

Montessori Parenting:

*Applying Montessori Principles in
Raising Caring and Capable Children*

by Jonathan Wolff

Montessori education is founded on universal principles of human development and learning. The underlying principles and practices that help children in a Montessori classroom become competent and capable learners can also be employed by parents in their homes.

1. Observation Brings Understanding

Montessori teachers spend time every day observing children in order to understand their individual and developmental needs. Montessori based much of her educational method and materials on information gathered about children through extensive observation.

Stand back and observe children at play, by themselves or with other children, provides us with invaluable knowledge about their needs; their interests and talents; their emotional and social needs; what sparks their curiosity.

2. Teach Teaching not Correcting

Human beings learn best when they are shown what to do, what's expected of them, what the positive choices are. Montessori teachers tend not to correct or criticize children for inappropriate behavior or failure to accomplish a learning task. Instead, they present and re-present practical alternatives and possibilities. They show the child ways to succeed.

At home the concept of "positive presentation" can take the form of "Here's how I use a napkin to clean my face," "When I want Mommy to give me a glass of milk, here is what I say."

3. Modeling and Mentoring Are the Best Ways to Change Behavior

Montessori spoke about the "absorbent mind" of the young child. Children soak up whatever they see, hear, feel, and touch in their home and school environments. When children see adults communicating respectfully and kindly, they tend to do the same. When they see their parents reading and discussing what they read instead of watching TV,

they tend to develop a love of language and literature. When they see everyone in the family pitching in to help before or after dinner, they want to be part of the team.

Parents who make conscious and planned efforts to model specific attitudes and behaviors for their child, at the time when their child demonstrates a need or desire to learn, find themselves role-playing more and lecturing less, with far better results.

4. Children Pass through Specific "Sensitive Periods" of Learning During Which They Are Highly Motivated and Receptive

Montessori observed that children move through periods in which the windows of interest in a particular subject or motivation to learn specific skills are wide open. She identified sensitive periods for language, math, sensorial, and moral development.

By observing children's emotional, social, intellectual, and physical responses to specific situations and settings, parents likewise can get a sense of their child's current needs, interests, and issues. A three year old who is tending to push or hit other children when frustrated is ready to receive role-played lessons on using language to get what he wants. A four or five year old may be ready to understand that in sharing with others, "they will share with me." The seven year old may be receptive to a presentation and discussion on the power of words to heal or hurt others.

Observing the child's interests, issues, and challenges invariably shows us where we need to focus our modeling and mentoring energies.

5. Control of Error is Built into the Learning Process

Most Montessori learning activities have some type of control of error or self-correcting feature. Children learn more efficiently and with less frustration when the environment, not the authority figure, structures their choices — when they see a linkage between their choices



of behavior and the resulting consequences.

Likewise, parents do well to build components of natural or logical consequence into their disciplinary practices. "If you throw sand, it might end up in someone's eyes" (a warning of natural consequence). "If you leave your toys in the driveway again, I will have to pick them up myself and you will not be able to play with them tomorrow" (logical consequence).

6. Isolation of Stimulus or Learning Objective

Observe a Montessori learning activity, and you will note that only one learning objective, concept, or skill is highlighted at a time. The Color Tablets, for example, which were designed to help children identify and name common hues, present only a color variable; there is no change of shape or size or texture. We want to draw the child's attention to only the color stimuli.

In helping children improve their behavior, parents should select a single, isolated skill or issue to present and re-present until it is mastered or at least improved. Beware of loading children with too many behavioral tasks to accomplish. If using language and not physical leverage is the current priority issue, then we may want to hold off on the table manners objective until the child has a better grasp on the first priority.

Summary

In a nutshell, we've identified six principles that Montessori teachers utilize to help children learn and grow. All of these can be translated and implemented by parents to support their children in their home environment.

1. Observe and understand the child.
2. Communicate your expectations positively.
3. Model the desired behaviors.
4. Watch for and honor "sensitive periods" of need and interest..
5. Establish natural or logical controls of error/consequences.
6. Focus on one task/issue at a time.

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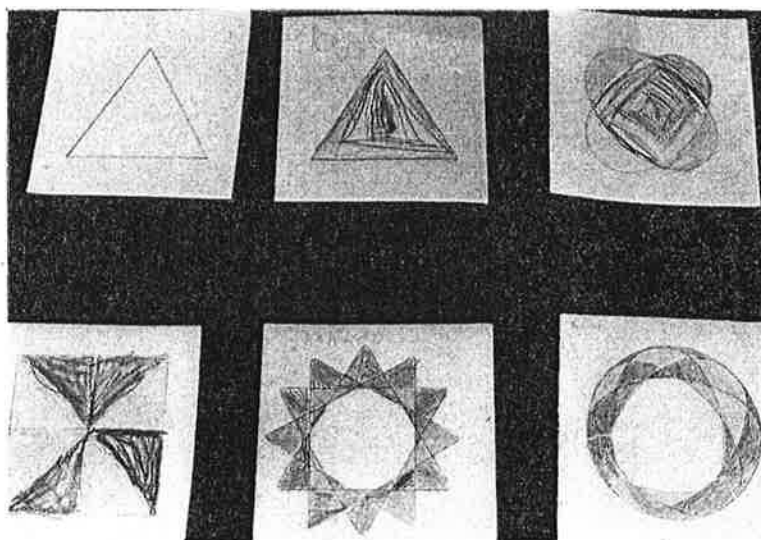
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PERFECTING THE MOTOR SKILLS WITH THE METAL INSETS

The child in a Montessori classroom learns to control a pencil by filling in outlines—an activity which does not weary him because he enjoys it. To make the outline, he uses equipment known as the Metal Insets. Each inset represents a different geometric shape. After selecting a figure and tracing it on paper, the child fills in the outline with a colored pencil of his own choosing.

At first his strokes are erratic and often extend beyond the outline. By degrees they become more accurate and uniform. Progress in muscular control can be noted by comparing the child's designs from week to week and from year to year. Eventually he makes more intricate designs by superimposing two or three other shapes on the original figure. When colored, this effort resembles a stained glass window.



The designs shown above, made by children using the Metal Insets, illustrate various stages of progress in this activity. Although work with the Metal Insets gives the child an opportunity to experiment with color and design, it is not considered creative art. Crayons and paints are not used for this activity because the purpose is always pencil control.