

Bringing Montessori Home

By Staci Jensen

As a parent and a teacher in a Montessori Early Childhood classroom, I have noticed a glaring disparity between my 7-year-old daughter's behavior at home and at school. She does fine, independent work in her Montessori school environment, yet, when handed a broom after a mealtime at home, tearfully claims she does not know how to sweep.

At school, skills are introduced from the simple to the complex, with new elements added gradually. Challenging new work still contains enough familiarity so that the child can succeed. For example, children in my classroom practice tasks such as dry pouring, sponge squeezing, wet pouring, tray wiping, filling and carrying vessels of water, and mopping, all in advance of easel painting. Prior experience creates comfort, confidence, and skill in the child; this structured approach helps each child to work to her fullest potential.

In this pursuit of independence, a child's home and school environment can be each other's greatest asset. However, creating a Montessori classroom in my kitchen and living room is simply not practical, though the two environments can provide mutual support as philosophical extensions of the same principles. The gifts we can give our children are adequate time, an economy of age-appropriate and well-communicated expectations, and trust in their innate capabilities, which are the same principles that support Montessori's educational philosophy.

Very young children are capable of independent work at home, though they must be provided enough time

and space to "do it myself." For example, 3- and 4-year-olds can wipe and dust tables, fold towels, and sort silverware. Older children can clear dishes from the table, fold a wider variety of clothing, and wash windows. Tasks presented without time pressures inherent to modern life give children an opportunity to focus on the job at hand and use their available coordination to attack it. Children require little more than to be kept company while working. However, we parents must be less judgmental and more willing to accept less-than-perfect results as tasks are performed to the best of the child's abilities. Finally, our children deserve to experience the small struggles that often accompany skill acquisition. In my home, a high-pitched wail signals distress but not the genuine need for assistance. Despite my intellectual knowledge and training, I still suppress the urge to rush to my daughter's rescue at the first sign of frustration. We rob our children of valuable learning opportunities when we step in, and worse still, may reinforce their sense of helplessness.

I vowed to try a different approach with my daughter, remembering a quote from *The Montessori Method*: "The child who does not do, does not know how to do" (Montessori, p. 109). I began by analyzing the sweeping task and removing any sense of time restriction; we swept instead of taking a bath that evening.

I asked her to fetch a broom and was surprised to see her return instead with a small hand broom and dustpan. Apparently, these were the tools she had used in sweeping her own small area of her classroom. I had erroneously assumed that she knew how to use a

regular broom to sweep a large area. After showing her how to use a child's upright broom for this task, I walked away to give her space to work, despite her protests that it was "too hard." Half an hour later, she finished the kitchen and offered to sweep the living room as well. While not a perfect job, the smiling child in front of me was visibly basking in the contentment of her independent endeavor.

I cannot say that my child has blossomed into an efficient, joyful sweeper of floors. However, that evening she began learning a valuable skill, and more importantly exceeded her own internal expectations. For me, this experience was a reminder that parents and teachers share the common goal of raising confident, independent children. If we as parents can take the time to provide better opportunities for children to do for themselves at home, we are assisting them as they grow into independent, competent adults.

Reference

Montessori, M. (2010). *The Montessori method*. Readaclassic.com.

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