

Montessori Messages about Practical Life Activities in the Home

by Sue Pritzker , Dawn Cowan and Merri Baehr Whipps

Providing Secure Boundaries and Clear Expectations

Sue Pritzker

At a parent education event, the evening ended with a sense that families would like more keys as to how to joyfully engage their children of all ages in practical activities at home. How can families witness some of the same joy, responsibility, engagement and follow-through of caring for the home environment as we speak of children having at school?

Perhaps we can start with these thoughts from Maria Montessori:

“The adult must recognize that he and she must take second place, endeavor all they can to understand the child, and to support and help him in the development of his life. This should be the aim of mother, father, teacher.”

The most fundamental step that families need to take to assist their child in their growth and development is to have a conscious plan for family life. The family unit must be strong and stable if it is to be a touchstone for the child as she navigates her way beyond family life. Margaret Stephenson, who worked and trained with Maria Montessori and who brought the Montessori movement to the US in the early 1960's, described the task of the family in relation to the child, “Offering a secure environment is the birthright of the child and the parents should be totally committed to this task.”

Ms. Stephenson explains that the adult need not be accepting of the child in every situation, but must offer love and security and must set the rules for how the family, as a social unit, lives in harmony by offering respect and clear expectations for family life. The rules in a family must be weighed and measured and when set, they must be capable of being achieved. She adds: “even the smallest child can find and cherish his place, can witness the behavior of the other family members, can see their acceptance of the rules, can note their relationships to one another and can begin to grow and to develop within this loving, secured environment.”

Ms. Stephenson was not shy in suggesting that, “the firm NO to the child for inappropriate behavior, for actions which might harm him becomes something that the child can accept and respond to, without arguing, (which never should be allowed), without a temper tantrum (entered into to get his own way and from which the child must never be allowed to win), but a NO which follows a consistent pattern.”

Every child needs order and routine in their lives, and providing such may be the biggest challenge that we face as parents. With the distractions and demands of both

professional and social life, it is easy for us to be distracted (by an assortment of electronic devices) and to forget the basic requirement of parenting—giving your undivided attention to your child and to family activity. Your attention provides the order and expectation your child needs to feel secure.

Ms. Stephenson continues, “The no’s must always be for the same situations and the yes’s the same. Then the child knows where he stands, in relation to his behavior and actions and to his family’s responses”.

To not offer a child the help they need to conform to the expectations of his society (whether the family, the classroom, the neighborhood) is to cheat him out of an understanding about HOW to act. By behaving well and following the family rules, the child has the opportunity to feel the same success they feel when accomplishing a new task or skill. The rules do not have to be the same in the home and in the school, but they need to be consistently respected and enforced in each environment to impress the child. It is an art to train children to have acceptable social behavior and to accept the rules of society—this art requires a gentle touch coupled with firmness that recognizes we want the people we love to be and do well. If we accept this challenge, as parents, we do our children harm when we accept conduct which will lead the child to be chastised by his peers or social groups.

How does this connect to Practical Life? As teachers, we face the problem that children who do not experience these limits and boundaries at home will have trouble finding their place at school and they will spend their time searching for the boundaries. Without the “centering” that comes with a consistent, secure environment, a child will not attach to work that is designed to meet her needs. The secure child will be attracted to the activities in their environment and they will take joy in being a contributing member of their “class” society through their efforts to help and respect each other. To be exact, when we have children (and parents) doing exactly what they like, without regard to its effect on their social group, we have a chaotic rather than peaceful existence.

From Ms. Stephenson, “ And so the art of Montessori thinking in the home, which we have to practice if our children are to make the most of their Montessori education, is to help them understand the rules of life in the society at home and to keep these rules. It is also to cooperate with the teachers and the schools in making the children aware of the fact that school and classroom have their appropriate rules and that we expect our children to keep them also. Parents and teachers have to form an alliance, because both are involved in helping the child help himself, and the fullness of that help can be given best by both together.”

Incorporating Practical Life into the Home Environment

Dawn Cowan

Following up on providing a home environment with secure boundaries and clear expectations, we want to continue our conversation about how to incorporate Practical Life into the home environment.

Children have an innate desire to belong to and become a meaningful part of their family and culture. We see this in the activity of the toddlers who want to insert themselves into the tasks of those around them and claim a portion of the work for themselves. The child who wants to stand on the stool and stir the batter with his parents or fold a towel together reveals this deep desire to learn the tasks of the family.

