

## Montessori and the Home Environment Toddlers

*“All the activities connected with looking after yourself and your surroundings, such as getting dressed, preparing food, laying the table, wiping the floor, clearing dishes, doing the dusting, etc., are activities belonging to what Dr. Montessori called ‘Practical Life’ and are precisely the tasks that adults like least. But between the ages of one and four years, children love these jobs and are delighted to be called on to participate in them.*

–Dr. Silvana Montanaro

### Participating in Family Life

Human beings of all ages want to be able to communicate with others, to challenge themselves, to do important work, and to contribute to society. This is human nature at its best.

This desire is especially strong during the time when the child who has been observing all kinds of important activity going on around her has finally mastered the mental and physical skills to stand up, walk, use her hands, and participate in real work.

A child learns self-control, and develops a healthy self-image if the work is real – washing fruits and vegetables, setting or clearing a table, washing dishes, watering plants, watering the garden, sorting, folding, and putting away laundry, sweeping, dusting, helping in the garden, any of the daily work of her family.

Family work, known as Practical Life in Montessori schools, is the single most important area of a Montessori education at any age. Allowing the child to participate in the life 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. In the first instance, the house guest is separate, the relationship formal. In the second, we share our life and the relationship is intimate—a true friendship.

### Three Areas of Family Life

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 interest in *practical life* by pretending to cook and clean, taking care of a doll, carrying out adult conversations, etc. But when given the chance, they would much rather be doing the real work of the family and community, instead of pretending. A child would prefer to remove real dust from a dusty shelf with a real child-sized duster, to help collect the dirty laundry or to fold it, to take part in preparing real meals, rather than to pretend to do these things with toys.

*...but I know happiness does not come with things. It can come from work and pride in what you do*  
--Gandhi

### **The Work Environment and Concentration**

One of the most calming activities for a child is concentration. This does not include passive, non-participatory concentration such as watching television or videos. The action must be something that is controlled by the child so she can repeat it as often as necessary, and it must challenge her body as well as her mind.

The choice of activities is not as important as the level of concentration brought forth. Deep concentration can occur while digging in the sand, washing carrots, stringing beads, coloring, doing a puzzle. Toddlers receive lessons which are well thought out, logical, and clear. An environment is created which fosters work and the teacher is always on the lookout for a child beginning to concentrate. When this happens she protects the child from interruption because she understands the place of this experience in creating balance and happiness in the child.

The availability of a little table kept cleared off and ready for work can help the child focus on her work and stick to it until she is finished. It is a natural consequence that, if the work is not put away, the space will not be available for the next activity.

An apron, used for cooking, cleaning, woodworking, gardening, etc., sometimes helps the child concentrate by marking the beginning and the end of a task. It also elevates the importance of work in the child's eyes. When a child's work is seen as important to the family, so is the child.

An apron should be made so that the child can put it on and fasten it by himself: he can work whenever he wants to work. A hook for hanging it on the wall keeps it always ready.

At this age, aprons may often be worn in a way that really does not protect the clothing. No matter. The purpose, at least at this age, is not cleanliness as much as it is to mark the beginning and end of a task, to help the child focus on the work, and to lend a feeling of respect to this "real" work. This is what counts.

### **Materials**

Whenever it is safe, we give beautiful, breakable materials to the child, respectfully sharing with him what the rest of the family uses—pottery, glass, metal, real tools. There is a great increase in the self-respect of the child when she is allowed to use our things, instead of being given plastic substitutes. There is also a corresponding respect for, and caring for, the materials when they are beautiful and breakable.

Children and parents can work together to make these things, throwing pots, cutting out and hand hemming aprons and dust cloths. In days past, the aprons, cloth napkins, polishing cloths, were decorated with embroidery by members of the children's family—adding special touches to them.

Often in the home we need to think carefully about how to arrange the children's practical life supplies. If the parent is a woodworker, or a gardener, a few good-quality, but child-sized, tools can be kept in a special place near the parent's tools, easily within reach. He can be shown how to use them along with the parent, and how to clean them and put them away when the work is finished.

We can do the same with tools for cleaning, preparing food, cooking, setting the table, and any everyday activity. We can either adapt our tools, cutting off the handles of good brooms and mops, or make or buy suitable ones – a small apron, smaller metal buckets, watering cans, kitchen tools, and so forth. For a child, just a few minutes a day working with parents on important "adult" activities can have a great benefit and begin a new way of communicating and living together.

### **A Place for Everything and Everything in its Place**

Ideally, whenever a toy or tool is brought into a home, the family decides exactly where it will be kept. Any great artist or car mechanic knows, the value of being able to find his tools ready for use exactly when he needs them. Children are the same, and their sense of order is far more intense at this age because they are constructing themselves through work.

In some homes, dishes are kept in the low cupboards, within reach of the children. Dangerous cleaning supplies are kept out of reach, of course, but everything else in the house can be kept within reach of the children and their friends.

### **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.

It is precisely because of the valuable work in *practical life* that children in Montessori homes and schools are able to concentrate, make intelligent decisions, and master the beginnings of other areas of study such as math, language, the arts, and the sciences. But the purpose of this work is the inner satisfaction and the support of the optimum development of the child. Following a successful, complete cycle of family work, a child becomes calm and satisfied and because of his inner peace, full of love for the environment and for others.

## **Undressing - Dressing**

Undressing is easier than dressing and is learned first – sometimes much to the consternation of the parents. Clothing that is easy to remove and to put on oneself enables the child to practice these skills. These are things to consider when picking out any clothing, from shoes to pajamas to coats, for young children.

A child's effort at picking out her own clothes and dressing herself are satisfied if the parents hang up, within the child's reach, just two outfits, letting the child decide between them when she dresses in the morning. This is enough of a decision in the beginning. Eventually she will be able to select everything from drawers, hangers, and shelves.

The process of teaching this takes the adult's time and patience in the beginning, but it is worth it for all.

## **The Needs of the Parents**

Parents do not always have the time to include the child in everything and should not feel bad about this. We must be easy on ourselves in the home and plan a time when we will really enjoy working together.

Success may come slowly in the beginning, as we learn how to "follow the child." It is helpful to begin with 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 little by little, take over the task.

Soon, we will begin to learn from the child how to bring our whole selves, mental, physical, and spiritual, to the task of the moment, to focus on each thing we do, and to enjoy each moment of life. Thus, the child becomes the teacher of the adult. The needs of the adult are met at the same time as the needs of the child.

## **Family Life**

### **Adults and Children Working Together**

*"The child can only develop by means of experience in his environment. We call such experience work"*

--Maria Montessori

Practical Life work provides valuable opportunities for adults and children to spend time together. We parents often wish for more excuses to be with our children, and to use our hands in the time-honored and calming traditional work of the artist and homemaker. Most of us have some talent we could share, or would like to develop – cooking, gardening, sewing, woodworking, making music. Even half an hour a week of sharing this with a child is a great beginning.

This cooperation can be of great benefit to ourselves, to our children, and to our developing relationship with each other.

--- Adapted from: [The Joyful Child](#)