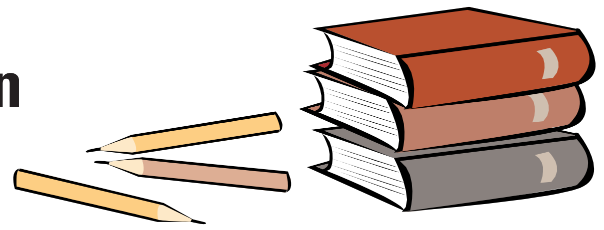
THE EARLY YEARS

Evaluating Montessori Education



Angeline Lillard[1]* and Nicole Else-Quest[2]

An analysis of students' academic and social scores compares a Montessori school with other elementary school education programs.

Montessori education is a 100-year-old method of schooling that was first used with impoverished preschool children in Rome. The program continues to grow in popularity. Estimates indicate that more than 5000 schools in the United States—including 300 public schools and some high schools—use the Montessori program. Montessori education is characterized by multi-age classrooms, a special set of educational materials, student-chosen work in long time blocks, collaboration, the absence of grades and tests, and individual and small group instruction in both academic and social skills (*1*). The effectiveness of some of these elements is supported by research on human learning (*2*).

We evaluated the social and academic impact of Montessori education. Children were studied near the end of the two most widely implemented levels of Montessori education: primary (3- to 6-year-olds) and elementary (6- to 12-year-olds). The Montessori school we studied [located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (*3*)], which served mainly urban minority children, was in its ninth year of operation and was recognized by the U.S. branch of the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI/USA) for its good implementation of Montessori principles (*4*).

Because it was not feasible to randomly assign children to experimental and control educational groups, we designed our study around the school lottery already in place. Both the experimental and the control group had entered the Montessori school lottery; those who were accepted were assigned to the experimental (Montessori) group, and those who were not accepted were assigned to the control (other education systems) group. This strategy addressed the concern that parents who seek to enroll their child in a Montessori school are different from parents who do not. It is crucial to control for this potential source of bias, because parents are the dominant influence on child outcomes (*5*).

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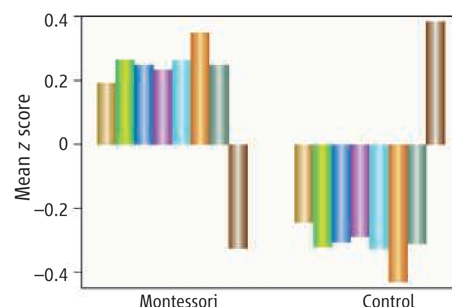
Recruitment

We contacted parents of children who had entered the Montessori school lottery in 1997 and 2003 and invited them to be in the study. All families were offered $100 for participation.

Because the lottery, which was conducted by the school district, was random, the Montessori and control groups should contain similar children. Ninety percent of consenting parents filled out a demographic survey. Parents from the Montessori and control groups had similar average incomes ($20,000 to $50,000 per year) at each student age level. This addressed a concern with a retrospective lottery loser design that the final samples might be different for reasons other than the treatment. Another variable, ethnicity, was not surveyed because parent income contributes more to child outcomes than does ethnicity (*6*). We were also concerned that requesting ethnicity data would reduce participation in this racially divided city.

Overall, 53 control and 59 Montessori students were studied (table S1). The 5-year-old group included 25 control and 30 Montessori children, and the 12-year-old group included 28 control and 29 Montessori children. Gender balance was imperfect, but gender did not contribute significantly to any of the differences reported here. Children at the Montessori school were drawn from all six classrooms at the primary level and all four at the upper elementary level. The control children were at non-Montessori schools: 27 public inner city schools (40 children) and 12 suburban public, private/voucher, or charter schools (13 children). Many of the public schools had enacted special programs, such as gifted and talented curricula, language immersion, arts, and discovery learning.



Results for 5-year-olds. Montessori students achieved higher scores [converted to average *z* scores (*18*)] for both academic and behavioral tests.

Children in both groups were tested for cognitive/academic and social/behavioral skills that were selected for importance in life, not to examine specific expected effects of Montessori education. Our results revealed significant advantages for the Montessori group over the control group for both age groups.

Results: 5-Year-Olds

Cognitive/Academic Measures. Seven scales were administered from the Woodcock-Johnson (WJ III) Test Battery (*7*). Significant differences favoring Montessori 5-year-olds were found on three WJ tests measuring academic skills related to school readiness: Letter-Word Identification, Word Attack (phonological decoding ability), and Applied Problems (math skills) (see chart, left). No difference was expected or found on the Picture Vocabulary test (basic vocabulary) because vocabulary is highly related to family background variables (*8*). Two WJ tests of basic thinking skills—Spatial Reasoning and Concept Formation—also showed no difference.

Five-year-olds were also tested on executive function, thought to be important to success in school. On one such test, children were asked to sort cards by one rule, switch to a new rule, and (if they did well) then switch to a compound rule. Montessori children performed significantly better on this test. A test of children's ability to delay gratification (a treat) did not indicate statistically significant differences.

Social/Behavioral Measures. Children were given five stories about social problems, such as another child hoarding a swing, and were asked how they would solve each problem (*9*).

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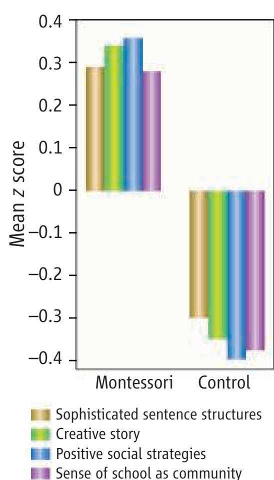
Montessori children were significantly more likely (43% versus 18% of responses) to use a higher level of reasoning by referring to justice or fairness to convince the other child to relinquish the object. Observations at the playground during recess indicated Montessori children were significantly more likely to be involved in positive shared peer play and significantly less likely to be involved in rough play that was ambiguous in intent (such as wrestling without smiling).

The False Belief task was administered to examine children's understanding of the mind (*10*). Recognition that people represent the world in subjective as well as objective ways is a landmark achievement in social cognition (*11*). Social negotiation and discussion about mental states leads to this advance in children (*12*). Whereas 80% (significantly more than chance) of the Montessori 5-year-olds passed, the control children were at chance, with 50% passing.

Results: 12-Year-Olds

Cognitive/Academic Measures. Twelve-year-olds were given 5 minutes to complete a story beginning "____ had the best/worst day at school." The Montessori students' essays were rated as significantly more creative and as using significantly more sophisticated sentence structures (see chart, below). Control and Montessori essays were similar in spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Unlike the 5-year-olds, the 12-year-olds did not perform differently on the WJ tests. This is surprising, because early reading skills normally predict later reading (*13*). Either the control group had "caught up" by age 12 to the Montessori children, or the 12-year-old Montessori children were not more advanced in these early reading skills when they were 5. If the latter, one possible explanation is that the 12-year-olds started at the school when it was in its third year. The Montessori method relies on peer teaching and modeling, so those who are in the early classes of a new school lack some advantages relative to those who begin later.

Social/Behavioral Measures. As a social skills test, 12-year-olds read six stories about social problems (such as not being asked to a party) and were asked to choose among four responses. Montessori 12-year-olds were significantly more likely to choose the positive assertive response (for example, verbally expressing one's hurt feelings to the host). On a questionnaire regarding their feelings about school, Montessori children indicated having a greater sense of community, responding more positively to items such as, "Students in my class really care about each other" and "Students in this class treat each other with respect."



Results for 12-year-olds. Students in the Montessori program wrote more sophisticated and creative stories and showed a more developed sense of community and social skills. Scores were converted to average *z* scores (*18*).

Benefits of Montessori Education

On several dimensions, children at a public inner city Montessori school had superior outcomes relative to a sample of Montessori applicants who, because of a random lottery, attended other schools. By the end of kindergarten, the Montessori children performed better on standardized tests of reading and math, engaged in more positive interaction on the playground, and showed more advanced social cognition and executive control. They also showed more concern for fairness and justice. At the end of elementary school, Montessori children wrote more creative essays with more complex sentence structures, selected more positive responses to social dilemmas, and reported feeling more of a sense of community at their school.

These findings were obtained with a lottery loser design that provides control for parental influence. Normally parental influence (both genetic and environmental) dominates over influences such as current or past school and day-care environments. For example, in the large National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) study of early child care, correlations between parenting quality and WJ early academic tests had effect sizes comparable to those seen here, whereas school effects were much smaller (*5*). An evaluation of *Success for All*, considered a highly successful reading intervention, reported a quarter of a standard deviation as its largest effect size (for Word Attack) in a randomized field trial, and stated that it was equal to a 4.69-month advance in reading skills (*14*). Stronger effects are often found in the first years of pilot programs when researchers are involved in implementation of their own programs (*15*), termed the "super-realization effect" (*16*). In our study, the school did not anticipate an evaluation. Especially remarkable outcomes of the Montessori education are the social effects, which are generally dominated by the home environment (*17*).

Future research could improve on the research design here by following lottery participants prospectively and by tracking those who drop out and examining their reasons. It would be useful to replicate these findings in different Montessori schools, which can vary widely. The school involved here was affiliated with AMI/USA, which has a traditional and relatively strict implementation. It would also be useful to know whether certain components of Montessori (e.g., the materials or the opportunities for collaborative work) are associated with particular outcomes.

