

Preparing the Environment

From Susan Mayclin Stephenson

Michael Olaf Montessori

***Many children in the USA have too many toys!
So what do we get for them for the holidays?***

Children want, children need, their parents time and attention. Recently there have been many 1-minute bedtime story type books on the market; what is that message to families? And toys that are advertised for children to use all by themselves alone in their room, fantasy toys where children can create a perfect world where there are many people who share their daily lives! Or electronic items where they learn to turn to a machine instead of other humans for happiness. Or plastic toys that give the message that children are not worth the real thing or the best quality. Where is this heading?

Each year the Michael Olaf Montessori Company has reduced the number of items they carry for children, focusing on better and better quality items that families can use together, or that teach about the real world of plants, animals and humans, and the beautiful world of the arts.

The following text is adapted from the Michael Olaf publications, Please feel free to share anything on this page with friends, teachers, family, anyone who wants the very best for the next generation.

Preparing the Environment

Constant preparation and adaptation of the environment to the ever-changing needs and tendencies of growing children is essential in the Montessori method of raising and educating children. The first consideration is physical safety, and then the proper support for free movement, exploration, making choices, concentrating, creating, completing cycles—all of which contribute to the optimum development of the child.

Natural materials instead of plastic, and attention to simplicity, muted colors, beauty, all contribute to the mental and physical health and self-respect of the child.

Reflecting the Child's Culture and Introducing the World

It is important that the environment reflect the child's heritage but also introduce the world. Look for items that are made by local artisans, or make them with your children, explore ethnic neighborhoods.

Make your home a unique reflection of your own unique part of the world. Include music, books, foods, crafts, stories from your parents and grandparents lives, but also include the same elements of cultures from around the world so your child learns that everyone is connected and he is a member of an international community.

Birth to Three

When parents are getting ready for the first child, they will be overwhelmed by ads on what they "need" for that child. It seems that these ads are aimed at selling things far more than providing what is really good for the child. Many items are not only over stimulating for the young child (too many objects, uncomfortably bright colors) but they hamper the natural development of important abilities such as language (pacifiers) and movement (cribs, swings, and high chairs) and even sometimes can be dangerous (walkers and off-gasses from plastic).

A simple, natural, and gentle environment, that encourages feelings of safety, and encourages the child to communicate with others and to move—that is the superior environment for the child from birth to three..

Safety

A child will develop more fully—mentally, emotionally, and physically—when she is free to move and explore an ever-enlarging environment. But in order to give the child this wonderful freedom, we must explore the home or day care environment with a fine-tooth comb. When a child is free to leave his floor bed and to move about his room, and later the other rooms—careful attention must be paid to covering plugs, taping wires to the wall or floor, removing poisonous plants and chemicals, and removing any objects that could harm the child. As the child begins to crawl quickly and to walk, the adults must continue to childproof the house.

General Environment Principles

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

(1) **Participation in Family Life:** Even from the very first days invite the child into the life of the family. In each room—the bedroom, kitchen, dining room, living room, front hall, and so forth.

(2) **Independence:** The child's message to us at any age is "Help me to do it myself." Supporting this need shows respect for and faith in the child. Think carefully about family activities in all areas of the home, and arrange each space to support independence. A coat tree, or low clothing rod or hook wherever the child dresses or undresses (front hall, bathroom, bedroom, etc.); a stool or bench for removing shoes and boots; inviting shelves for books, dishes, toys.

(3) **Belongings:** This brings up a very important point. It is too much for anyone to care for or enjoy belongings when there are too many out at one time. In preparing the home environment for a child, have a place to keep clothing, toys, and books that are not being used.

(4) **Putting Away & The Sense of Order:** "Discipline" comes from the same word as "disciple" and our children become disciplined only by imitating us; just as we teach manners such as saying "thank you" by modeling this for our children instead of reminding, we can teach them to put away their books and toys only by gracefully and cheerfully doing it over and over in their presence. People are always amazed at how neat and beautiful a child's environment can be with the right guidance.

