

Montessori Philosophy and Effective Parenting

Session 1 “I can do it!”

With Mindy Gillen

Set them up for success in their environment:

“Any child who is self-sufficient, who can tie his shoes, dress or undress himself, reflects in his joy and sense of achievement the image of human dignity which is derived from a sense of independence.” - Maria Montessori

- Do you find yourself doing most things for your child in an environment set up for adults? How can you make everyday tasks and chores child friendly, developmentally appropriate, and accessible? Get curious!
 - When your child spills, do you clean it up for them? What if they had a bucket, a sponge and a small stool to give them access to a sink? They could get their bucket and sponge and clean up their own spills!
 - When getting dressed, does your child have far too many options, inappropriate options for the season, or are their shelves, drawers and hangers too high? An easy modification is to put a small set of options at your child’s level, on a shelf, in drawers, or on a low hanging rack. Keep it simple and select clothing that your child can easily take on and off.
 - Are they hungry or thirsty and waiting on you to get them a drink or food? Set up a shelf with pre-approved items that you are okay with your child eating at any point during the day, think bananas, apples, and other healthy snacks. Limit the number of items to 3 or 4 per day to avoid snacking too much between meals. Be sure to have plates, bowls and utensils available to them as well, and a small dish bin to put dirty dishes. Model how to get their food and clean up after themselves until they get the hang of it.

Expand your thinking. What else could your child do independently? Could they warm food in a microwave? Could they wash their face? Could they feed the pets, put dirty clothes in the laundry, sort their laundry, fold their laundry, fill or empty the dishwasher, clean the cat litter box, make their bed, button their sweater, zip their jacket? It is fun to think about how you might set up the environment in order to make your child successful at a new opportunity.

Why are we so passionate about independence?

- The feeling of successfully doing something meaningful on one’s own is a huge factor in building a sense of self-confidence. It builds over time, as one success leads a child to feel more confident that something they want to try will also be successful. And strong self-confidence is a key factor in long term success and happiness.
- There are many opportunities to build physical coordination: hand grasp, wrist rotation, finger control, core strength, balance, spatial awareness. And young children seek opportunities for maximum effort, so let them move the kitchen tower, or a table or chair, or a bucket of water themselves.
- There are opportunities to learn order and logical sequence of events. Learning to put things where they belong so we can find them when we want them later! Learning the sequence of

washing a table, from clearing the table surface, to getting the table cleaning bucket, filling it with water, dipping the scrubber in the water, then in the soap then scrubbing the table top in small circles. Then using the sponge to carefully wipe off the soap, rinse and ring out the sponge and wipe again. Then drying with a towel. Then emptying the dirty water, making sure the cleaning tools are put away tidily in the right place. That is a lot of steps!

- Learning how to do things correctly offers opportunities for practicing appropriate behavioral boundaries and sets them up for learning some self-discipline and follow through. (The sponge does not get thrown on the floor when you are finished, the bucket of water does not get poured on the table, etc.) When you know that they know how to use a sponge, you will feel more confident in requiring them to use one to clean up a spill for themselves.
- Being helpful and independent gives the child opportunities to seek and receive your highly valued attention through positive and helpful actions, and to spend time with you doing the daily chores that do take up a lot of our adult lives.
- Doing REAL work is much more engaging for children than being relegated to pretend participation. Engagement teaches concentration and concentration brings a feeling of peace and joy.

Set them up for success with your language:

- Avoid asking questions, instead frame your requests as polite commands. Ex: Instead of “Can you please pick up your toys?” Try: “It is time to pick up your toys, please put them in the basket and back on the shelf.”
- Ask questions and get curious with your child! Ex: there is water on the floor, what should you do about that?
- Give **two** choices, when appropriate. Finding a way to give your child power while still controlling the outcome is an essential part of collaboration and successful independence. Ex: “Would you like to wear the red socks, or the blue socks?” Or simply have a drawer where you put options for the day, but limit the options to two to start with. That can expand as they get more confident.

Set them up for success with your boundaries and appropriate expectations: “A child needs freedom within limits.” Maria Montessori

- Always show first. Dr. Montessori says, teach through lessons, not corrections. Be sure to first show exactly how to do whatever it is you are allowing your child to do, or that they are trying to do.
- Give help when necessary- avoid stepping in or taking over, allow your child the time to try and try and try again! Helping them deal with the feeling of frustration is a great opportunity. Sometimes life is very frustrating and sometimes things are difficult. But with practice pretty much always comes success. Be careful that your child is not using “I need help” to really mean, I can get your attention through being incapable.
- Allow your child to safely make mistakes; this is how they learn. When you have opened up a new opportunity for independent action, give yourself and your child at least 2 weeks to practice and get a handle on it. Spills, mistakes, even broken items, are just stops along the route to success. Be consistent and stick with it.