Montessori education has a fundamentally different structure from traditional education. At least when strictly implemented, Montessori education fosters social and academic skills that are equal or superior to those fostered by a pool of other types of schools.

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18. The *z*-score conversion was used for the graph to give all tests the same metric. A *z* score sets the mean (in this case of the entire sample) at 0, one standard deviation above the mean at 1.68, and one standard deviation below the mean at –1.68.

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On Time

by Claire Paglia | Montessori Blog

Imagine that you have just entered a special event.

Everyone is already there and has begun to eat their meals, having already had time to hang their coats, get a drink, find their table and get to know the people next to you and across from you before the special guest speaks. You have arrived late and haven't had time to do any of the above. It's almost an arresting feeling to walk in the door and realize how late you are. I mean, it didn't seem like things were running that far behind, right?

Translating the above scenario, which most adults have experienced at one time or another, to the experience of at 2 ½-6 ½ year old child is not that far from what the child experiences when he arrives to school after the day has already begun.

More often than not the children who are repeatedly tardy haven't the slightest idea that they are, in fact, very late to school until they reach the doorway and see that the class is already in session. They see their friends busy at work, no longer in the transitional space in the doorway for putting away coats and lunchboxes and greeting one another. There is always a moment where the late child stands almost paralyzed in the doorway, and it dawns on them that they are late. I still greet those children just as I would the child who is on time, and sometimes I might ask how the morning went at home.

I'm reminded of one very strong-willed child who was always late to school by at least an hour and sometimes two. Every day, she would come into the classroom with a scowl on her face and have the toughest time finding a material to work with to begin her day.

For almost a whole school year, I tried to figure out why she was so late, talking about the importance of being on time with her parents, reminding them that we wanted to offer all of the children a peaceful, uninterrupted three-hour-work cycle, to no avail. Finally, she told me that she just didn't feel like getting up in the morning.

Mentioning this new development to her parents changed things a bit. They started to put her to bed earlier and wake her up earlier so they could arrive at school on time. And interestingly enough, she started to change as well. The scowl left her face and was replaced with eagerness and joy to be at school and even arrive before some of her other friends. Others had the same response once they began to arrive on time. Tantrums ceased.

It is so vital to set up a consistent routine at home so that one is able to get from place to place on time. Children at this age are looking to us to know how we should be as human beings. If we set up the precedence that it is acceptable to walk in late to school, church, plays, baseball practice, ballet rehearsal or a violin lesson, the children begin to develop a habit of arriving after events are under way and never really understand the impression that it has on others.

On the other hand, if we can offer to the children a predictable routine and schedule so that they know when things are happening, it often takes the stress and chaos out of leaving on time. They can depend on the same series of events to happen before they must be in the car on the way to school, practices, etc.

And if getting dressed is the culprit, send them to school in their pajamas with a change of clothes. I guarantee you they won't spend more than five minutes in their pajamas at school once they see everyone else is dressed!

The five-day school week

Another challenge that Montessorians face, especially when working with the younger children, is helping parents, and sometimes administrators alike, to grasp the importance of a five-day school week.

I so often hear, "Well, they are only three," or "They are going to spend SO many years in school, why spend time in a five-day week now?" It's very hard to know the best way to respond. I understand how hard it can be sometimes for parents to spend time away from their children. Or parents sometimes look at school as a way to have a little break and time to take care of other responsibilities as well as offering their child a place to spend a few hours engaged in a safe place.

However, a key reason behind the five-day school week in Primary, in particular, is that it aids the social cohesion of the classroom environment. What is social cohesion?

It's the building of the group, the dynamics and the pulse of the classroom. It's the balance between oldest and youngest; first-, second- and third-year children; and even the balance between personalities, cultures and societal norms. The children are subconsciously absorbing all that is around them, including those who are not at school on a regular basis. The children always ask where another child is whenever the child is absent from school.

That is to say, children of this age, as mentioned above, thrive on consistency and routine. So, attending school for five consecutive days is invaluable to the child. When they attend regularly, the environment becomes more predictable, and the daily routine gives satisfaction rather than the distress or tension of becoming oriented again after a gap. Dr. Maria Montessori says, "it is through these daily experiences that a social order comes to being … the only social life that children get in ordinary schools is during playtime or on excursions. Ours live always in an active community."

The children that attend school five days a week also have a much easier time continuing along the progression of materials at their own pace. There is more time for receiving new lessons and less time in between receiving those lessons, so there is more time for practicing and mastering them.

These children are getting the full benefit of one of the cornerstones of an authentic Montessori experience — the three-hour work cycle.

Montessori observed that a MINIMUM of three hours leads to the deepest concentration, which is followed by calm, peaceful, cooperative and kind characteristics. Concentration is considered “healing” as it brings us to feel more confident, energized, and refreshed. We want to be able to offer consistent open-ended time so that children have the freedom to independently choose what to do. If we do this, we observe children who become so engaged that they start to “fall in love” with work.

But a child who is not in school on time five days a week is not able to reap the full benefits of the work cycle.

On time and in school

So, what might happen if you arrived at the party early with ample time to settle in, put your coat away and greet your friends? You have enough time to get a drink and find your seat before the meal even begins. How do you feel? Are you more settled? Are you feeling more at peace or even excited about the upcoming events for the evening?

The children are the same. They begin their day with more joy and peace when they have enough time to adjust and transition into the environment when arriving on time. Also, when they are attending for the full five-day week, the children feel they are even more of an active participant in the daily life of the community. The children even aid each other in finding their work for the day and gearing up for new lessons on exciting materials.

Mario Montessori, Jr, in his book Education for Human Development, reminds us that, “Adults are the representatives of the outer world and the most important source of guidance for the child. … Man is not born with pre-established behavior patterns but with the ability to form them during youth. He does this through his personal experiences in his interaction with the environment. These experiences are internalized, and thus structure his inner world.”

Our role is even more vital for the child, for we demonstrate the very behavior that we are hoping to see. We help the child to experience how courteous it is to be on time, participating fully in the classroom activities and how both impact the surrounding environment.

Claire Paglia is starting her fifth year as a primary Montessori guide and her third at Cross of Life Christian Montessori School in Roswell, Georgia. She's also worked closely with Joen Bettmann, director of training, at the International Montessori Training Institute in Atlanta as a course assistant. She lives with her husband and 11-month-old son, outside of Atlanta.

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Serve Up Good Nutrition for Preschool Children

Get even picky eaters to eat healthfully – with a minimum of fuss.

By Elizabeth M. Ward, MS, RD
WebMD Feature
Reviewed by Kathleen M. Zelman, MPH, RD, LD

Preschoolers are active, spirited tykes. And while they're generally adorable and fun, it's perfectly normal for 3, 4, and 5-year-olds to be opinionated -- especially about eating.
Here's some advice from the experts on how to avoid preschool food fights.

What's On the Menu?

"Preschoolers can eat what the rest of the family eats," says Melinda Johnson, MS, RD, a pediatric nutrition expert and spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. That's provided family meals feature a variety of healthy foods, in moderation.

Depending on his or her age, an active preschooler's energy needs rival those of some grown women. While there's no need to track a youngster's calorie consumption, it is important to make calories count.

A young child's eating plan should consist mostly of healthy foods, such as lean meats, poultry, seafood, eggs, and legumes; whole grains, such as whole-wheat bread and cereals; at least two servings of dairy foods daily; and fresh or lightly processed fruits and vegetables.

There is room for treats, but it's limited, says Kathy Mitchell, MD, a practicing pediatrician at Harvard Vanguard Medical Associates in Watertown, Mass.

"Keep junk foods like cookies and candy out of the house to reduce temptation," she advises. "But don't go overboard. Kids can become intensely attracted to forbidden foods."

Make Time for Meals

Regular family meals provide opportunities for good nutrition, and much more. Dining together encourages proper table manners and fosters language development and conversational skills. When you

minimize distractions by turning off the TV and turning on the answering machine, you show your child that mealtime is reserved for savoring healthy food and nurturing meaningful relationships.

While the ritual of regular meals is comforting to kids, dining with preschoolers can be chaotic and messy. Expect spills and some sloppy eating as your youngster hones his self-feeding skills. Refrain from being a "clean freak" to minimize mealtime stress.

"Being too strict about neatness at the dinner table may cause your little one to feel bad about knocking over his milk or getting food on his clothes," Johnson says.

Monkey See, Monkey Do

Want your child to accept baked potatoes instead of fries, and to prefer milk to sugary soft drinks? Then you must, too.

"Studies show that children adopt their parents' eating habits starting early in life," Johnson says. "Don't expect your child to eat better than you do."

Little ones love to imitate adults, and they will mimic your eating habits, whether they are good or in need of improvement. Capitalize on a youngster's natural curiosity by substituting healthier foods at the dinner table. Chances are, he'll have what you're having, and you'll be broadening his food horizons while arousing a minimum of suspicion.

Here are some suggested stand-ins that offer variety and good nutrition:

- Couscous instead of white rice
- Sweet potatoes for white potatoes
- Canadian bacon for bacon
- Mashed potatoes made with reduced-fat milk for french fries
- Fig bars for high-fat cookies
- Tube yogurt (freeze first for easier handling) for ice cream
  Reduced-fat cheddar for regular cheese.

