

## *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!

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*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.*

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# OMA *FORZA VITALE!*

September 27, 2011



## *Bringing Montessori to Teen Parents*

By Meredith Crandall Brown

One Friday evening a little over a year ago, I turned on OPB and was transfixed by that week's Portland City Club speaker. Dennis Morrow was talking about his work with homeless youth and teen parents through the organization Janus ([www.janusyouth.org](http://www.janusyouth.org)). I had joined the Board of the OMA that year with the intention of doing some sort of outreach program. We had formed a new committee and had some big ideas, one being to share parenting skills from the Montessori perspective with parents not involved with a school. When I was a guide I really enjoyed sharing our approach during conferences and casual conversation, feeling any help at home was of great benefit not just to the child but to the whole family. However, I couldn't help but feel we were preaching to the choir. My desire to participate on the board, as well as my goal for the Outreach Committee, was to get beyond what I felt to be a Montessori bubble.

When I heard Dennis Morrow speak I had already been in touch with the Multnomah County Library and was in the process of setting-up free public talks with them, but felt we would be reaching a similar cross-section of parents as those who already had their children in a Montessori school. I wanted to bring Montessori to a more "at risk" population. Janus Youth Programs seemed a great place to start, as their approach to helping people help themselves resonated with Montessori. I got in touch with their Insights Teen Parent Program, which has been providing parenting education and support services to teens for over 30 years through home visits and support groups; they offer a wide range of support focusing on child development, domestic violence, homelessness and foster care involvement for teen parents or their children ([www.insightstpp.org](http://www.insightstpp.org)).

I introduced myself through email to one of their coordinators and was pleasantly surprised by their quick response. Over the past year we have been developing a relationship. Initially, Cathy Dorner and Ursula Melvin gave a more traditional talk on toys, a topic identified by the Insights coordinators as particularly relevant to their parents. Since then I have gone twice this year; first giving a talk on observation and the

second time facilitating a playgroup. The parents bring their children to the meetings, so I brought my younger one-year-old son along too, finding him to be a great conversation starter, as well as giving me the opportunity to model some of the things I was talking about. For example, discipline. We had a consequential conversation about how to deal with a situation that arose when a 3-year old boy playing a toy piano suddenly found himself surrounded by three little toddlers all wanting to bang on it at the same time. I demonstrated how to redirect the other children to something else until he was done. Even the breakdown of the word “redirecting” was educational. During another conversation I was joking with one of the dads about being silly when nobody is watching and how ridiculous we must look as we goof around with our children. I could tell from his laugh and sparkle that this was a highlight of parenting for him. He shared that he had begun to really bond with his daughter and was no longer intimidated when he was alone with her.

This opportunity for relaxed conversation came in handy later on in the group when I was touching on language development. I asked if any of them read to their kids. The dad I had been laughing with earlier said he didn't because he has ADD. It was then easy to tie in how despite his own experience, books can be a fun, even silly time with your kids, and also a great thing to do when you don't know *what* to do with your child. If he found he was having trouble, he didn't have to read them, he could make up his own stories or simply talk about the pictures. He really liked this idea and we talked about where he could find some board books in the children's section of the library. At times the parents tune-out, but when I can see an idea settling in their minds of lasting impact, the other periods of disinterest feel completely worthwhile.

My work with Insights, though just starting, has been very satisfying. Their needs change each six-week rotation, but currently they would like me to be a consistent participant, developing a relationship with the parents by hosting one group each session. Even after two visits I can see the benefits of this approach. I was able to have some follow-up with a mother who had attended both of the groups I led. It was fun to see and discuss how much her child had grown in two months and to have the beginning of some sort of relationship. I am not a trained social worker, but my experience as a guide and parent seems to be adequate preparation for my level of involvement in their young lives. It feels wonderful to bring the common sense, compassionate approach of Montessori to a group of people who might otherwise never have the opportunity hear it.

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# Handling the Holidays – A guide for parents



For many of us, the holidays are an intense time. For children, this is especially true. The following list of time-tested tips can help you guide your child through the holiday season.

## Maintain familiar routines

Children create internal order in their minds through the external order around them. By adhering as closely as possible to established routines, you can help your child to weather the irregular schedules and new stimuli of the holiday season. Give special consideration to bedtimes, waking-up times, meal scheduling and naptimes.

## Prepare for success

Before a holiday outing, family dinner, or other new situation, consider your child's needs carefully to avoid unexpected surprises. Will there be food he can eat, or should you bring food for him? Will he need a nap, and is there a place to nap? Will there be games he can play with, or will you need to bring a bag of his favorite toys and books? Some simple preparations will increase your child's comfort in new situations, including contacting the host/hostess and finding out what their expectations of your child will be.

- *"There won't be many toys or books at Aunt Sally's house. You can fill your backpack with your favorite games and books so you'll have lots of fun things to do. She has a big, bright living room, and you can play with your toys there."*

## Set your child's expectations

Children benefit from knowing in advance what is expected of them, and even young toddlers can understand a very brief description of an upcoming social occasion. When setting your child's expectations, describe who, what, when, where and why. You can also follow up with questions for your child to help them further understand what will be expected of them.

