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# Bringing Montessori into the Home

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Montessori education, which developed over 100 years ago, is having a resurgence. Educators, parents and even employers are recognising that the top-down teaching approaches used in many of our schools are not helping children learn the skills they will need in the 21st century. We are preparing them for a future we don't know ourselves. A future where they'll need to apply problem-solving skills, an enormous amount of creativity, and flexibility. Not simply memorising facts to pass tests.

In a Montessori school, there are mixed-ages and the teacher (often called “the guide”) supports each child on his own timeline, with his own interests and individual way of learning. During the 3-hour work cycle, the children choose freely from hands-on activities—laid out attractively in trays on shelves—that form part of a rich curriculum. And the teacher gives each child lessons where he is up to. The younger children learn so naturally from observing the older children working on their own lessons, and older children consolidate their own learning by aiding younger children.

## Five Steps You Can Take

Perhaps you have heard about Montessori education and thought it only applied in a school setting. Yet there is so much wisdom in the Montessori approach that can also be applied at home to help us raise curious learners and have a more peaceful way to be with children in the home. Here are five steps to bring the Montessori approach into the home:

### 1. Preparing the home.

In the Montessori approach, a prepared classroom (known as “the prepared environment”) is considered the second teacher. The

Montessori teacher prepares the classroom before the children arrive to meet the needs of the children in the class.

The same principle applies at home. Our homes can help to engage our children, help them become more independent, and keep them curious. This is what we can do to achieve that:

- Make activities attractive and inviting.
- Ensure activities are available that challenge the children—neither too easy nor difficult, but where a child is working to master the activity.
- Make the space accessible to children—have things on low shelves, set up in a way that children can manage themselves (for example, tissues down low to help themselves, low hooks where they can hang up their own bag and coat at the entrance to your home), and cloths at the ready for when there are spills.
- Display activities on shelves in baskets and trays where the children can see what is available to play with (rather than hidden in a toy box where the parts are easy to lose).
- Have a place for everything and everything in its place—this makes it easy for children to find things as well as to return them once they are finished. Less rushing around looking for a missing shoe or having toys everywhere that have not been tidied away.
- Have child-sized furniture that is the correct size—look for a small table and chair where the child’s feet can be flat on the floor. The child will be more stable, secure, and need less assistance to get on and off the chair.
- Set up corners in the home—for example, an art area, a book corner for reading, an area for puzzles and games.

All areas of the home can be set up with the children in mind—from a step in the bathroom to reach the sink, to the bedroom where they can access a limited choice of clothing for the day, to the kitchen where they can help themselves to a glass of water or reach their plates and cutlery to set the table or make their own snack.

## 2. Montessori activities for the home.

Montessori activities provide a holistic education for our children—their fine and gross motor development, language development, self-expression activities like arts and crafts and music, and skills of daily life (called “practical life activities”).

That said, our homes are not Montessori classrooms. So we do not need a pink tower or cylinder blocks in our homes, as beautiful as they are. Instead we can offer a variety of activities that will help develop our child as a whole but are more suitable for home learning.

In Montessori, we have an expression “follow the child.” This means that we follow our child’s interests. It’s amazing what children can learn when we observe closely the way they learn and the things they are interested in, and allow them to follow their own pace.

For children who enjoy vehicles, we can offer sets of vehicles such as construction vehicles, emergency vehicles, or aircraft. They can learn the names of the vehicles and will easily learn the differences between an excavator, front wheel loader, bulldozer and cement mixer. Then we could extend their learning in a natural way by offering opportunities to create art around vehicles, to build a garage for their vehicles, go on an outing to visit a fire station or car repair garage, or sort vehicles by colour, size or make.

This is so different to top-down learning which we may be used to from our own childhood—where the teacher or adult decides what the child should be doing or learning. Step back. Observe. And watch your child develop his unique gifts.

## 3. Keeping children curious.

If we wish to keep the love of learning alive and keep children curious, there are five essential ingredients. When we ensure these five ingredients are available to our children, they have a strong base to become curious about the world around them and to develop the ability to think and do things for themselves:

**Trust in the child.** Dr. Montessori encourages us to trust that children want to learn and grow. That they intrinsically

know what they need to be working on right now to develop as they should. This means that if we provide them with a rich environment to explore, we don't need to force them to learn or be worried if they are developing "differently" to their peers.

We can trust that they are developing along their unique path, in their unique way, on their unique timeline.

**A rich learning environment.** Dr. Montessori wrote about the importance of hands-on learning experiences where children can make discoveries for themselves. So rather than simply giving the answers to them, instead we can look for ways for them to discover for themselves.

A rich learning environment does not have to be filled with expensive materials. Explorations in nature can be totally free; posting a chain or string into a cardboard tube can cost nothing; and sorting out some dried beans can again cost very little.

So we can look at their physical environment and even the adults around them to see if their environment provides them with rich opportunities for exploration.

**Time.** For children to have an urge to discover, explore and wonder, they need time. Time that is unscheduled. Time that is not rushed. Sometimes even feeling bored.

Allow time to explore. Allow time for movement. Allow time for language and conversation. Allow time for building connection. Allow time for wonder and getting curious.

**A safe and secure base.** Physically, we keep our children safe from electrical outlets and busy roads. We childproof our homes, or at least one area, where our child can freely explore.