Snacks Fill Nutrient Gaps

Scheduling meals and snacks helps ensure a healthy diet for preschoolers. Problem is, young children don't always follow a rigid eating plan. Illnesses, including ear infections and colds; fatigue; and growth spurts can temporarily change the frequency and amount your young child consumes.

Healthy between-meal snacks help fill in nutrient gaps in a little one's diet. The best snacks are nutritious foods eaten in amounts that take the edge off your son or daughter's hunger. Don't worry if they're not ravenous at their next meal.

"When you offer nutritious snacks, your child gets what they need, so it doesn't matter if they don't eat a lot at dinner," says Mitchell.

Feed your child in a designated area, preferably a kitchen or dining room table. Sitting down to eat, and only to eat, helps children pay attention to their feelings of fullness, Mitchell says.

Try these nutritious and delicious snack options for your preschooler:

- 1/2 sandwich
- Well-cooked vegetables and low-fat dip
- Whole grain crackers and cheese
- Yogurt
- Fruit smoothies
- Milk
- Chopped hard-boiled eggs or scrambled eggs
- Dry cereal; cereal with milk
- Low-fat microwave popcorn (starting at age 4).

Encourage a Healthy Weight

Your child is still young, but it's not too early to help him achieve a healthy weight. Respecting a preschooler's ability to decide how much to eat and when is central to that effort. An *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* study suggests how capable children are of regulating their intake – and how adults can interfere with that innate ability.

When researchers served preschoolers a double portion of macaroni and cheese, the children took bigger bites and ate more. But when the

researchers placed the double-sized portion in a serving bowl and let the children serve themselves, the children chose an appropriate amount of food for their ages: about a 1/2-cup portion for 3-year-olds and 3/4 cup for 4 and 5-year-olds.

Limiting television -- even educational shows -- also improves preschoolers' chances for a healthy weight. Three-year-olds who watched two or more hours of television daily were nearly three times more likely to be overweight than children who watched less, according to recent research in the *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*.

"It's tempting to allow a preschooler to watch TV so that you can get a few minutes to yourself, but it's a tough habit to break," Mitchell says. And while Mitchell, a mother of two, does not expect parents to banish television, she is adamant about separating eating and the television set.

What's the problem with eating in front of the TV? Writing in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, researchers recently found that preschoolers of normal weight who often eat while watching television tend to eat more, possibly because they are distracted from normal cues for fullness.

Fend Off Food Fits

Preschoolers can be picky eaters. They may favor the same few foods for weeks on end, in spite of your attempts at variety. You can't stop children from fussing about food, but you can control the way you react to their demands for chicken nuggets or macaroni and cheese every day.

The temptation is to prepare only the foods you are sure your young child will accept. But resist that urge.

Johnson, also a mom, recommends playing down entrenched food preferences while continuing to offer a variety of choices.

"Most children will eventually get bored and at least start picking at the other foods you offer, as long as you don't engage them in a power struggle at the table," she says.

It's normal to become concerned when a child continues to choose the same limited diet. While you're waiting for your child to snap out of his eating rut, put your mind at ease by offering a daily multivitamin appropriate for your child's age. Multivitamins fill in small nutrient gaps in a picky eater's diet, particularly for iron -- a nutrient that's critical to a child's brain development, immune system and energy level.

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Separation

by Ann Jordahl

"The infant in arms has far greater mental energies than are usually imagined. At birth he is nothing – psychologically speaking. And not only in his mind, for at birth he is incapable of coordinated movement. With his almost useless limbs there is nothing he can do. Nor can he talk, even if he sees what is going on about him. Yet, with the passing of time, the child walks and talks and goes from one achievement to another, till a man is formed in all the grandeur of his bodily and mental gifts. And this opens the door to an imperious truth: the child is not an inert being who owes everything he can do to us, as if he were an empty vessel that we have to fill. No, it is the child who makes the man, and no man exists who was not made by the child who once he was."[1]

From beginning to end, human life encompasses a series of separations. The fetus, in undergoing birth, experiences a drastic separation from the uterine paradise where its every need was anticipated and where its experience of stimulation was heavily mediated. It emerges as a baby into a world to which it must adapt. This new baby needs approximately two months to develop the ability to regulate its own body temperature, to adjust to sudden or loud noises, to bright lights, to being touched, especially by anyone other than its mother. And it takes the new mother a similar amount of time to recover from the work of pregnancy and birth and to adjust to serving the new and imperious demands of the baby.

The birth of the baby severs the initial unity in which two lived as one. And it exposes the baby to the excitements and dangers of the world. While the fetus was protected, the baby is on its own. No matter how loving and protective the parent, only the baby can do its own breathing and eating and processing of stimulation. The mission of this baby, like that of any other new life, is to mature. And as the baby becomes a child, it looks more and more away from its parent and to the world for the stimulation and challenge which it uses in order to complete its task of maturing, of becoming like its parent.

Usually birth occurs because the pregnancy can no longer sustain the needs of the fetus and because the fetus is developed to the point of being ready to function independently. In fact, the fetus will not survive if it does not separate from its mother for the first time, through birth. And the pregnant mother can't, and probably doesn't really want to support the baby's growth in this way much longer. A pregnancy, even an easy one, is hard on the body, and at its heavy conclusion, the mother too is ready for the unity of pregnancy to come to an end.

Children who are allowed to separate and to go out into the world on their own, return freely, out of love, because they have no need of escape.

And end it does, with the sometimes shockingly difficult experience of birth, followed by a slow adjustment to the newly separated state of things. While both mother and baby are ready for the separation, they are ready for very different reasons. The baby must separate in order to survive and to thrive; the mother must separate because she cannot continue to sustain so completely the burden of another life.

Once the baby has taken up the burden of sustaining its own life, it enters into a new relationship with its mother. In this relationship, mother and baby rely on one another to adjust to life after the birth. The baby's suckling produces maternal hormones, which help the mother to heal from the stress of pregnancy and birth. The mother supports the baby's survival and helps the baby to adjust to life outside the womb. While no longer an entity, mother and baby can remain close and deeply in tune with one another. This allows them to adjust to the separation they had needed and to the subsequent change in their relationship.

This sequence of unity followed by separation and the development of a new kind of relationship, sets the paradigm for the lifelong parent-child relationship. Throughout their lives, the child will follow a pattern of development away from the parent, into the world, and the parent will be challenged to adjust to and then to trust the child's increasing autonomy. Each time the child reaches a new level of independence the parent-child relationship changes. And each time the child becomes ready for more independence, they need to achieve it in order to keep on growing. The parental protectiveness which had served the child well just previously, can next become a barrier to the child's development unless the parent is able to grant the child the new room that it needs to grow.

When a child masters a level of independence and separation that they are ready for, such as going to school as a toddler or a primary student; going on a field trip; spending the night at a grandparent's or friend's house; going on overnight field trips with a school group; they reach a level of fulfillment, inner peace, and confidence that comes from being at one with themselves. The parent who accepts separation fosters their child's own trust in themselves, and in them as parents, for the parent who accepts separation is able to observe and to respect their child.

"Life is a continuum of natural *separations* and *attachments*... Natural separations and attachments are those that happen at the right time and with the right help. It is important to understand that both realities are part of the process of development and that we need both in order to continue to grow...it must be clear that when we leave something it is to gain more, to have more opportunities ...If we can perceive the value of separation (and are ready to separate) then we can help children deal with this separation and transform it into a process that enhances trust and security in life... As [children] continue to grow, the entire world will become their environment, and they will feel free to move in it because they bring inside of themselves the positive model of a separation: a gate through which it is possible to reach more experiences and relationships."[2]

And thus it can be a bittersweet experience to raise a child. When we become parents we welcome a new life into our settled and mature lives, and experience a state of union, which feels like a blessing. Time slow down as the baby shifts in our arms, and we have a sense of our lives falling into place. For some of us, to become a parent is not only a natural pleasure, but also a way to lay balm upon old wounds. For all of us, to become a parent is to grow in unforeseen ways, and to experience our astounding capacity for love.

Then time begins to speed up as the baby crawls out of our arms, learns to stand, and walks away. Oh yes, the baby always comes back, but each time as an older, sturdier, and more independent child. The sense of union becomes intermittent. Eventually the pleasure of parenting becomes shot through with difficulties. We become tired, or exasperated, or confused, or worried. Perhaps we doubt our ability to parent, or become concerned for our child's progress. Yet through it all we can continue to grow as we continue to experience a love astounding in its capacity to abide by difficulty.

As our children grow, they leave us for increasingly long periods of time, at greater and greater distances. These departures into independence are at once cause and effect of our children's developing maturity. When they go, whether it is to crawl into the next room or to board the bus for camp, we miss our children. We love them and we miss them. Perhaps we are concerned for them. And in these states of feeling, it can be difficult for us to release our children to their maturity.

It is as easy for us to convince ourselves that our child is not yet ready to leave us in a certain way. We can readily believe that so small or so young a being needs protecting, and so believing, we might delay their leave-taking for a little. We substitute our competence for our child's learning, because we tell ourselves that the work of learning will hurt them in some way, or be too hard for them.