As adults, our work in these moments is to resist the understandable urge to amuse the child with a toy or other distraction so we can complete the housework efficiently. Instead, we can endeavor to shift our perspective from product to process and try to see the situation from the viewpoint of the child. We can recognize that a child's desire to help with a chore is no different than a child's early attempts at reading. With reading, the adult more often understands the need to slow down, have patience, and proceed with encouragement. The same goes for Practical Life activities.

The messages we send to our young children about their place in our families and how we welcome them into this work lays the foundation for all our years together with our child. We can slow down, smile, be patient while she picks up one end of the towel, drops it, and then works to have both in hand before folding it together. It's less about getting the laundry done in that moment because, after all, there will always be more laundry; it's about respecting the child's efforts and process and giving the message that these are supported by the family.

As the child grows, we can continue to make room for spontaneous efforts of help with family chores. Often, 3- and 4-year-olds will simply see something out of order in the environment and choose to remedy the situation, such as moving errant shoes to the closet. They also begin to explore the work of the family routines such as setting the table for dinner. Placing napkins on the table while mom sets out the cups can happen as long as everything is accessible for the child. At this age, when possible, it is advisable to invite the child to help in a specific way and then let this be the child's choice.

One day a child may welcome the invitation to set the table and another decline, and through it all we must trust in the child's inner desire to make a contribution. To an extent, it's fine to allow this exploration of their own will as it provides the foundation for later participation. If the child declines, simply model setting the table yourself. Chances are, your child will stay close by and observe. Very likely, they might simply set out the napkins at some future time without being asked.

As adults, we are modeling not only the practical life activity but also the attitude about the activity. Can we find joy in the tasks of daily life or do our children only hear us complain about undone chores or our own dislike of cleaning? Has your child observed you cleaning your room? Are professional cleaning services doing too much of the work in your household?

There are many options when it comes to the precious family time in the evenings and over the weekends. It's helpful for parents to know that, in the right tone of voice, cleaning the bathroom can be presented as just as exciting an option as a trip to the zoo. Getting out the unusual brushes, taking down the shower curtain, conversing about the purpose of the items in a bathroom cabinet, sweeping and mopping, and all the associated activities are full of points of interest for a young child as well as the feeling of working closely with a parent to help the household. The child may go in and out of the activity but will probably be more in than out. Again, if we relax our expectation about the product, allow the child to participate at their own level, and have the time to spend, then we are less apt to experience adult frustration.

As the child moves into the Elementary years, we can elevate their own awareness of the importance of their personal contributions. Based on their own experiences in the home, the child will have an understanding of many of the basic jobs. At this age, we can now come to a more formal agreement and give the child a degree of choice, i.e. 'What part of preparing for dinner will be your responsibility?' Once this has been decided, then the child must be helped to understand their contribution is essential. "We can't sit down for dinner without napkins. What help do you need to get this done?" No pleading and no anger, just a clear message of intention and an offer of support.

One key in creating a positive culture of practical life in the family is to honor effort. Is it important that the window is still smudged or is the importance in the fact that the child completed the steps independently and endeavored to make their home a more beautiful place? On a different day, a parent might give a more specific lesson about how to really make the windows gleam, but in the moment it is usually best to allow the child to feel satisfaction and leave the criticism or feedback for another moment.

As the child grows older and more confident, chances are that they will notice the imperfections on their own and seek advice from their elders about how to best do the job. If we put ourselves in the place of the child and imagine what it would feel like to have a partner or family member routinely react critically to our efforts to help, it's easy to gain the perspective that can best inform our words and gestures.

As children move into the adolescent years, if they've had this foundation of feeling the importance of their part in the family functioning then they are well-prepared to step into a more adult-like role. They assume the need for their daily and weekly part in caring for the household. As at all ages, they will feel best about contributions that are more difficult than when they were younger, which involve more skills. This is a good time for project work that involves a higher level of skill and responsibility, such as painting the house, mowing the lawn, cooking an entire family meal, and changing the oil in the car. At first, an adult must work side-by-side the adolescent, clearly modeling the skills and offering all the needed information while making it clear that the teenager will soon be working on their own. This is also an age when making money and having one's work validated by someone other than the parent are powerful motivators. Getting paid by acquaintances (to babysit, mow lawns, stock shelves, produce arts and crafts, remove moss from the roof) meets many developmental needs for the teenager.

By offering and modeling purposeful work with a spirit of support and joy we create the atmosphere for practical life cooperation and participation in the home.