Emotionally, we can give them safety too. We can accept them for who they are. And they can trust us to be there for them even when they are having a hard time.

Having this safety and security then allows children much freedom to be curious in the world.

**Fostering a sense of wonder.** As a parent we can ask questions about the world we see, invite exploration with all the senses, and invite children into nature as often as possible.

#### **4. Cultivating cooperation.**

The Montessori approach has a lot to help us to cultivate cooperation in our children at home. Rather than using rewards (like stickers or saying “good job”), bribes, or punishments which are extrinsic motivators, we like to build a child’s intrinsic motivation.

When we only get children’s cooperation because there is something they will receive, they may cooperate only to receive the reward and the price may continue to grow to continue to motivate them. Similarly, if we threaten them or punish them, they may only behave to avoid a punishment or sneak behind our backs so they don’t get caught.

Instead, in a Montessori approach, we look for ways to work with our children in a respectful way. If they need help to tidy away, we can help them break it down into smaller parts, work alongside them, give them a little help to support them, have a place where everything goes, show them that we are looking after our home and the things that are important to us, and allow time. Rather than nagging them, or lecturing, or giving them lots of instructions.

And we will still help our children to make amends if necessary, but when they have calmed down and are ready to make it up to the other person in an age-appropriate way. This may look like offering a friend a cool cloth or tissue if they are hurt or drawing a picture for them.

It’s important to note that this approach can take longer and may require more patience from the adult. It requires us to have connection with our children. Because without connection we get very little cooperation.

So while it may seem quicker to put our children in time out to think about what they have done, this is not likely to build the connection with them that we will need as they grow, and may even alienate them from us.

## 5. Accepting our child.

A large part of the work of a Montessori teacher is to accept every child. Montessori teachers practice observation for hundreds of hours in their training and then in the classroom. By observing each child we can see objectively where each child is at today. The child feels safe and seen. This provides an ideal learning environment.

Similarly, at home we can practice giving full acceptance of our children. It's easier to accept them when they are behaving well. So it's often that we need to practice this in moments where our children are acting out, ignoring our requests, fighting with a sibling, or melting down. It's in these moments our children need us. They are trying to communicate something and may need our help to be their translator, not to judge them in that moment. Or we may have hopes and dreams for our child, perhaps something we missed out on ourselves as a child. Yet it's important to step back and see that our children have their own plans. And it is our role as their parent, teacher or other adult to support them in these plans, rather than taking them over.

### Common Questions

These are several questions that frequently arise when I speak with parents:

**When should we correct a child?** In Montessori we are very conscious not to shut down a child's learning by immediately correcting a mistake. If we ask a young child to show us a dog and he raises the cat to show us, we would say, "Ah, you wanted to show me the cat," and make a mental note that the child may still be confusing a dog and cat and to teach him again at a later moment.

We call this principle "Teach by teaching, not by correcting."

So how much do you let the child lead and when do you step in to correct him at home. Let's say a child is using an activity or object in a way that it wasn't intended. For example, using a watering can to fill a bucket rather than to water a plant. As long as it is safe and he isn't hurting himself, someone else, or the environment (the home, nature, etc.), then I don't step in to correct

him. At this point, I'm choosing to preserve his concentration and focus. Then I make a mental note to show him at a later neutral moment how to give water to the plants.

The child will be much more receptive to hearing how to use the watering can (teaching), rather than if I step in immediately to tell him he is doing something wrong (correcting).

On the other hand, if children are hurting themselves, someone else or the environment, I will step in to set a kind and clear limit. "It's my job to keep everyone safe. Would you like to use the broom for sweeping? Or we can put it back on its hook."

**What about technology?** I'd be curious to hear what Dr. Montessori would say about technology if she was alive. For children under 6 years old, we see there is little need for screens—they understand best from the world around them, touching things to explore them, and having first-hand experiences. And the technology has become so intuitive that it's not difficult for them to later pick up how to swipe a screen to unlock it.

For older children, I like the advice offered by Sue Palmer in *Toxic Childhood*. Rather than being completely screen-free where our children don't know what their peers are enjoying, she advises using technology with limits on how long they'll be using a screen and what they can choose from.

As an example, in the elementary years my children had a half hour a day of screens and knew enough about what their peers were playing—while also learning some basic programming and how to build a website—and had more time for open-ended play. At their Montessori school there were a few computers available for their class to do research for projects or to put together presentations. And the rest was done by hand—learning and writing with their hands.

**What about testing?** In a Montessori school, you will see very little testing. The teacher knows where children are up to as they give them the next lesson when they have mastered the one before.



So children are not learning just to pass a test, but because of curiosity about the world around them.

When we apply this lens, we might even notice how often we test our own children. We ask a young child to clap for grandma, a toddler “What colour is this?” and on and on.

As parents we can ask ourselves are we doing this to make them learn faster or to gain approval from others.

Instead we can look to provide a rich learning environment for them to explore, show our children lots of colours around them, and then allow them to show us what they know and delight with them when they start to point to lots of blue objects around them.

Yes, they have mastered it.

And when children will need to learn to do exams, Montessori children learn how to take tests just like any other skill. And practice and practice until they are ready.

It’s another way to learn. A more natural one. And where the adult is a guide, not a boss or servant.

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