"When [children] have chosen a task and adults go to help them thinking it is too hard, the children defend themselves against this useless help. This is easily understood because the child, in order to grow, must be active in tasks his intelligence tells him he can do and if people go to help the child, they act instead of him."[3]

When we delay a child's independence, even for just a little while, we ask the child to halt the progress of their inevitable development. A child might well accommodate a parent's concern by trying to delay their own growth. They might delay learning to use the toilet, or avoid making choices for themselves, or persist in a fear of leaving home. But time waits for no child, and the child who tries to stay young in order to allay a parent's concerns simply postpones or avoids learning certain life skills. The child cannot avoid growing up, and needs to learn how to function independently. Just as no parent can breathe for their child, so no parent can go out into the world for their child, or mature for them.

"A child gains experience through exercise and movement. He coordinates his own movements and records the emotions he experiences in coming into contact with the external world. These help to mold his intelligence. He laboriously learns how to speak by listening attentively and making those initial efforts which are possible for him alone, and with tireless efforts he succeeds in learning how to stand erect and run about...By means of his constant efforts, experiences, sorrows, and conquests of difficult trials and struggles, a child slowly perfects his activities. An adult can assist in shaping the environment, but it is the child that perfects his own being...The perfections of an adult are thus dependent upon his efforts as a child."[4]

Independent, mature functioning does not commence when a child leaves home as a young adult. It develops in stages from very early in a child's life. And it rests upon two things besides the child's natural tendency to develop. It rests upon the child's basic trust in the world, and upon their basic trust in themselves. The child's basic trust in the world develops in their first few months of life after birth, while they adjust to independent functioning for the first time. A young baby who adjusts to the first separation from its mother learns that when it needs something, that need will be satisfied. And the child's basic trust in themselves develops during their first years, as they establish and coordinate all of the abilities which will allow them to function independently.

The child who separates from their parent is able to do so because the parent leads the way. The parent who teaches their child that "Mommy always comes back" thereby teaches their child how to come back. It is indeed possible to have the best of both worlds: it is possible to allow one's child to grow, to separate, to fulfill their developmental mission. And it is possible to remain connected. Children who are allowed to separate and to go out into the world on their own, return freely, out of love, because they have no need of escape. They are free.

Separations provide us with the opportunity to experience first hand the nature of human love. Not only is a parent's love for their child elastic and infinite, but, we discover, so is the child's love for their parent. As our children separate from us, bit by bit, more and more, we lose their dependence and their need for us. But we gain their freely chosen love, and they return to us because we have trusted them to develop, to mature, to become independent. We have trusted them and in so doing, we have taught them to become like us. And they have become adult, capable of vast and surprising things, like thriving in the world, giving love, and nurturing life.

NOTES:

[1] Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, Henry Holt and Co., New York, 1995, p. 15.

[2] Silvana Quattrocchi Montanaro, "The Value of Separation."

[3] Maria Montessori, *The Four Planes of Education*, AMI, 1939, p. 4.

[4] Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1972, pp. 194-5.

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The Montessori Dictionary

Key Terms Defined

Written by Annette Haines, Ed.D.

Absorbent mind: A mind able to absorb knowledge quickly and effortlessly. Montessori said the child from birth to six years has an "absorbent mind."

Adaptation: Related to the idea of an absorbent mind (Haines, 1993) is a special power of the young child that can be called the power of adaptation. This power is a process whereby the young child absorbs the culture of her time and place, taking in all the spirit, the customs, the ambitions and attitudes of a society by simply living in that society.

Analysis of movement: A technique used by Montessori teachers. The adult, when showing a complex action to a child, breaks it down into its parts and shows one step at a time, executing each movement slowly and exactly. The action thus becomes a sequence of simple movements and the child has a greater chance of success when "given the liberty to make use of them." (Montessori, 1996, p 108)

Children's House: The English name for Montessori's Casa dei Bambini [Italian]. A place for children from 3-6 years to live and grow. Everything necessary for optimal human development is included in a safe and secure environment.

Classification: Sorting. Allocating or distributing according to common characteristics. The young child engages in classification activities because the process is essential for the construction of the intellect. The Montessori classroom offers many opportunities for classification.

Concentration: The act of concentrating. The young child focuses his or her attention on aspects of the environment essential for development. From a Montessori perspective, concentration is "a consistent activity concentrated on a single work–an exercise on some external object, where the movements of the hands are guided by the mind." (1983, p.149) Deep engagement.

Concrete to abstract: A progression both logical and developmentally appropriate. The child is introduced first to a concrete material that embodies an abstract idea such as size or color. Given hands-on experience, the child's mind grasps the idea inherent in the material and forms an abstraction. Only as the child develops, is she gradually able to comprehend the same idea in symbolic form.

Control of error: A way of providing instant feedback. Every Montessori activity provides the child with some way of assessing his own progress. This puts the control in the hands of the learner and protects the young child's self-esteem and self-motivation. Control of error is an essential aspect of auto-education. Coordination of movement: One of the major accomplishments of early childhood. Through the child's own activity, she refines her muscular coordination and consequently acquires increasingly higher levels of independent functioning. Because of this developmental need, children are drawn to activities which involve movement and especially to pastimes which demand a certain level of exactitude and precision.

Creativity/imagination: Imagination involves the forming of a mental concept of what is not actually present to the senses. Creativity is a product of the imagination and results from the mental recombining of imagined ideas in new and inventive ways. Both are dependent mental imaginary formed on through sensorial experience.

Cycle of activity: Little children, when engaged in an activity which interests them, will repeat it many times and for no apparent reason, stopping suddenly only when the inner need which compelled the child to activity has been satisfied. To allow for the possibility of long concentrated work cycles, Montessori advocates a 3-hour uninterrupted work period.

Development of the will: The ability to will, or choose to do something with conscious intent, develops gradually during the first phase of life and is strengthened through practice. The Montessori environment offers many opportunities for the child to choose. Willpower, or self-control, results from the many little choices of daily life in a Montessori school.

Deviations: Behavior commonly seen in children that is the result of some obstacle to normal development. Such behavior may be commonly understood as negative (a timid child, a destructive child, etc.) or positive (a passive, quiet child). Both positive and negative deviations disappear once the child begins to concentrate on a piece of work freely chosen.

Discipline from within: Self-discipline. The discipline in a well-run Montessori classroom is not a result of the teacher's control or of rewards or punishments. It's source comes from within each individual child,who can control his or her own actions and make positive choices regarding personal behavior. Self-discipline is directly related to development of the will.

Exercises of practical life: One of the four areas of the Montessori prepared environment. The exercises of practical life resemble the simple work of life in the home: sweeping, dusting, washing dishes, etc. These purposeful activities help the child adapt to his new community, learn self-control and begin to see himself as a contributing party of the social unit. His intellect grows as he works his hands; his personality becomes integrated as body and mind function as a unit.

False fatigue: A phenomenon observed in Children's Houses around the world–often at approximately 10 a.m. The children seem to lose interest in work, their behavior becomes disorderly and the noise level rises. It may appear as if the children are tired. However, if the directress understands this is simply false fatigue, they will return to work on their own and their work will be at an even higher level than before.

Grace and courtesy: An aspect of practical life. Little lessons which demonstrate positive social behavior help the young child adapt to life in a group and arm her with knowledge of socially acceptable behavior; practical information, useful both in and out of school.

Help from periphery: The periphery is that part of the child that comes into contact with external reality. The child takes in impressions through the senses and through movement. Help from the periphery means presenting objects and activities in such a way so as to evoke purposeful movement on the part of the child. "We never give to the eye more than we give to the hand." (Standing. 1957, p. 237)

Human tendencies: A central tenet of Montessori philosophy is that human beings exhibit a predisposition towards exploration, orientation, order, abstraction, work, self-perfection, communication, and a spiritual life. The tendencies are universal, spanning age, culture, and racial barriers; they have existed since the dawn of the species and are probably evolutionary in origin. "Montessori stresses the need to serve those special traits that have proven to be tendencies of man throughout history." (Mario Montessori, 1966, p. 21)

Independence: Not depending on another–"with various shades of meaning." (OED, p. 836) Normal development milestones such as weaning, talking, etc. can be seen as a series of events which enable the child to achieve increased individuation, autonomy, and self-regulation. Throughout the four planes of development, the child and young adult continuously seek to become more independent. It's as if the child says, help me to help myself.

Isolation of difficulty: Before giving a presentation, the Montessori teacher analyzes the activity she wants to show the child. Procedures or movements that might prove troublesome are isolated and taught to the child separately. For example, holding and snipping with scissors, simple movement, is shown before cut¬ting curved or zigzag lines; folding cloths are shown before table washing, an activity requiring folding. A task should neither be so hard that it is overwhelming, nor so easy that it is boring.

Indirect preparation: The way nature has of preparing the intelligence. In every action, there is a conscious interest. Through this interest, the mind is being prepared for something in the future. For example, a young child will enjoy the putting together of various triangular shapes, totally unaware that because of this work his mind will later be more accepting of geometry. Also called remote preparation, the deeper educational purpose of many Montessori activities is remote in time.

