

## Montessori and the Home Environment Preschool and Kindergarten

*“The child can only develop by means of experience in his environment.  
We call such experience work”*  
-- Dr. Maria Montessori

### **The First Six Years of Life**

Many people throughout history have noted the importance of the first six years of life. A child fully becomes a member of her particular family group during these early years. She takes in everything she sees, hears, and feels in her environment. A child who loves herself and feels safe in the world, who has experienced the joy of making a contribution to her group, and who has fallen in love with work, learning, and loving, is fortunate indeed.

Every child, by instinct, wants to learn and grow to the best of his abilities. Before the age of six he does this by imitating those around him. To help him, we must carefully prepare the physical and social environment, for this is the way culture and moral and spiritual beliefs are passed on.

### **Participating in Family Life**

The traditional work of the family is known as “Practical Life Work.” It is the single most important area of an education for life. Allowing the child to participate in the daily work he sees going on around him is an act of great respect for, and confidence in, the child. It helps him to feel important to himself and to those around him. He is needed. We can empathize if we think of the difference in our feelings for a dinner guest in our home who is completely served and waited on, or for one who is welcomed in our kitchen to talk and to laugh while we prepare the meal together.

The three main areas of “Practical Life” activities are:

1. care of the environment -- cleaning, sweeping, washing clothes, gardening, etc.,
2. the care of the person – dressing, brushing teeth, cooking, setting the table, etc.,  
and
3. grace and courtesy – walking carefully, carrying things, moving gracefully,  
offering food, saying “please” and “thank you” and so on.

Children have always shown us their interests in all three areas by pretending to cook, clean, take care of a baby, have tea parties, carry out adult conversations, but when given the chance they would much rather be doing the real work of the family and community along with others.

Instead of “making-believe”, a child would almost always prefer to remove dust from a dusty self with a real child-sized duster, pour real herb tea or juice from a porcelain tea pot, or pound a real nail into a piece of wood to make a simple bird feeder that the family will use. And he would rather be mixing a bit of flour and egg with a real hand mixer to help with the family breakfast instead of always playing at cooking.

### **The Child's Purpose**

The child's reason for, and way of, working is different from ours. We adults will usually choose to do things the most efficient and quickest way. A child, on the other hand, is working to master the activity and to practice and perfect her abilities. She may scrub a table for hours, but only when she feels the urge. She may sweep the floor every morning for two weeks and not again for a month – because she will be occupied with mastering something else. If we expected her to keep carrying out every new activity every day, there would be no time for sleep.

There are many physical, emotional, and mental values of this work. Through these activities, the child learns to be independent. This is important because there can be no intelligent choice or responsibility at any age without independence in thought and action. She learns to concentrate, to control muscles, to move and act with care, to focus, to analyze logical steps, and to complete a cycle of activity. As long as the activity contains all of these elements, the mind and hand working together, any work or play will benefit the child.

### **Family Life--Food**

Arranging the cooking and dining areas for the work of the child does not have to be a giant undertaking, and it does not need to be done all at once. Consider giving the child one low shelf or one drawer in the kitchen in the beginning. This could contain a cutting board and a safe knife, or cereal bowls and spoons – whatever the child is most likely to use most often.

A stool is a good first investment, so the child can reach the sink or the counter, for work at the counter and sink. Even better, if there is room, have a small table and chair or stool out of the way where the child can prepare and eat snack, or do his share of the food preparation.

This is an exercise in contributing to the good of others – preparing and serving food and cleaning up.

### **Practical Life Tasks As the Foundation for All Later Work**

It is not uncommon for the value of *practical life* or *family life* exercise to be misunderstood. Some parents may exclaim in dismay that their child is “wasting time cleaning in her new Montessori school when she should be doing math!” However, math and all other intellectual work requires the ability to move carefully, to focus, to complete sequential steps, to concentrate, to make intelligent choices and to persevere in one's work. This is exactly what is learned during practical life work. As a result of periods of time spent concentrating on such a task, a child becomes calm and satisfied, and because of this inner peace, full of love of others.

Perhaps an even more important result of this work is that the child sees himself as an important and contributing member of the group, and as an intimate friend, when he is welcome to participate in the work of the adult. Think about the difference between how close you feel to your own guests. If all the work is done by you in anticipation for the guest's arrival, that is one relationship. When a friend joins you in your preparation of the meal, that is a closer relationship. The child benefits most from this close relationship with the parent, whether it be in washing or drying the dishes, setting the table, cleaning out the cupboards or refrigerator, mixing the muffin batter, and so forth.

When a child has a lot of experience with the important developmental tasks called “practical life”, he becomes more successful in all other areas of study and more successful in relating to others.

*The most important discovery is that a child returns to a normal state through work. Countless experiments made upon children of every race throughout the world have shown that this is the most certain datum that we have in the field of psychology and education. A child’s desire to work represents a vital instinct since he cannot organize his personality without working: a man builds himself through working. There can be no substitute for work, neither affection nor physical well-being can replace it. A man builds himself by carrying out manual labor in which he uses his hands as the instruments of his personality and as an expression of his intellect and will help him to dominate his environment. A child’s instinct for work is proof that work is instinctive to man and characteristic of the species.*

*...if we showed them exactly how to do something, this precision in itself seemed to hold their interest. To have a real purpose to which the action was directed, this was the first condition, but the exact way of doing it acted like a support which rendered the child stable in his efforts, and therefore brought him to make progress in his development. Order and precision, we found, are the keys to spontaneous work in the school.*

*--Dr. Maria Montessori*

### **The Needs of the Parents**

Parents do not always have the time to include the child in everything and should not feel guilty about this. A teacher is available to the child for this work all day long, and trained to give lessons and help the child grow toward independence. It is too much to expect a new parent or a busy parent to do this perfectly. We must be easy on ourselves in the home and plan a time when we will enjoy work as well as the children.

Begin with just one thing, perhaps putting the napkins on the table for a meal, and gradually add to the tasks in which the child can participate, and eventually take over the task. This effort on the part of the parent pays off for the adult as well as the child as we observe that the child’s method of working is not just to get the task finished, but to enjoy it!

One of the lessons we can learn from the child is how to bring our whole selves, mentally, physically, and spiritually, to the task at hand, to focus on each thing we do, and to enjoy each moment of life.

### **Active Play**

It takes work on the part of the adult to withstand the temptation to let the child spend hours in front of the television or the computer, but it is well worth the effort to support the natural development of the child. Television accustoms the child to be a passive receiver of information rather than an active questioner or researcher. And the intelligence of computers does not hold a candle to the kind of creativity inborn in the human being.

--- From Child of the World