- *"Tonight we'll be having dinner at Grandma Judy's house. It will take us a long time to drive there, so let's choose some books for the car ride. You'll get to see your cousins Alice and Mark, and your Aunt Amy and Uncle Matt. There aren't many toys at Grandma's house, so we'll choose some of yours to take with us. You can also play with Alice and Mark"*
- *"Do you remember Grandma Judy? She's so excited to see you tonight. What games will you play with Alice and Mark?"*
- *"When we're sitting at the table having dinner, that's a good time for you to eat quietly with us and use your best table manners. If you need anything, you can ask me quietly – I'll be right next to you".*
- *"When Grandpa and Grandma arrive, they'll each want to give you a big warm hug. After that, you can ask them if you can take their coat and hang it in the closet for them, like I showed you. They'll like that very much".*
- *"You'll be receiving some presents tonight. It's very exciting, isn't it? It's also important to say "Thank you very much" to every person who gives you a present. Let's practice. You give me a present. Thank you very much, Micah! Now, I'll give you a present. What can you say back to me?"*

## Set a good example

Even the most patient parent can experience frayed nerves during the hectic holiday season. However, it's also important to remember that children take their cues from the adults around them. Children will also follow your example with regard to food intake, greetings, pleases and thank yous, and other social aspects. By remaining a calm demeanor, and modeling how you'd like your child to behave, you set clear expectations for their behavior. For more formal social situations, consider role-playing with your child so that she knows what her expected behavior should be. This will also lessen your child's tension due to unfamiliar settings and people.

- *"I'm just going to have one scoop of mashed potatoes. I want to have room for dessert!"*
- *"Today's going to be a really busy day. I'll make sure I have some quiet moments so that I can feel relaxed. Would you like to come sit quietly with me?"*

## Involve your child

Children love to be a part of the holiday bustle, and by including them you can create special memories as well as keeping them productively occupied. Consider your child's ability level when assigning tasks, and explain exactly what you want them to do. This can include modeling slowly and clearly the exact movements they will use to successfully complete tasks.

- *"I'm so glad you want to set the table! I know you'll make it look beautiful. First you have to carry each plate to the table, one at a time, and put it in front of each chair. I'll show you how. I'm going to walk slowly, and use two hands to hold each plate".*
- *"Now it's time for the forks. The forks go on this side of the plate. You can use your thumb, like this, to see where to put the fork. You can put one fork next to every plate, just like this. You do the next one, then I'll take another turn".*
- *"When we wrap presents, we have to make sure we cut the right amount of paper. I'll show you how, and then you can measure. Then you measure again, and then you cut along the line. It's called 'measure twice, cut once'"*

## Balance healthy eating with occasional indulgence

Holiday feasts are frequently filled with sugary, calorie-dense dishes, and children's bodies are especially sensitive to these foods. Help children learn how to limit their consumption by offering appropriate choices, setting boundaries, and limiting access to overly-tempting foods.

- *"Would you like a slice of apple pie, or a cookie?"*
- *"During the holidays, it's fun to eat some special foods, as well as the healthy foods we usually eat".*
- *"It's sometimes hard to say no to yummy food, so I'm putting this back in the pantry so we can make good choices. I'll bring them back down later when our guests arrive, and we can have a few each so everyone can enjoy them".*

## Select holiday activities carefully

When deciding which holiday invitations to accept or activities to do, as much as possible consider how your child will react in those circumstances. This ranges from shopping trips to the mall, to holiday parties, to large family gatherings. Balance what you know of your child's personality and habits with the adult duties required of you during the holiday season.

## Remain focused on deeper meaning

With the commercialization of the holiday season, parents are more concerned than ever about offering their child a balanced experience, with both the fun of gift-giving and the meaning of the season.

**Limit presents** Give one special gift instead of a large selection from a list. This helps children learn to feel satisfied with quality, and not quantity.

**Give presents a context** Discuss gift-giving with your child in simple terms. This is one way that people show they are thinking of us. Handmade or simple presents are given with as much care and love as a large, expensive present.

**Create a donation ritual** You can engender in your child an appreciation for their own circumstances, and a desire to help others, by creating a simple donation ritual every year. Select a charity or organization to which you would like to donate, and involve your child in selection and distribution of your donation.

- *"Giving presents is one way to show people that we care about them. What are some other ways? I'll think of one. You can give a big, warm hug. Can you think of some ways we can show people we love them?"*
- *"We're lucky that we have so many nice things. We have yummy food, a warm bed, and lots of toys. There are lots of children who don't have those things. Let's think of some things we could do for them so that they have a nice Christmas, too".*
- *"One of the nicest things we can do when someone gives us a present is to write a thank you card. Let's write some thank you together. You can tell me what to write, and then you can sign your name at the bottom." (if child is not yet a writer)*

## Further Reading

**Unplug the Christmas Machine: A Complete Guide to Putting Love and Joy back into the Season**

by Jo Robinson and Jean Staeheli, Harper Paperbacks, 1991

ISBN: 9780688109615