Language appreciation: From the very first days in the Montessori classroom, children are given the opportunity to listen to true stories about known subjects, told with great expression. Songs, poems, and rhymes are a part of the daily life of the class. The teacher models the art of conversation and respectfully listens to her young students. Looking at beautiful books with lovely, realistic pictures is also a part of language appreciation.

Learning explosions: Human development is often not slow and steady; acquisitions seem to arrive suddenly, almost overnight, and with explosive impact. Such learning explosions are the sudden outward manifestation of a long process of internal growth. For example, the explosion of spoken language around two years of age is the result of many months of inner preparation and mental development.

Mathematical mind: All babies are born with mathematical minds, that is, they have a propensity to learn things which enhance their ability to be exact and orderly, to observe, compare, and classify. Humans naturally tend to calculate, measure, reason, abstract, imagine, and create. But this vital part of intelligence must be given help and direction for it to develop and function. If mathematics is not part of the young child's experience, his subconscious mind will not be accepting of it at a later date.

Maximum effort: Children seem to enjoy difficult work, work which tests their abilities and provides a sense of their growing power. They exult in giving their maximum effort. For example, a tiny child will struggle to carry a tray with juice glasses or push a heavy wheelbarrow whereas school age children, if allowed to make up their own problems, will prefer to sink their teeth into a challenging equation (1+ 2+3+4…+10)2 rather than drill on 3+5=_ and 6+2=_.

Memory games: During the 3–6 period, children are building their memory; sensorial games provide children an opportunity to strengthen their mental muscles. A typical game goes like this; a child picks up a geometric shape from a drawer; lightly traces the shape with her fingers and then sets it back on the table. She then must carry that shape in her mind as she walks across a room full of distractions and finds its match amongst a set of cards at the opposite end of the room. Games like this build visual memory, a key component of reading. Similar games can be played in other sensory modes: auditory, tactile, etc.

Mixed ages: One of the hallmarks of the Montessori method is that children of mixed ages work together in the same class. Age-groupings are based on developmental planes. Children from 3 to 6 years of age are together in the Children's House; 6 to 9–year–olds share the lower elementary, and the upper elementary is made up of 9 to 12– year–olds. Because the work is individual, children progress at their own pace; there is cooperation rather than competition between the ages.

Normalization: If young children are repeatedly able to experience periods of spontaneous concentration on a piece of work freely chosen, they will begin to display the characteristics of normal development; a love of work, an attachment to reality, and a love of silence and working alone. Normalized children are happier children: enthusiastic, generous, and helpful to others. They make constructive work choices and their work reflects their level of development.

Obedience: Obedience is an act of will and develops gradually, showing itself "unexpectedly at the end of a long process of maturation." (Montessori, 1967, p. 257) While the inner development is going on, little children may obey occasionally, but be completely unable to obey consistently. As their will develops through the exercise of free choice, children begin to have the self-discipline or self-control necessary for obedience.

Points of interest: Montessori realized that if children spent too long a time on a complex task or failed to master the necessary details, the exercise would cease to interest them. Therefore she suggested that points of interest be interspersed throughout each activity. These points guide the child toward his or her goal and stimulate repetition and interest by offering immediate feedback, or what Montessori called "control of error." The child's performance becomes refined through trial and error, the points of interest acting as signposts along the path to success.

Prepared environment: The Montessori classroom is an environment prepared by the adult for children. It contains all the essentials for optimal development but nothing superfluous. Attributes of a prepared environment include order and reality, beauty and simplicity. Everything is child-sized to enhance the children's independent functioning. A trained adult and a large enough group of children of mixed ages make up a vital part of the prepared environment.

Presentation: The adult in a Montessori environment does not teach in the traditional sense. Rather she shows the child how to use the various objects and then leaves them free to explore and experiment. This act of showing is called, a presentation. To be effective, it must be done slowly and exactly, step by step, and with a minimum of words.

Psychic embryo: The first three years of life is a period of mental concentration, just as the 9 months in utero is a period of physical creation. The brain awaits experience in the environment to flesh out the genetic blueprint. Since so much mental development occurs after birth, Montessori called the human infant a psychic embryo.

Repetition: The young child's work is very different from the adult's. When an adult works, he sets out to accomplish some goal and stops working when the object has been achieved. A child, however, does not work to accomplish an external goal but rather an internal one. Consequently, they will repeat an activity until the inner goal is accomplished. The unconscious urge to repeat helps the child to coordinate a movement or acquire some ability.

Sensitive periods: Young children experience transient periods of sensibility and are intrinsically motivated or urged to activity by specific sensitivities. A child in a sensitive period is believed to exhibit spontaneous concentration when engaged in an activity that matches a particular sensitivity. For example, children in a sensitive period for order will be drawn to activities that involve ordering. They will be observed choosing such activities and becoming deeply concentrated, sometimes repeating the activity over and over, without external reward or encouragement. Young children are naturally drawn towards those specific aspects of the environment which meet their developmental needs.

Sensorial materials: The sensorial materials were created to help young children in the process of creating and organizing their intelligence. Each scientifically designed material isolates a quality found in the world such as color, size, shape, etc, and this isolation focuses the attention on this one aspect. The child, through repeated manipulation of these objects, comes to form clear ideas or abstractions. What could not be explained by words, the child learns by experience working with the sensorial materials.

Simple to complex: A principal used in the sequence of presentations in a Montessori classroom. Children are first introduced to a concept or idea in its simplest form. As they progress and become capable of mak¬ing more complex connections, they are eventually able to handle information that is less isolated.

Socialization: "The process by which the individual acquires the knowledge and dispositions that enable him to participate as an effective member of a social group and a given social order." (Osterkorn, 1980, p. 12) "Optimal social learning takes place when the children are at different ages." (Hellbrugge, 1979, p. 14)

Sound games: Many children know the alphabet but have not analyzed the sounds in words nor are they aware that words are made up of separate sounds (phonemic awareness). From the age of two (or as soon as the child is speaking fluently) sound games can make them aware of the sounds in words. In England, they use the nursery game "I Spy." The sound of the letter and not the letter name is pronounced.

Three hour work cycle: Through years of observation around the world, Montessori came to understand that children, when left in freedom, displayed a distinct work cycle which was so predictable it could even be graphed. This cycle, with two peaks and one valley, lasted approximately three hours. In Montessori schools, children have three hours of open, uninterrupted time to choose independent work, become deeply engaged, and repeat to their own satisfaction.

The Montessori Dictionary

Key Terms Defined

Three period lesson: "The famous three period lesson of Sequin" (Standing, 1957, p. 307) is actually quite simple. The first period is NAMING: "This is thick. This is thin." The second period is recognition: "Give me the thick. Give me the thin." The third period consists of THE PRONUNCIATION OF THE WORD: "What is this?" In three simple steps, the entire learning process is brought into play. The three period lesson is used for giving language.

Vocabulary enrichment: The young child's vocabulary increases exponentially in the years from 3-6. To feed this natural hunger for words, vocabulary is given: the names of biology, geometry, geography, and so forth, can be learned as well as the names of qualities found in the sensorial material. The child's absorbent mind takes in all these new words "rapidly and brilliantly." (Montessori, 1946, p. 10)

Work: From an evolutionary perspective, the long period of childhood exists so children can learn and experiment in a relatively pressure-free environment. Most social scientists refer to this pressure–free experimentation as play, (e.g., see Groos, 1901) although Montessori prefers to call this activity the "work" of childhood. Children certainly are serious when engaged in the kind of play that meets developmental needs and, given freedom and time, will choose purposeful activities over frivolous make–believe ones.

Writing to reading: In a Montessori environment, children usually begin writing before they can read. They are keen to create words with a box of loose letters (the moveable alphabet) or write their words with chalk or pencil. About six months later, they begin to understand what reading means, and they do so only through associating it with writing. (Montessori, 1936/1983, p. 142)

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THE BLOG

Parents, Please Stop Saying ‘OK’

07/30/2015 01:35 pm ET | **Updated** Jul 30, 2016

Andrea Nair
Psychotherapist, Former Teacher, Parenting Educator

ALAMY

In our quest to attach properly, attune deeply, and respect thoroughly, many parents (me included!) have adopted the bad habit of saying, “OK?” when asking a child to do something.

In our minds we are friendly and checking for approval to show our children how much we love and care for them. BUT, in our child’s mind, he or she is thinking, “GREAT! I get veto power,” and are likely to put on the brakes or shout, “NO!”

Our attempt to be friendly by asking, “OK?” is actually counterproductive. Here’s why:

Putting “OK” at the end of an instruction does two unhelpful things. First, it turns that request into a “yes/no” question, which your child can respond “no” to. Second, it gives your child the authority to ignore your instruction.

Our children get a conflicting message when we add this powerful word to the end of instructions. It is very clear when a parent says, “It’s shoes on time! Are we getting to the mudroom on two feet or two hands and one foot?” The child knows exactly what is expected of her. Adding “OK” with an upward voice inflection turns a statement of instruction (which is clear) into a question (which makes it unclear).

If your child hears, “It’s time to go, OK?” or, “Do you want to put your shoes on? OK?” that child will not know what is expected of her. Also, if your child is asked if she wants to put her shoes on, you have nowhere to go if she says, “NO!” You did ask, and she answered.

Are you the leader of your family?