The Environment & The Absorbent Mind

During the first 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. If our children are in a childcare setting or an infant community we must exact the same high standards.

Quality and beauty of the environment and of books and materials are very important in attracting, satisfying, and keeping the attention of the child. If the child is exposed to beautiful mobiles, posters, rattles and toys, made of wood and other natural products, as an adult she will help create a world with the same high standards.

Toys, rattles, puzzles, tables, and chairs—made of wood—develop an appreciation for nature and quality and protect the child from unsafe chemicals that are found in many synthetic materials.

Pictures on the wall, hung at the eye-level of the child, can be beautiful, framed art prints, or simple posters. All of us have been influenced by our first environment, and nothing helps create beauty in the world as much as giving beauty to the very young.

Toy Storage

Rather than tossing toys into large toy boxes, it is more satisfying to the child to keep them neatly on shelves, hung on hooks, kept ready to work with on wooden

trays or small baskets. This also makes putting away much more logical and enjoyable. The Chinese art of placement, Feng Shui, teaches that clutter, even hidden under a bed or piled on the top of bookcases, can cause stress.

The Outside Environment

Sometimes we forget that daily life was first carried out in the outdoors, people coming into their homes for shelter from the elements. This is still the instinct of the child. In the first days of life, just a breath of fresh air and a look at the tree branches moving in the wind each day is sufficient; soon a daily walk in the baby carrier or stroller; and before you know it, walks led by the child, where each new thing—cracks in the sidewalk, parades of ants, puddles, brick walls, weeds and thistles—many details which we as adults previously overlooked, will enchant the child and make a short walk into a long drawn out discovery. Sometimes a "walk to the park" can take an hour, and one may not even get past the front sidewalk.

It is very good for us adults to slow down, forget our plan, and follow the child as he discovers, smells, sees, hears, and touches the outside world.

Welcome the child to your outside work—washing the car, working in the garden, whatever you can do outside instead of inside—there is always some little part of the real work that a child can do.

Try to create an outside area where the child can not only do outside activities such as playing in a sandbox, but activities he would be doing inside, such as washing his hands or the dishes, looking at books, doing a puzzle.

Age 3-6

Children at this age often prefer to work on the floor instead of at a table—on rugs or pieces of carpet that can be rolled up or put out of the way when not in use. This marks the workspace just as would a table.

Toys, books, and materials can be attractively arranged on trays and in baskets, on natural wood or white shelves according to subject—language, math, geography, history, science, music, and art. Each object has a special, permanent place so that children know where to find it and where to put it away for the next person when finished. Tables and chairs that support proper posture are important at every age.

Age 6-12

This child is interested in right and wrong, in the far distance past, cultures, countries, great people, exploring with the mind. He wants to explore with his mind and now has the imagination to do so. Give him books and projects, coop games, real work in the real world. He is building the groundwork for a valuable, interesting and enjoyable future.

He needs space for silence and uninterrupted time to think great thoughts. Whereas at age 3-6 the world was brought into the house of children, now the child begins to go out into the world, for field trips such as shopping at the grocery store for a cooking project, getting office supplies, interviewing subjects for history projects, or visiting museums, and so forth.

The Environment for All Children.

There are two important things to keep in mind in organizing a child's environment in the home.

(1) Have a place in each room for the few, carefully chosen child's belongings: By the front door a stool to sit on and a place to hang coats and keep shoes. In the living room a place for the child's books and toys—neatly, attractively organized. Think out the activities and the materials for all living spaces and arrange the environment to include the child's activities.

(2) Don't put out too many toys and books at one time. Those being used by the child at the moment are sufficient. It is a good idea to rotate—taking out those books and toys that have not been chosen lately and removing them to storage for a time. Children grow and change and they need help to keep their environment uncluttered and peaceful.

The Environment & the Mind

Everyone at every age is affected by their environment. Habits of organizing the environment reduce stress and aid the development of an organized, efficient, and creative mind.

A child who joins in the arrangement of an environment, and learns to select a few lovely things, will be aided in many ways with this help in creating good work habits, concentration, and a clear, uncluttered, and peaceful mind.

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