Obstacles to Practical Life

Merri Baehr Whipps

The foundation for children to successfully engage in Practical Life activities at home is comprised of the following: the importance of secure boundaries, clear expectations, the child being a meaningful part of the family, and parents modeling positive attitudes toward the work. Let's look at four minor obstacles that can stand in the way.

If a household activity is too hard or too easy it can be an obstacle for the child's participation. It is important for the adult to take some time to work next to the child and observe which aspects are engaging, and then build upon that by going to the next level or starting at ground zero with an aspect the child seems to be unaware of.

For example, a four-year-old helping to prepare the lettuce for the salad might be most intrigued with washing each leaf—and might need a next point of interest such as turning each leaf over to wash the opposite side, or how to adjust the force of the water from the tap. An older elementary child who is engaged by flavor might be asked to pair the lettuce leaves with complimentary ingredients and a dressing of their choice. An adolescent might be ready to follow a recipe to make a dressing—or might need the initial lesson on how to wash lettuce leaves if they didn't get that lesson when they were younger.

It can be a major point of frustration to assume the child's level of knowledge, as each person's set of experiences and level of consciousness with a particular task is so unique. Montessori Guides call those little aspects of learning "points of interest"—acknowledging that a person will readily learn and remember those points that are sincerely "of interest" to them.

As you probably know from waiting for a three year old to get his shoes on by himself, often the adult's impulse is to just "do it myself" so that the waiting time is eliminated. Being in a hurry is a common obstacle to allowing practical life activities a presence in family life. One possible solution is to break the task into smaller bits, some of which you ask the child to help with and some of which you do yourself, so that the wait time is shortened. In the case of putting on shoes, it might be "You get your toes in and I'll get your heel in" or "You choose one shoe to put on and I'll do the other one." But when it's possible, it is luxurious to just wait and watch, allowing your child to do as much as he possibly can. And in the watching, you'll probably become aware of some points of interest which would be helpful to your child.

Montessori wrote, "Teach teaching, not correcting", and cautioned us all to focus on sharing with children the right way to do something rather than admonishing them for something done wrong. How easy it is to fall into patterns of ignoring what a child is doing until something goes wrong, when a little advance work can provide a clear model at an emotionally neutral time (thus easier for the child to happily absorb the information). "Watch how I wash this dirty glass, then you can try it" is much more effective than "This glass is still dirty; you aren't doing a good job." The exception to this is when harm might occur if a quick intervention does not happen, e.g. "Wait! I must show you how to hold that knife!" and "No, you may not hit others." But even regarding these situations, it is ideal to find a time to share a lesson on how to hold a knife, and how to say "I am angry!" when you need to.

And finally, there is the opposite obstacle to correcting, that of praise and rewards. Alfie Kohn says, "That's right. There are at least 70 studies showing that extrinsic motivators—including A's, sometimes praise, and other rewards—are not merely ineffective over the long haul but counterproductive with respect to the things that concern us most: desire to learn, commitment to good values, and so on. Another group of studies shows that when people are offered a reward for doing a task that involves some degree of problem solving or creativity—or for doing it well—they will tend to do lower-quality work than those offered no reward...."

"Positive feedback that is perceived as information is not in itself destructive and indeed can be quite constructive, educationally speaking. And encouragement— helping people feel acknowledged so that their interest in a task is redoubled—is not a bad thing. But most praise given to children takes the form of a verbal reward, which can have the same destructive impact as other rewards: it feels controlling, it warps the relationship between the adult and the child—and between the child and his or her peers—and it undermines interest in the task itself." So as the child in the home does something helpful to the practical life of the family, such as sweeping up the spill or making a dish of food for dinner, we are wise to acknowledge their positive contribution and the gratefulness we feel, while steering clear of praise that invites them to feel we are surprised they can help or are pressuring them to always help in that way.

May we all reach that ultimate goal of growing old with adult children who are able to attend to a task with focus, attentive to the points of interest (details) involved, who feel confident in applying themselves to a task and patient with themselves in the face of error, and find internal satisfaction in problem solving. Now *that's* what Practical Life is all about!

Montessori Messages is the newsletter for Childpeace Montessori School in Portland, Oregon. Sue Pritzker is head of school. Dawn Cowan is the Admissions and Program Director for elementary. Merri Baehr Whipps is the Admissions and Program Director for toddler and early childhood.

Brought to you by the Oregon Montessori Association.

The Oregon Montessori Association is a group of schools and individuals who support vibrant Montessori education in Oregon and Southwest Washington...and beyond.

Visit www.oregonmontessori.com