We can give our children a sense of power by giving them a choice between two options that still gets the job done without asking, “OK.” When we do this, we encourage cooperation, get the task we need to get done complete, and reduce power struggles. The tricky balance for many parents is how to retain the leadership role in the family (or shared with your partner) and also give instructions in a friendly way. When we ask, “OK” we are giving too much power to our children, which is likely to later make us frustrated if they decide not to do what we’ve asked. If you’d like to clarify that your child understands what you are asking, you can say, “Do you understand what... I need/ what time it is/ what we are doing now?”

Breaking the OK habit

In order to stop saying “OK,” remind yourself to form your instructions as friendly statements. Here are three suggestions for getting rid of “OK.”

Count the number of times you say, "OK."

Be aware of how many times you say this word. Count how many times you catch yourself saying it. Write that word down on a sticky note, put that on the fridge, and try to cut that number down the next day.

You can ask your friend or partner for help to stop saying, "OK." They can let you know when you've done it or you can turn it into a fun game like, "The first person to say 'OK' is buying lunch today."

Use an "It's __ time. Are you doing that by A or B" instruction.

Instead of saying, "We need to... OK" or "I'd like you to... OK," try, "It's (getting in the car) time." If your child is under the age of four, I do recommend giving your child several warnings that a change in the activity is coming. I call those, "transition signals."

Here are other examples of that one:

"It's tooth brushing time. Who is brushing them today, Mommy or Daddy?"

"It's changing time. Are you wearing your pink tights or yellow dress?"

You many notice that I am using an "It's ___ time" followed by an "either/or" question. The combination of these two parenting techniques can be very successful at increasing cooperation!

Use "When/ then," "After/ then," or, "First/ then."

The "when/ then" technique and its awesome variations are a very effective way to encourage cooperation in young children. I invite you to read this post where I explain how to use this parenting tool.

Examples of that technique are:

"When your hands are clean, then I know you are ready to eat."

“After your puzzle is back in it’s away spot, then I know you are ready to play with me.”

“First shoes on, then your favourite song in the car.”

“After you go down the slide two more times, then we know it’s time to go.”

I’d love to know: how many times did you say “OK” today? 20? 100?! Let’s start a Stopping OK support group over on my Facebook page. We can do it!

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PARENTING FOR A NEW WORLD
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Did You Say "Sorry?": Seeing Through Montessori Eyes

by Donna Brant Goertz

Upon entering a Montessori school, new staff members, parents, and children alike begin the slow process of assimilating into a new culture, a culture grown out of an understanding of the child's true nature. Within this culture we have elaborated anew each of the ordinary processes, rituals, customs, manners, and practices of daily life and learning to reflect Maria Montessori's vision of child development. In a Montessori school, we have strikingly different ways of handling what in a traditional school would be called lying, cheating, stealing, or bullying and their traditional aftermath, apologizing. For years it has been our challenge as Montessorians and parents of Montessori children to write about our culture, its practices, and their meanings so that all of us, adults and children alike, can clarify our thinking. Once clarity is achieved, we all endeavor mightily to maintain that clarity against the natural tendency to revert to the traditional thinking and behavior ingrained in us during childhood, both at home and at school.

Taking a Fresh Look

Why do we not, on principle, describe a child as difficult or as a problem? Or lazy? Or defiant? Why do we not, on principle, pass judgment on children and dole out punishment? Why do we, on the contrary, think and rethink these subjects, read and write about them, and gather to discuss them? In this article, I will explore why we Montessorians don't require children to say they're sorry and what we do instead that is so much healthier for their emotional development. The underlying principles here are our deeply held trust in the life forces and primal urges that drive a child's development and our dedication to providing support and removing obstacles to her self-realization as an intelligent, creative, and caring human being. Maria Montessori taught us to recognize the innate developmental goodness of children and see that it is the environment, at home and at school, that prevents them from realizing that rightful goodness. We recognize that it is the responsibility of diligently self-monitoring adults to provide a meticulously prepared environment and informed and loving relationships within which children can exercise choice, enjoy freedom, and thereby actualize their best selves. Such support is a child's basic need both at home and at school.

> The traditionally required "sorry" acts as a bandage, constricting sore emotions instead of airing and healing them.

What Do You Say, Billy?

Why do we never require a child to say "sorry," and what do we do instead? Why do we never even suggest it to a child, and what do we suggest instead? On the contrary, we strongly caution children not to apologize quickly and lightly, because an apology thus given usually leaps forth as a defensive way to avoid taking responsibility for one's own actions and others' feelings. Neither do we abandon our children by neglecting their social and emotional development.

A few years ago on the playground I walked past an adult, new to our school, who stood with two six-year-old children in that typical stance an adult strikes when an aggrieved child and the "transgressor" face off and the adult awaits obedience to the command falsely posed as a question, "What do you say Billy?"

What To Say Instead of "Sorry"

I spoke up quickly, saying, "Whatever you say right now, Billy, do not say 'sorry.' Wait an hour or a day to say 'sorry.' Saying 'sorry' is so important, no one should ever do it quickly or lightly or under pressure. For now you might say, 'I'm searching my heart for contrition,' or, 'I hope I can feel sorry soon,' or, 'I'm still so angry I can't even imagine ever being sorry.' You could say, 'I want to tell you all my angry feelings,' or, 'You're hurt. May I bring you an ice pack?' or, 'I'm sorry you're hurt, but I'm not yet sorry I hurt you.' You might say, 'I'm sad,' or, 'I'm scared,' or, 'I'm so angry I still don't even feel sorry you're hurt and that feels really bad.'"

First Response: Emotional First Aid for Both

If the child who was hurt is still crying, I put my arms around them both and say, "Two really hurt children. What have they done to each other? One has hit and one has been hit. How can we help them feel better? Does either of you need an ice pack or a wet cloth? Would a drink of water help?" When children's fights are handled in this manner consistently, it is typical for both children to be crying afterward and for the one who did the hitting to be eager to care for the one she hit. This is because the child who has hit has not been taught to separate herself from the pain that led her to hit in the first place or from the shock of hurting someone. Her immediate and authentic

emotions remain undistorted and accessible. It is easy to help the children deal with this straightforward situation. Sorrow for causing pain is just beneath the surface in children who have not been scolded, blamed, or made to say sorry.[1]

When one child hits another child, who then begins to cry, it is common for the closest adult or even the closest child to turn to the one who did the hitting and scold him while at the same time comforting the child who is crying. Next, it is common for the adult to request an explanation from the two children and after hearing their cross-accusations, to hand down a judgment, solution, or sentence. Finally, the adult demands an apology from the child who hit, or even from both children to one another.

This form of adult intervention effectively separates the children from the original, authentic emotions that led to the hitting and from their emotional responses to hitting and being hit. This intervention blankets the primary emotions that are genuinely related to the event, obscuring them with an unrelated series of emotions that result from the interaction with the adult. Instead of feeling his original anger and his subsequent distress at having hurt someone, the hitter is afraid of the adult's reaction, defensive of his own actions, justified that he has hurt another, angry that the other child is telling, and confused at the whole swirl of emotions.

In the early years, a child feels conflicted that he must say "sorry" when he doesn't feel it yet, but over time he begins to learn to tell that lie, "sorry," more readily and easily in order to spare himself the adult's judgment. Soon the child who hits develops a facility for feigning contrition and compassion and that false "sorry" becomes a habitual substitute for the real thing. Some children even go on to say "sorry" sarcastically; others say it with melodramatic pseudo-sincerity. All children who experience this traditional intervention lose connection with their core and displace their anger. Thus, the other, the enemy, is born. Montessori has a lot to say about all this in her book *Education and Peace*. It is worth a careful reading.[2]

Staying With the Conflict Until It Is Resolved

The more effective adult intervention is to comfort both children and hear the feelings of both, asserting all the while, with deeply held conviction, that it is not okay to hit and it is not okay to be hit. Both children are enlisted to plan strategies for handling conflicts better in the future so that no one gets hit and no one hits. Then, with this bottom line established, the two children are held accountable for figuring out a way to solve current individual problems without hitting or being hit.

Enlisting the Community to Invest in Solutions

For chronic complaints about the same individual who hits often, help the children think in a new way. "What could we do so that she doesn't feel like hitting everyone? How can we tell when she is about to hit? How can we argue in a way that doesn't lead her to an

STEP ONE
Sit down together. Never begin problem solving while anyone is standing up. Comfort both children and wait until the worst of the crying or yelling is over. Remind the children that it's not okay to hit or to get hit. There are better ways to solve conflict, and we will work together to plan them. Give the children time to decide who will listen first.

STEP TWO
Prepare each child to listen to what happened from the other child's viewpoint, instructing each, "Get ready to listen to all he has to say before you speak, even if you disagree with what he's saying. Listen all the way through."

STEP THREE
Instruct each, "Prepare yourself to say all you have to say with strong but respectful words and a strong but respectful tone of voice, without repeating any part of it. Get ready to stop when you've had your say and listen to the other person with all your attention."

STEP FOUR
Support each child to restate what the other child said to him. "What did he say that you did that he didn't like? How did he say he felt?"

STEP FIVE
Support each child to listen to what the other child would like him to do instead next time.

STEP SIX
Support each child to say what he'd like the other child to do next time.

STEP SEVEN
Support each child to say what he could offer to do differently next time.