Set them up for success with your faith, trust, and knowledge.

- In a world that affords children very little power, children focus on what they can control. Giving your child appropriate levels of responsibility and control allows them to be successful, efficacious, and self-confident.

Model, model, model! Children learn by example and watch everything we do.

- Make your child part of your every day activities. They will be watching how you do things, and taking the opportunity to try alongside you. Be careful, because whatever you do, they will try to do. Handle items you are taking off a shelf one at a time with 2 hands, use a carrying tote to carry all your cleaning supplies instead of trying to carry them all a jumble in your arms at one time, if you casually swipe a spider down with a broom, you can bet your child will be using the broom up in the air instead of on the floor. If you toss your trash toward the can, so will your child.
- Cooking is a favorite activity for children. Find ways to involve them. They can wash fruits and vegetables, help chop, peel, grate, measure, scoop, pour, stir, etc. (There are a variety of child safe and effective chopping tools, check out Montessori Services for some ideas.) Teach them about food prep safety like always washing hands before handling food, not eating off of food prep utensils, etc. Kitchen towers are great tools, though honestly I always preferred a child sized table and chair in the kitchen. I had 3 children and a cooktop in an island so if the children were up at counter level they were too close to my big sharp knives and the hot stove for my comfort! I would put down on their table what they could help with and I avoided having them help stirring in hot pans until they were much older. At that point, I set up a system of having 1 child help with dinner each night, not all three!

What Independence does not mean:

“To let your child do as he likes when he has not yet developed any powers of control is to betray the idea of freedom.” -Maria Montessori

“Freedom isn’t the absence of boundaries; it’s the ability to operate successfully and happily within boundaries.” -Shirley Boone

- There is a “Gentle Parenting” movement taking hold right now, and while some of the ideas and methods can be useful, it seems to be rather passive and permissive and does not seem to offer the opportunity for building respect for others and the environment, or development of social grace and courtesy and self-discipline. The Montessori idea of freedom revolves around mindfully considering how a child can be successful and safe and respectful in an environment, giving them careful lessons on how to participate or utilize that environment, including any boundaries, things they may not do in the environment, and then following through consistently to redirect back to appropriate uses of the space, or consequences if necessary. The Montessori method does not offer a passive, do whatever you feel like freedom.
- Children are not equipped with the rationality or experience to be left with decisions about health and safety. They might want to climb up on the highest climber at the park, but if they could get very injured by a fall, then they should not be allowed to go there until they have demonstrated a sureness in their climbing and balancing abilities. They generally are not

equipped to make decisions about when they should go to bed, or what school they should attend. You must be the adult and make these decisions. You certainly can ask your child's opinion, or consider where you are being controlling and consider if there is a way to create a safe environment to allow your child more freedom in a certain situation, but you need to be able to say, and enforce, that your child may not do something that is dangerous to themselves or others.

Here is a link to a good video showing how one family has redesigned their home for success and independence for their child. There are some great ideas here. There are many good videos with ideas you may find on Youtube and many "Montessori Mom" bloggers that can inspire you!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cERwg8Az1BE>

I am at the stage of life where my children are adults and we can discuss and observe how the choices we made in raising them have impacted them as adults. And I also have grandchildren. My daughter is a certified Montessori teacher, and was prior to having children, where I got the training only after my children were 3, 4 and 6. It has been amazing to see the difference in a child raised with a Montessori home from day one! My not quite 3 year old granddaughter chooses her clothes and gets dressed on her own, has a space for her jacket and shoes and always puts them there, as well as knowing where those things go when she visits our home, she puts away activities when done with them (not always without a reminder, but usually!) she loves to help prep dinner, gets her own snacks and drinks when hungry, carries her own things in her own backpack when going on a hike or to the park, or to grandma's house. She is very confident in all her actions. She can move through her bedtime routine, changing into pajamas, brushing her teeth, choosing books, completely independently – though she is young and sometimes tests the boundaries : -) it is a joy to see. Of course she can have melt-downs, and test boundaries, but watching how those things are handled in a Montessori and positive discipline way and how she is able to calm herself and move on from these moments is also wonderful. We will talk more about that in another session and I will be sharing other parenting successes I have been reflecting on lately as my young adult children blossom.

Here are some wonderful quotes to help you think about the importance of encouraging independence:

"The greatest gifts we can give our children, are the roots of responsibility and the wings of independence." -Maria Montessori

"Never do for the child what he can do for himself. A dependent child is a demanding child. Children become irresponsible only when we fail to give them responsibility." -Rudolf Dreikurs and Margaret Goldman

"Never help a child with a task at which he feels he can succeed." -Maria Montessori

"Do not tell them how to do it. Show them how to do it and do not say a word. If you tell them, they will watch your lips move. If you show them, they will want to do it themselves." -Maria Montessori