

The Montessori Approach to Discipline

Tuesday, 19 September 2006 22:52 | Written by Mary Conroy & Kitty Williams Bravo by Mary Conroy and Kitty Williams Bravo

This article was first published in Tomorrow's Child magazine

Upon visiting a Montessori classroom for the first time, one might wonder what magic spell has been cast upon these young children making them so calm and self directed. Another person might look at that same class and be confused by the children's independence, wondering where's the discipline, these children just do as they please. Visitors commonly issue such comments as, "I've heard Montessori is too free and chaotic" or "I've heard Montessori is too structured." It does not seem possible that these two extreme opposites can both be true. Montessori is, however, all in the eyes of the beholder. This method or philosophy of education varies in interpretation from school to school, teacher to teacher, and parent to parent. There are certainly some Montessori classrooms that are very rigid and adult controlled, and there are also classrooms that are disorderly and anything goes. Montessori when done well, however, is a beautiful blend and perfect balance of freedom and structure. The best Montessori teachers or facilitators understand that maintaining the delicate balance is one of the most challenging and rewarding aspects of their job. It is on that foundation of freedom and structure that the child builds discipline.

Freedom is not a word that is traditionally associated with discipline. Parents are often concerned that the Montessori child's freedom to choose activities presupposes that discipline is something alien to our classrooms. Does freedom mean license to act as he or she chooses or does freedom of choice carry with it certain responsibilities in the classroom community? Are we, as some would claim, a place where children can do what they like or, as a young Montessori student once told a visitor, a place where children like what they do?

To have any meaningful discussion of these questions, it would seem that our first priority should be to define this thing called discipline. Montessori herself held that discipline is "not ...a fact but a way." True discipline comes more from within than without and is the result of steadily developing inner growth. Just as the very young child must first learn to stand before she can walk, she must develop an inward order through work before she is able to choose and carry out her own acts. Surprisingly enough, Montessori found that it was through the very liberty inherent in her classrooms that the children were given the means to reveal their inner or self-discipline. Independence did not diminish respect for authority but rather deepened it. One of the things that aroused her greatest interest was that order and discipline seemed to be so closely united that they resulted in freedom.

But, many people assume that discipline is something that is imposed from without by an authority figure who should be obeyed without question. Discipline in the Montessori environment is not something that is done to the child; nor is it a technique for controlling behavior. Our concern is with the development of the internal locus of control, which enables an individual to choose the right behavior because it is right for him or herself and right for the community.

If discipline comes from within, then what is the job of the teacher? Inner discipline is something, which evolves. It is not something that is automatically present within the child and it can not be taught. The role of the teacher, then, is to be a model and a guide while supporting the child as he develops to the point where he is able to choose to accept and to follow the “rules” of the classroom community. This level of obedience is the point where true inner discipline has been reached. One knows this level of discipline has been reached when children are able to make appropriate behavioral choices even when we are not present.

Discipline presupposes a certain degree of obedience. Before the age of three a child is truly unable to obey unless what is asked of her happens to correspond with one of her vital urges. At this stage, her personality hasn't formed to the level where she is capable of making a choice to obey. It is this level which Montessori termed the first level of obedience. A toddler can obey, but not always. The second level of obedience is reached when the child is capable of understanding another person's wishes and can express them in her own behavior. When this second level of obedience is reached, most parents and teachers would think they had reached their goal. Most adults ask only that children obey. The goals of Montessori reach beyond this, however, to the third level which Montessori called “joyful obedience”. At this stage the child has internalized obedience, or we might say, had developed self-discipline where he sees clearly the value of what is being offered to him by authority and rushes to obey. This is not blind obedience at all, but is a fully informed choice by a personality which has grown in freedom and developed to its fullest potential. This is what we want for our children. With this level of obedience or self-discipline comes a degree of self-respect in which a child cannot help but respect the rights and needs of others alongside her own. She is then able to learn and grow freely in the security of a community of respectful individuals.

This of course, is a wonderful philosophy, but can Montessori truly deliver these results? Montessori can only benefit children when it moves beyond philosophy and takes a practical application. This involves the careful preparation of the teacher and the classroom environment.

The teacher should be a specialist, trained in child development, as well as Montessori Philosophy and methodology for the age group with whom he or she will be working. Equally important, these adults will need to possess robust enthusiasm for learning, a deep respect for all life, kindness, and the patience of a saint.

The classroom should be beautiful, orderly, and so inviting that the child cannot resist exploring. It should be steeped with a sense of wonder. Within this environment the child will be free to explore, but with this freedom comes responsibility. One of the secrets to success in the Montessori classroom is freedom within the limits of very clear ground rules. Every school's ground rules will vary but the essence is generally the same. 1) Take care of all people and living things in our environment, and 2) Take care of all of the material things in our environment. If you think about it, every “do” or “don't” one could wish to implore fits in these two rules, or could be narrowed even further to this one simple rule, “be respectful of everyone and everything.”