STEP EIGHT
Support each child to listen to what the other child offers to do differently next time.

SUMMARY
Help the children end the problem-solving session with a quick summary. "Tell him again what he did/said that you didn't like and what you would like him to do/say next time instead. Listen while he tells you again what you did/said that he didn't like and what he would like you to do/say next time instead. Tell him what you can offer to do or say differently next time. Listen while he tells you again what he can offer to do or say differently next time."

anger that becomes violent?" Inviting the community to share in the child's development helps them focus on their own role in these situations.

As for chronic complaints from another individual who gets hit often, help the children think in a new way: "How can he make his point strongly without getting hit? How can he get along with the children so they don't feel like hitting him? How can he get attention without annoying people?" It is important to enlist the help of the community because when they invest in helping the "victim" break out of his role, they become alert to their own part in the process.

Helping the Individual to Step Out of a Role

To the child who has hit, you can say, "How can you express anger with respectful words? What can you say instead of calling names? How can you say what you feel without accusing or blaming someone else? What can you say to show strength without making physical threats?"

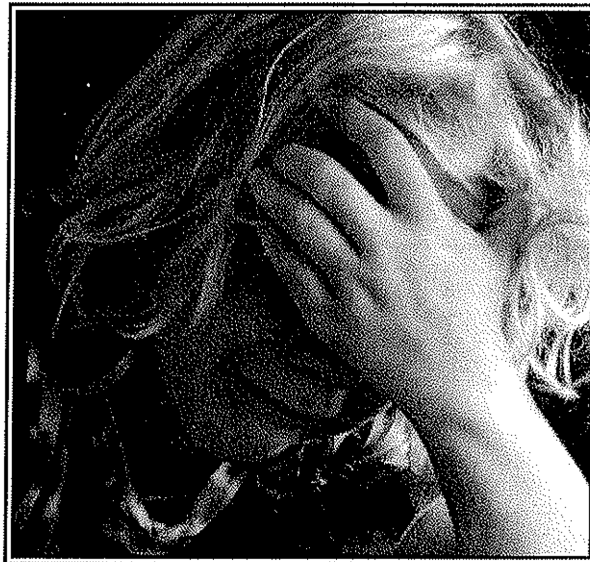
To the child who has been hit, you can say, "How can you be a person who doesn't get hit? How can you be a person who doesn't hit? You have a hidden power in your secret heart that knows how to do this. Speak to that power every night before you go to sleep and every morning when you wake up. Speak to that power when you are about to get yourself hit (or when you are about to hit someone)."

Coming From the Heart

"When you feel like saying 'sorry' from your heart, go and say it." We encourage the children to enjoy the grace of a sincere apology. We acknowledge a child's spontaneous expression of contrition and share it with the community. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

One day Danny said, "I'm sorry I took your pencil and that you were looking for it for so long. I lost mine and I wanted to start writing my story right away. I saw you were sad and confused. I'm really sorry."

I said, "Danny, that is the first time I've heard you volunteer a sincere apology.



Children, we have something big to celebrate. Danny is growing into saying 'sorry' from the heart." I am delighted to share Danny's development with the children. He has come such a long way. He knows it, too, and so does the community. Saying "sorry" is a celebration of healing one's self and seeking to heal an experience in a relationship. Saying "sorry" is a point of arrival, not a demanding point of departure up front. It is not a way to avoid an adult's ire, one's own responsibility, or the duty to make amends.

For the first year Danny was with us, we spent a lot of energy getting him to drop saying, "No, I didn't," when everyone saw him do something, and getting him to say, "I wish I hadn't," instead. Suddenly, this year he has developed by leaps and bounds so that he can not only experience deep remorse but also tell on himself when no one has even seen what he did. And he can offer a genuine apology as well. The long slow process has been worth the effort and time it has taken. Real social and emotional progress has been made, not just acquiescence to an adult command, as Montessori so eloquently and wisely describes in the stages of obedience. Commanding unthinking obedience and developing children to become adults who obey blindly is horrifically dangerous, as history has repeatedly shown.[3]

Modeling the Behavior We Seek

In a Montessori community, we adults apologize sincerely and freely to the children when we make a mistake or misunderstand and misjudge. In this way, we model apologizing for the children, knowing it to be the most potent way to lead them to do the same. When we forget to do something, must change a plan, or renegotiate a commitment, we apologize because we feel genuine regret. With elementary-age children, I make sure the children have models of many kinds of apologies from me, light-hearted for leaving my tea cup on their table ("Did you enjoy your tea, dearie? Really, Stan, sorry I left my tea cup on your table and in your way. Thanks for not letting it get spilled."); silly and mildly self-deprecatory if I have taped a note to my lunch basket and still forgotten to bring what I said I would ("Maybe I should have taped it to my nose! Sorry, Ruth, I'll try to remember tomorrow."); or anguished if I have stepped on a foot ("Oh, Beth, that must have hurt like crazy. Are you all right?"); and an endless variety of others. Children are eager to model themselves after adults they love and respect, especially if those adults have a deep understanding of the children's nature, an endlessly hopeful confidence in their goodness, and a boundless appreciation for their worth.

We acknowledge the sincerity and deep feeling of children's apologies when they come as a point of arrival from the wellspring of their hearts. We stop children and call them to a higher plane when their apologies come from habit, fear, manipulation, control, or avoidance of responsibility. That's the time to stay with the conflict and work it through, leaving no room for a quick and insincere apology. That's the time to plant the seeds of an ability to apologize spontaneously and sincerely that will flower and bear fruit in the future.

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1 Dr. Maria Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, trans. M. Joseph Costelloe, S. J. (New York: Ballentine Books, 1972). "Conventions which camouflage a man's true feelings are a spiritual lie which help him adapt himself to the organized deviations of society but which gradually change love into hatred. This is the terrible lie lurking in the deepest recesses of the subconscious."

2 Dr. Maria Montessori, Education and Peace, trans. Helen Lane (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1972). "The [traditional] obedience forced upon a child at home and in school, an obedience that does not recognize the rights of reason and justice, prepares the adult [he becomes] to resign himself to anything and everything. The widespread practice in [traditional] educational institutions of exposing a child who makes mistakes to public disapproval . . . instills in him an uncontrollable and irrational terror of public opinion, however unfair and erroneous that opinion may be. And through these and many other kinds of conditioning that lead to a sense of inferiority, the way is opened to the spirit of unthinking respect, and indeed almost mindless idolatry, in the minds of paralyzed adults toward public leaders. . . . And discipline thus becomes almost synonymous with slavery" (p. 20,21).

"Men educated in this [traditional] manner have not been prepared to seek truth and to make it an intimate part of their lives, nor to be charitable toward others and to cooperate with them to create a better life for all. On the contrary, the [traditional] education they have received has prepared them for what can be considered only an interlude in the real collective life—war.

"If man were to grow up fully and with a sound psyche, developing a strong character and a clear mind, he would be unable to tolerate the existence of diametrically opposed moral principles within himself or to advocate simultaneously two sorts of justice, one that fosters life and one that destroys it. He would not simultaneously cultivate two moral powers in his heart. Nor would he erect two disciplines: one that marshals human energies to build, another that marshals them to destroy what has been built. A strong man cannot stand a split in his consciousness, much less act in two opposite ways" (ibid., p. 21,22).

3 Dr. Maria Montessori, "On Discipline-Reflections and Advice," The Call of Education 1, nos. 3-4 (1924), www.montessori-ami.org. "Free choice is a higher activity: only the child who knows what he needs to exercise and develop his spiritual life can really choose freely. One cannot speak of free choice when every external object calls the child equally, and the child, lacking in directing willpower, follows everything and passes from one thing to another without end. This is one of the most important distinctions which the teacher should be able to make. The child who does not yet obey an internal guide is not the free child entering upon the long and narrow way of perfection. He is still the slave of superficial sensations, which make him the sport of his environment; his spirit is tossed between one object and another, like a ball. The man is born when the soul feels itself; fixes, orientates itself and chooses. "This is the period in which discipline establishes itself: a form of active peace, of obedience and love, in which work perfects itself and multiplies, just as in springtime the flowers take on color, leading on to the production of sweet and refreshing fruits."

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Donna Bryant Goertz, 0 to 3, primary, and elementary trained, founded Austin Montessori School in Austin, Texas, in 1967, which she directs to date. For twenty-five years, she guided classes of thirty-five children from 6 to 9 years of age. Currently, she dedicates herself to staff development, parent education, and new programs initiatives. Goertz writes for journals and lectures internationally on the social, emotional, character, and values development in the Montessori classroom as related to Montessori's education for peace. Her book, *Children Who Are Not Yet Peaceful*: Preventing Exclusion in the Early Elementary Classroom has been translated into Spanish and awaits its Chinese translation. It is used in education circles around the world.

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Why are so many (smart!) kids missing this social skill?

By Paula Spencer Scott Posted August 4, 2016

Something strange is happening.

Teachers have begun to notice an uptick in some surprising, seemingly unrelated behaviors. Kids—even from well-off, well-educated families—are having more than the usual amount of trouble asking for help. Working together. Sharing toys. Following along when the teacher points to the blackboard.

In a survey of 1,100 senior primary-school staff in the U.K., nearly *four in five* said they were worried about poor social skills or speech problems in their young students.

