

Montessori at Home—Preparing a Supportive Environment

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Imagine if you were suddenly confined to a wheelchair? What type of special accommodations could be made to the living spaces in your home so that you would not have to rely heavily on the aid of others? How would you handle well-meaning friends and relatives that want to do everything for you now? What could be added, changed or modified to allow you to continue to be independent, participate and make a meaningful contribution to your family?

Hmmmmmm.....young children are about half as tall as an adult in a wheelchair. Imagine yourself being your child's height as you walk through the rooms in your home. Sit on the floor in various areas of each room for a while. Observe everything from their eyes and their height. Think about all the things you do as an adult in each room. How would you be able to accomplish all those things at your child's height? Would you feel frustrated/dependent/angry? Hmmmmmm.....!

A major deterrent for children is that they live in a world that is generally prepared for the functioning of adults. Faced with no other alternative, they adapt to our busy, fast-paced, multi-tasking lifestyle. They adapt to the ever increasing speed of media, advancing technology and marketing directed at children. They adapt to their home environment where most everything is adult sized or made of plastic and is fantasy-based. Children need to be in an environment that supports them, not where they have to adapt to our adult world.

Now, think about another major deterrent for children to develop into independent beings. As adults, we are very, very important in a child's environment. Unknowingly however, most adults, at varying degrees, are significant obstacles to children. Adults often feel they are supposed to help children and do things for them—it's another way of loving and caring for them. Many adults see children as dependent beings. When we "do" for our children, we think we are nurturing and caring for them. It is certainly true that adults can accomplish tasks far more efficiently and effectively than children—it is certainly less stressful if we take care of it ourselves. But how does this help children gain the independence they are striving for—what message does this give to our children?

When children are physically able and allowed to do things and learn to do things for themselves, but adults interfere with this need and do it for them, children adapt by accepting and taking for granted that they are helpless and dependent—maybe even not capable or competent. This is far from true. Beginning around the age of one, children desire to learn how to and to do things for themselves and to participate/contribute meaningfully with their family. Why are two-year-old children labeled with the term “terrible twos”? Why do we have power struggles with our children? Simply put, because adults in good faith mistakenly interfere with the child’s natural developmental needs. Children have an internal, unconscious need to do things for themselves. They need to feel in charge of themselves and feel that they are contributing. The child’s greatest work is to learn and assimilate all that is necessary to be an adult. They need adults to be patient, observant and active guides; they need their living environments to be prepared and supportive of their unconscious, innate need to be independent and contributing beings.

One way for children to feel in charge of themselves is to offer them simple choices. “Would you like to wear your red pants or your blue pants today?” Making a choice gives the child the opportunity to make a decision about him/herself. For the adult, it is offering a freedom with limits—the child is free to choose within the limits of what is offered. Limits give children a sense of security.

A word of caution: Just as you need time to allow your perception of your child’s need for independence to grow, your child who has adapted to being dependent will need some coaxing and guidance towards independence. It is unfair to expect your child to suddenly have the desire to do the things you have often done for him/her. If you normally put your child’s coat away for them, pick up toys, do their laundry, set and clear the table at mealtimes, straighten their room, put their shoes on for them, get them dressed in the morning—all without any or too little assistance from your child, please do not expect your child’s immediate reciprocal and eager cooperation. For a while, they may fight the idea of having to do things on their own. They may not be capable of some things yet. Be patient and encouraging. Observe how you can help your child gain the skills necessary to be independent.

Getting Started

How do you get started preparing a more supportive environment for your child? There are several aspects to consider. The physical environment, looking within ourselves and discovering how we hinder our child's independence, and by observing our children—they show us what they need; we have to be open to observing it. Observing each room from your child's eyes and height is a great start. Consider daily routines and activities. Identify situations that are stressful for you and for your child. What can be changed, omitted or added to help? Perhaps start at the beginning of the day and work your way to bedtime or focus on times or situations that need the most attention. Begin to organize and eliminate 'disordered' areas.