The rules are kept simple, yet they are explored in great detail. It should never be assumed that the child understands what it means to be kind or respectful. A great amount of time and energy must be focused on teaching lessons that demonstrate socially acceptable behavior. Children don't just automatically know how to be a friend, express anger, or how to solve problems. As a matter of fact, many adults are still learning how to cope with these issues. Yet, we often forget to teach children the everyday skills necessary for getting along with others. These special skills are taught with the Grace and Courtesy lessons. These lessons are presented through demonstration and then practiced through role-playing, and modeled by teachers and older students. They are the foundation of the classroom, as they set a tone of respect and kindness. The child learns such important skills as, how to shake hands and greet a friend,

how to properly interrupt someone who is busy, and how to tell someone to please move out of my way. The children love these lessons. They are always eager to take a turn playing the roles, and they are thrilled to know a better way to handle personal situations.

Another important consideration, is that children have the same range and depth of emotions as adults, but they don't have the maturity or experience to put these feelings in perspective. The goal of Grace and Courtesy lessons and conflict resolution techniques is to validate these feelings and give children the tools to successfully tackle them. Children learn what to do when someone is unkind or unfair and how to discuss conflicts when they occur. Teachers and children act as mediators, coaching children in conflict through a process of expressing their feelings and finding a way to fix their mistakes. In one such incident, a five-year-old acted as the peacemaker for two children engaged in an escalating disagreement. She linked the hands of the angry children and rubbed their backs as she encouraged their negotiations. In time, with modeling and consistency, children become proficient at handling social difficulties. In fact, parents have reported incidents in which children have encouraged peaceful negotiations between mom and dad, as well as settling problems with siblings and neighborhood friends.

In addition to lessons, which teach social graces, there is a lot of emphasis placed on developing practical life skills. What we commonly refer to as misbehavior is often the side effect when children feel insecure, and disempowered. Children who are happily engaged in self-satisfying activities with a clear purpose experience a great sense of accomplishment and power. When the child can do things for herself, she will feel confident and in control. These everyday living skills such as pouring, scrubbing tables, dish washing, and polishing, also help the child learn to focus his attention and complete a task. These lessons require the child to follow an orderly step by step process, which will further develop both self discipline and logical thinking, thus laying a foundation for the more abstract academic activities offered within the other areas of the classroom.

The magical spell that enables the Montessori Child to become disciplined is his love for meaningful activity. When the environment provides consistency, nurturing adults and stimulating work, the child can go about his most important work, creating the adult he will become. Montessori offers him valuable tools for this great task: independence, order, coordination, cooperation and confidence.

Montessori, however, is only one component in the child's life. A child's home environment and parents' love are the most critical factors in his development. Unfortunately, our children are not born with an owner's manual. Parents generally rely on the wisdom of grandparents and doctors educators, as well as their own instincts to determine the right parenting style for their family. Parents should be able to find within their Montessori school, a family friendly environment that is ready to offer support. When schools and families develop a partnership there is greater opportunity for consistency and continuity.

How can parents bring this type of discipline home from the classroom? A democratic parenting style is recommended, rather than the authoritarian style with which most of us grew up. We learn to be obedient "or else." Discipline was imposed from without rather than allowed to grow from within. Threats, bribes or withdrawal of privileges were expected to make us comply with our parents' wishes. To be consistent with the "discipline" used in the classroom the parenting style at home should emphasize respect for the child's feelings, choices within acceptable limits, encouragement, conflict resolution, and natural and logical consequences for behavior.

There are many parenting courses, which encourage this style of parenting. Such courses as Redirecting Children's Behavior, Active Parenting, or STEP, dovetail the Montessori approach to discipline. These courses are based on theories of psychologists, Rudolf Dreikurs and Alfred Adler. Adler was a contemporary and a colleague of Dr. Montessori and they shared many ideas about children's behavior. Parenting courses and parent support networks are a wonderful way to create bridges between the classroom and family environments.

Whether in the home or the classroom it is important to keep in mind the ultimate goal of discipline. Too often we discipline for the moment, hastily solving the present problem, but possibly creating future ones. Disciplining with the long-range goal means keeping in mind the independent adult you want your child to become.

The goal of the Montessori classroom whether it is a prepared environment for infants and toddlers, preschoolers, elementary, or secondary students, is first and foremost the development of skills necessary for a productive and fulfilling life. The best of the academic curriculums are useless if the child does not develop inner discipline, integrity, and respect for others and oneself. In today's world of moral degeneracy, these goals may seem out of reach, but they are more important than ever before. The young person who faces the world of tomorrow armed with self-confidence and self-discipline is far more likely to achieve success and happiness. They will be prepared to meet any challenges that the "real world" may present, and will hopefully bring to that world a bit of the peace and joy they experienced in the Montessori environment.