the movements absolutely necessary in the analytical succession of actions. But all this is not confined to ART. It is a general principle which concerns every act of life.

There is an age when movements possess a fascinating interest, when the muscular and nervous apparatus responds to exercise — it is the age of infancy and early childhood.

We want to help the child to perform useful acts. We do not want to *serve* the child, we want to give help. Especially for parents of privileged classes who wait on their children, or in former times had servants to wait on their children (now the mother takes the place of the servant), they should be made clear of the danger of this servility, which puts obstacles in the way of the life that is unfolding. It leads to helplessness and lack of strength.

Practical life exercises go from easy to more complicated, from shorter to longer, and the longer ones are really very successive processes. Think of washing and ironing: this is a lengthy, complicated procedure. Sometimes it goes over two days. One day is for washing, not only those dirty little clothes, but other more attractive things — napkins, handkerchiefs, some with color, some with a flower, some with lace edges, washable grosgrain ribbon or linen or silk. These can be sprinkled with a little shaker, rolled up and stored overnight in a plastic bag on a windowsill or in the refrigerator. The next morning they are ready to be ironed, and folded, and put to use.

One morning when I was visiting a school, a little boy said, “Would you like some coffee?” I said yes, and he disappeared. It was about ten. I forgot all about him. When it was almost time to go home, he came from another room with a little tray. He had made coffee for me — from scratch. He had a little coffee grinder, a jar of beans, everything. It had taken almost an hour, but he made coffee.

Vegetable and fruit snacks are not more expensive than cookies. You can make celery slices, stuffed with filling, or a banana sliced and decorated with a raisin on top. You can crack eggs, boil water, boil eggs. You have a timer. Measuring and time both enter into

cooking. Hard-boiled eggs can be peeled, sliced, and put on a tiny cracker.

Gardening depends on the weather. But newspapers have regular features, and there are special magazines only for indoor gardening. We can have indoor gardens, animals and plants, calendars and weather charts. The children take care of these things as part of practical life, but they lead into other areas, such as numbers. Practical life is not a set of separate activities; it must be incorporated into the life of the class.

In Europe we had aprons for each activity. I think this came down from the Middle Ages, when each trade had its own costume: the baker, the shoemaker, the tailor, and so on. As you know, children like to dress up. At the moment a child puts on an apron, the activity has a beginning; when he takes it off, the activity ends. It has a special duration, with a preparation to do something well.

For shoe polishing, a child put on the apron and took a turn being “shoe shine man.” By extension, he found out that shoes are different; leather, patent leather, suede, cloth, and different materials need different treatment. We made samples of the materials and the children learned different materials and how to treat them. It was a process, rather than just an exercise.



from Waltuch collection

How can a parent follow through at home?

Parents come to understand that the children are trying to build themselves to become independent, independent from the person who feeds them, who clothes them. We should give them the chance to do it by themselves. Parents should encourage the child. The child as young as 4 can make his own bed, and loves to do it. But if the mother comes and says, "Oh, this is all crooked!" then it's finished. There should not be criticism. The effort alone, the will to do it is enough. It can be repeated another day. "Let's change the linen, let's do it together." And through the repetition, the child sees, perfects.

We are speaking of universal principles guiding the development of man. We must understand that it is these tendencies of man which govern his development, and that these tendencies must be realized and catered to.

The "aid to life" has to be related to the tendencies of man. These tendencies (just to name a few) of exploration, order, exactness, orientation, manipulation, repetition, work, govern the formation of man. And nowhere is there such a satisfactory outlet as practical life exercises, touching on all these necessary tendencies. So, the environment must be prepared for an

exploration of the life of the child, who has a need of self-control and coordinated movement.

The child, entering an environment which he has to explore, should find modes of activity, modes that are familiar to him, those he sees around him in the home.

The prepared environment for the child from 3-6 needs those exercises of practical life, because they help the child to adapt to his environment. They allow him a continual possibility of repeated steps, which eventually will perfect his performance.

Children need help from parents in tidying their things. They have too many things and toys, and we have to be sure that there are not too many to manage. They need their place to sleep, to eat, to be active, and all this relates to the child's striving for independence. The wise parent lets his child feed himself even if it is messy, dress himself even if he is slow. Parents must respond to the child's own rhythm with as little direction as possible.

Let me end with a quotation from Maria Montessori which she stated in general, but which can be certainly applied to this part of "Practical Life": "Childhood constructs with what it finds. If the material is poor, the construction is also poor. In order to build himself, the child has taken by chance whatever he finds in the environment." □