Children between the ages of birth and three years absorb information and experiences that shape who they are becoming from their family and their home environment. Some things to consider:

- Safety—is your environment safe so that you do not have to worry about what your child may get into. Safety leads to freedom for the child and for the adults.
- Furnishings—is there furniture that is your child's size and/or step stools up to sinks, etc.?
- Movement—is there enough space for your child to experience gross motor movement indoors.
- ***Clothing—clothing greatly affects a child's independence. T-shirts, pants with elastic at the waist and socks and Velcro shoes are the easiest for young children to manage.***
Clothing that is too small, too big, or too long, dresses, tights, buttons in the back, crotch snaps, jeans, overalls, etc. are obstacles for children.
- Beauty—is there artwork at the child's level to enjoy. Plants, flowers, paintings, mobiles, etc. are enjoyable for children.
- Natural Lighting—this is beneficial for everyone, especially for children. A table and chair under a window is wonderful.
- Clutter—if areas of your room that are used by your child are cluttered or unordered, this affects your child's internal sense of order. Children need to have order in their environment so that they can have internal order and peace.
- Play Items—Does your child have a large quantity of toys that are often left laying around. Are some items played with and tossed aside after a short while. Are some items used frequently and truly engage your child's attention. Observe what your child enjoys. Simplify and eliminate as much and as often as possible!!!
- Create a balance between your child's needs and inclusion with the family as a whole.

Practical Suggestions

Anticipating a situation and deciding on the most practical solution will help your child be independent. For example, when the weather turns cooler, where do you want your child's wrap (coat, sweater, jacket), shoes, hat, etc. to be fetched from and returned to when you leave and return from your home? If there is a specific hook for a wrap (with a loop sewn inside), a basket for hats/mittens, and a drawer or rug for shoes, then each item has a home. You can tell your child, "I have found a special place for your coat. (Or, let's make a special place for your coat to be hung up on together.) Here is a red hook in your closet. Can your hands reach it? It is just the right height for you to reach. There is a loop on your coat/let's find it. Let's practice putting the loop over the hook. You can put your coat here when you are not wearing it." This may sound simplistic and/or corny. If done consistently, in a positive way and in your own style, it can be very effective. Your child will feel included, cared for and responsible. You have prepared a specific location for their wrap, you have shown them how to hang it up and you have given the message that this is where their wrap goes—period. Your child will probably need reminders: "Oh, show me where that special red hook is; where was that special place we made just for your coat; show me how you put the loop in your coat over that special red hook; your red hook is missing your coat, can you find your coat?"

Kitchen Suggestions:

- ◆ A step stool so your child can be at counter level while assisting in meal prep/clean up.
- ◆ A child's size apron and a special place for storing it; a hook or drawer.
- ◆ Special knife/crinkle cutter and/or spreader that your child can use to help prepare food. Children enjoy slicing fruits and vegetables such as bananas and cooked carrots; they also love to spread butter on bread.
- ◆ A scrub brush and bowl/bin (or water in the sink) to clean fruits or vegetables.
- ◆ A small pitcher of water in the refrigerator along with a supply of cups on a low shelf.
- ◆ A booster seat instead of a high chair that your child can climb into/or a child's size table and chair for your child to eat at; high chairs only serve to contain a child until the adult releases them.
- ◆ A small supply of healthy snack items available in the lower section of the refrigerator or on a lower shelf so your child can choose something when they feel hungry.
- ◆ Table settings on a low shelf so that your child may set their own/or everyone's space at the table.