Meanwhile, speech and language therapists are seeing something similar that they're calling *a time bomb in the works*: Kids increasingly need help with basic social skills, like learning not to interrupt willy-nilly. A 2014 study in the journal *Pediatrics* found a 63 percent increase in disability associated with speech problems between 2001 and 2011, though the percentage of kids with disabilities rose just 16 percent. And the biggest increase was among the wealthiest families.

In short, many of the very kids you'd expect would be headed for success are instead struggling with social problems, reading problems, and other troubles.
What's going on?

One common thread seems to be a basic but critical social skill that many experts fear is falling by the wayside:

Understanding how to have a conversation

We all fixate on those magical first words. But then what? Knowing how to use words with others can make or break a kid's future, says speech-language pathologist Susan Diamond, of Alameda, California, author of *Social Rules for Kids*.
Conversing—using the right words in the right way—is a skill kids begin to learn even before *ma-ma* and *bye-bye* and keep honing for years.

Nobody's born knowing how. Nearly all of us picked this up on the fly in the simple interactions we had with our parents and others.

But more and more kids are missing out on these everyday conversation skills that we all take for granted:

1) How to read nonverbal cues
That's all the stuff that we say without uttering a word. It's *most* of what gets communicated!

“Nonverbal behaviors—facial expressions, gestures, intonation, proximity to one another, body language—are 65 to 70 percent of overall communication comprehension,” says Ann-Mari Pierotti, associate director of clinical issues in speech-language pathology for the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA).

From birth our babies track our smiles, tune into whether our tone is happy or angry, follow what we’re looking at. All without words. Later, when they point at something and say, “Dat?” they count on us to name it. When they ask for something and we look puzzled, they think, “Oh, she didn’t get what I said.”

2) How to take turns

You talk, I listen. I talk, you listen. Conversation is like tennis, volleying back and forth.

“Conversational turn-taking starts with games like peekaboo and waving bye-bye,” says Geralyn Timler, director of the Child Language and Social

Communication Lab at Miami University in Ohio. “You cue the child to join in and have a back-and-forth interaction, following the child’s lead.”

It’s more intricate than it might seem. When one person is talking, the other has to be quiet and listen. He also has to pay close attention and show with nods or *uh-huh*s that he’s following along. He has to hold back from interrupting until it’s his turn—and know when that is and what’s expected of him.

3) How to stay on topic

You can’t only talk about Minecraft or horses or your opinions and expect to forge strong social relationships. Being able to converse means staying on the same page with others. It means adding appropriate comments and questions at the right time, and making links between related things and weaving them in. It means refraining from scattered, Dory-like chatter in the middle of something else.

It means learning how to relate to others.

Here’s all it takes to start (and keep) conversation flowing:

Learning how to converse isn’t rocket science. It boils down to two things, speech-language experts say: exposure and practice.

Babies need practice holding conversations with us even before they understand our words. Toddlers need to be encouraged to take their first stabs at joining us in it. And preschoolers and older kids—on up through the teen years!—need to be engaged in lots of face-to-face talk.

All pretty simple, right? Except for this one thing: We have to be more *intentional* about teaching conversation skills than our own moms or dads ever were.
Because…smartphones!

We adults can get away with scrolling and tapping in front of one another because we’ve already mastered conversation. But not our kids.

“We’re just all so conditioned to use devices,” says ASHA’s Pierotti, who’s also a mom. “We shut out our kids without realizing it. I’m guilty of it too.”

More than half of parents in a 2016 ASHA poll agreed that devices are making it harder to engage in meaningful conversations.

Innocently, we all get sucked down “the rabbit hole,” Pierotti told me: We’re playing with Kiddo at the park. We snap a cute pic. Quick upload to Instagram. There we see Best Friend’s latest post. And another. And another. It’s just a few minutes…but the minutes add up.

Minutes of no nonverbal communication. No back-and-forth. No shared topics. No parental modeling.

Nobody's sure what counts as "enough" face-to-face conversation for kids to develop the social communication skills they need.

Probably a lot, most experts seem to agree. Almost surely more than our kids are getting now.

First we need to make time to show them the ropes.

"It's unrealistic to say, 'Just put the cellphone down!'" Diamond told me. "It's all about balance—making sure we find ways to spend quality time in different situations, talking about different topics and experiences, attaching the language to what's going on."

One way: Commit to just a few low-tech or no-tech habits as a family. It could be certain zones of the house, like the dinner table. Or it could be certain times of day: Before school, bath time, and bedtime are all good because those are natural chances to go 1:1 with our kids. Plan tech-free outings: an after-dinner walk, during outside play, driving to and from school. (ASHA offers more ideas in its new "Digital Diet".)

The earlier we start, the more our kids will take tech-free times or places for granted. But it's never too late.

A prime habit to try breaking: Using electronic "shut-up toys," as experts call them, in cars and restaurants—because they become a slippery slope of no return.
Remember: The younger the child, the more critical it is that we engage them in lots of different kinds of conversations, in varied settings, using more and more new words.

It also helps when we follow the same rules: Kids hate a double-standard around tech use, a University of Michigan study showed.

Don’t just tell. Talk (and listen).

Normal, relaxed, give-and-take conversation is all it takes.

I’d be rich, Timler told me, if I had a buck for every time I issued a direction as a mom: *Pick that up. Bring that here. Put your shoes on. Let’s go. Hurry up!* That may be effective mom talk, but it’s not true conversation.

Asking questions is a good tactic because it gives turn-taking a nudge. Sprinkle “ask words” into your kid talk: *what, when, where, how.* “Learning how to ask questions is like building a bridge,” Pierotti says.

Instead of jumping in to solve problems, do this:

When your kid comes home sad because friends left her out or a teacher gave a bad grade she doesn't understand, what do you do? Step in to try to fix the problem?

Better to role-play a little instead, Diamond says. "Empower kids to solve problems themselves by giving them the language for it: 'Let's see, how can we solve this?' Or 'What are some good things you could say?'" Point out effective timing, facial expressions, and words to use.

Make language part of family fun.

A few ideas:

- *Focusing on talk during meals.* Need ideas? Check Harvard's The Family Dinner Project or Table Topics: Family Edition.
- *Reading and storytelling.* It's impossible to read too much to kids, Pierotti says. "It has to be topic areas that are interesting to them, so then you talk about it."
- *Toys that can be manipulated*. Another plus to open-ended toys like blocks and pretend props is that you're practically forced to talk about them more.
- *Games that get everyone interacting.* Pierotti likes Charades, Apples to Apples, Scattergories, Taboo, and Clue.

Give kids chances to practice with others.

One way that can be overlooked, especially in an era of academic preschools, nanny care, and solo play on computers: playing with other kids. Play—especially pretend and physical play—is a huge way kids develop all kinds of social skills, especially social communication, says Timler.

Explain why talking to people matters.

Kids can be oblivious. "Explain what people think of you if you don't look them in the eye and say hello," Timler says. "Your kids might not even realize they're giving a negative impression."

Get help if you're seeing red flags.

These are among the signs of social-communication problems, Diamond says:

- Having almost no friends or playdates
- Lots of meltdowns (which often stem from the inability to communicate needs)
- Having limited language (Rule of thumb: able to put two words together at age 2)
- Not talking

A 2- to 3-year-old should be able to look at the person talking, say “Hi” and “Bye” and “Please” with reminders, and use verbal turn-taking and nonverbal communication to show dislike or pleasure or to ask for things. By 3, your child should be able to tell a little story about what happened, say, in preschool today, Timler says.

Good things happen to good conversationalists.

(And by “good conversationalist” I don’t mean a junior Jimmy Kimmel or Terry Gross. Just a kid who can keep up with the three basics: reading nonverbal cues, taking turns, and staying on topic.)

1) They focus better in school.

Having basic social-communication skills allows kids to follow along when teachers point to the blackboard and stay on topic during lessons—right from

the start of school.

Maybe not surprisingly, kids with speech and language impairment have a four to five times greater risk of reading trouble in grade school, according to a 2015 report in *Pediatrics*. Those problems follow them into adulthood, and poor learners tend to earn lower wages, it found.

2) They can advocate for themselves.
Being able to “read” others and know how to talk to them gives kids the power to stand up for themselves, Diamond says. “Every child should be able to raise a hand in class,” she says. Not only can they better ask for help, but they can challenge a teacher’s mistake, navigate friend drama, and even fend off bullies, she told me.

With more power, they feel less frustration and show fewer behavior problems.

3) They’re better liked.

Kids like other kids who know how to say “Hi” and talk about stuff. You have more friends when you’re able to sort out differences, share, and empathize—and not hog the conversation or blurt out random things at inappropriate times.

And you can bet that teachers, coaches, and future employers prefer such kids too.

The good news about talking about talking:

One of the cool findings from the ASHA survey: 90 percent of parents, especially younger millennial parents, said that learning about the risks involved with poor communication skills made them more likely to change their own personal tech device habits.

Awareness seems huge, but it makes sense, because we're the first generation of parents that's had to worry about being so intentional about conversation.
Fortunately, it's easy. After all, all we're talking about is…*talk*.

"It should be enjoyable—not really work—for parents," Timler told me. "But it has to happen."

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