- ◆ A rubber scraper and container or garbage can so that they may scrape any food left on their plate.
- ◆ A designated spot within their reach to place their used dishes.
- ◆ A sponge and drying cloth to clean their eating area/the entire table.
- ◆ A small hand held broom and pan to clean crumbs up from the floor.
- ◆ A towel for wiping up spills.
- ◆ A small basket of washcloths for cleaning face and hands or wet wipes; a container to place the washcloths when finished.
- ◆ Small mirror for the child to observe their face while cleaning it
- ◆ A step stool to the sink where the child can help with dishwashing/drying

Bathroom Suggestions:

- ◆ A sturdy, non-skid stool to reach the sink, soap and drying towel.
- ◆ Their bath towel on a bar or hook low enough so they can manage taking it off and putting it away. A place for your child to put his/her own clothing away before bathing (a hamper in their room or elsewhere).
- ◆ A small supply/basket of diapers/pull-ups or underwear and wipes your child can easily access. Tissues within reach.
- ◆ The hot water temperature set to 120 degrees or lower; this will enable your child to use the cold and hot water without your supervision or worry.
- ◆ A basket or other container for tub toys.
- ◆ A basket for child's brush and hair things.

Bedroom Suggestions: Bedrooms are a child's place to rest and rejuvenate and have their own space in the family home. A child's bedroom should be comforting and comfortable and everything should be entirely accessible by your child.

- ◆ A mattress on the floor (even for infants and toddlers) or a bed on a very low frame is ideal. Cribs serve only to keep the child contained until an adult retrieves them.
- ◆ A dresser in which the child can open/close each drawer and obtain/put away his/her own clothing; limit several clothing items in each drawer until the child is much older. (Store the rest of your child's wardrobe in a place easily accessible to you so that you can place appropriate choices in the drawers or closet each day—two pairs of shorts and t-shirts to choose from in the summer; two pairs of sweat pants and long sleeve shirts in the winter, etc.)
- ◆ A closet rod that has been placed at your child's level; it will need to be raised as your child grows taller.
- ◆ A laundry hamper so your child has a specific place to put their clothing.

- ◆ A table and a chair that is comfortable for your child's height. (Very young children fall backwards in most chairs; look for a style that resists tipping.)
- ◆ A rug or specific place for shoes, slippers and boots.
- ◆ Hooks in the closet or behind a door for your child's wraps, umbrella, purse, backpack, etc. You may want to consider a separate board piece to place into studs in the wall and attach a row of hooks to the board. As the child grows taller, the board can be raised or an additional board with hooks can be placed higher.
- ◆ A mirror for hair brushing and/or a full-length mirror.
- ◆ Shelving or a shelf unit to hold their personal items: a hair brush; family picture; personal items; collections; a flashlight; magnifying glass; photo album; maybe a tape or cd player with a small supply of musical choices; etc.
- ◆ A container for their finished art work and school work.
- ◆ If a family room or play room is not available for books/toys/activities, these items can be placed on shelving in the bedroom. You may want to consider separate shelving for the books/toys/activities and separate shelving for the personal items.
- ◆ If your child's room is spacious, a small rocking chair with a basket of books near it—or, a large pillow against a wall with a rug and books nearby may be enjoyable.
- ◆ A plant for your child to enjoy and care for is a nice touch; they can even paint the pot and help in the planting. (A tiny watering can or a tiny pitcher is needed for watering; this could be placed in your child's room or in the kitchen.)
- ◆ A vase and doily (perhaps given as a gift) so that your child may pick a flower from the garden or store occasionally to make their room more lovely.
- ◆ A dusting cloth for your child to clean the dresser and shelves.
- ◆ Having too much in any area of your child's room will cause "messes" that your child is not able to independently keep tidy.

Laundry Room:

- ◆ A step stool for your child to put in and take out laundry from the washer/dryer. They love to push the buttons and watch the washing machine cycles.
- ◆ A small basket with cleaning supplies: a sponge, scrub brush, toilet brush, drying towel, and cleanser (this could be a small container with a little baking soda or Bon Ami).
- ◆ You may want to have additional baskets for dusting: a dusting cloth and possibly a small medicine type bottle with a dropper for dispensing polish. (A few drops could be placed on a table and the child could use the dusting cloth to clean/polish the surface.)

- ◆ Another basket could be for window washing: a small spray bottle with water, a sponge, a small window squeegee, and a drying cloth (you may want an extra towel available to place at the base of the window to collect the excess water).

Other Living Areas:

Consider placing one or two baskets or containers with play items in each room for your child's enjoyment. The living room could have a basket of books, a puzzle, and a basket of blocks for example. There could be a small shelf or lower section of an end table for these items or a comfortable rug with the baskets next to it.

Toys/Play Item Suggestions: Children learn by using their hands during meaningful activity. Toys that offer little or no assistance for the child's need to develop and understand the world only serves to entertain them for a short while. **Don't be fooled by consumer marketing tactics that rely on our desire to give our children the best we can!!! Instead, observe your child; they are the real consumer; they will show you by their interest what satisfies them.** What do they play with most? What captures their interest and holds their attention? Consider boxing up/getting rid of everything else. Anything a child plays with for a short while and is then forgotten or misused serves no real purpose to the child. Having fewer open-ended items available placed in an orderly fashion is far more beneficial and enjoyable than a lot of items in disarray. For example, depending on your child's age and interests, you may want to have legos (not the whole container; as much as your child will be able to use and put away), a few crayons and white paper, puzzles, blocks, lacing cards, clay/play-doh, chalk and a chalkboard, a magnifying glass, a child's flashlight, etc. each in a basket or tray and all neatly on a shelf. Limit the number of items available so the area is orderly. Rotate items when a new interest is needed and as abilities change.

It is not necessary to purchase expensive baskets, etc. Check local thrift stores for baskets and trays. Small, clear storage containers with easy to open lids or drawers work well for items with many pieces. Shelving can be plywood (plain or stained) with bricks, a free-standing shelf unit (preferably with adjustable shelves), or some other creative shelving fixture.

This all sounds like a lot of responsibility and effort—it is! It is also a lot of information to digest. Start with a small task and observe the benefits. Be enthusiastically persistent. View your home through your child's eyes. Think about what could be added, changed or modified so your child does not have to rely on/wait for others for assistance. Observing your child and seeing the world through their eyes is a skill/habit that can take time to cultivate. It is difficult to break away from our busy adult lives and consider the true (non-commercialized) needs of our children. Preparing an

environment for them that meets their inherent needs for independence, order, participation and meaningful contribution takes an investment of time, energy and a little money. The life-long benefits to your child are immeasurable.

Your child's greatest work is to learn and assimilate all that is necessary to be an adult. By the time a child is three years old, they are a fully formed human being. The experiences they have or don't have shape the adult they will become. Our greatest work is to raise our children—let's help them to help themselves.

References for Preparing Environments Supportive to Young Children

Montessori From the Start; The Child at Home—from Birth to Age Three, by Paula Polk Lillard and Lynn Lillard Jessen (ISBN 0-8052-1112-8)

How to Raise an Amazing Child—The Montessori Way, by Tim Seldin, President of the Montessori Foundation (ISBN 978-0-7566-2505-4)

Understanding the Human Being—The Importance of the First Three Years of Life, by Silvana Quattrocchi Montanaro, MD (ISBN 1-879341-00-X)

At Home with Montessori, by Patricia Oriti (available for purchase from North American Montessori Teachers' Association (NAMTA) (441) 834-4011)

Look at the Child, by Aline D. Wolf (ISBN 0-9601016-2-4)

Montessori Services catalogue: 1 (877) 975-3003; www.montessoriservices.com

Michael Olaf catalogue: 1 (800) 429-8877; www.michaelolaf.net (The Joyful Child—birth to 3)

Furniture: (a few Google suggestions)

Childcraft

L.O.R.D.

Community Playthings

Jonti-Craft

Montessori Services

Michael Olaf

Kaplan

Toys/Activities: (a few Google suggestions)

Rosie Hippo

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