

Effective Parenting and Montessori Philosophy session 3: “Take a Deep Breath”

“The Montessori approach is uniquely effective in helping children to grow into resilient, competent, and resourceful individuals who are best equipped to face our future challenges and thrive.” The Montessori Institute of North Texas

Resilience - the capacity to withstand or to recover quickly from difficulties.

Resilience has been studied pretty extensively in children and the main factors that support a resilient child are self-regulation, a high-trust relationship with parents, and quality school and neighborhood experiences. The Montessori philosophy supports these factors, offering many opportunities for children to develop good self-regulation, build trusting relationships with adults and children, opportunities to explore, make mistakes and recover without being called out or “saved” by an adult, and to build their confidence in their ability to be independent and resourceful.

“Joy, feeling one’s own value, being appreciated and loved by others, feeling useful and capable of production are all factors of enormous value for the human soul.” ~ Maria Montessori

“It is well to cultivate a friendly feeling towards error, to treat it as a companion inseparable from our lives, as something having a purpose, which it truly has.” ~ Maria Montessori

Maria Montessori

Resilience requires practice handling emotions like disappointment, sadness, fear, frustration and anger. It is important to allow children to have these feelings and to learn to move through them on their own. We parents never like to hear our child cry, but even starting very young, it is important to allow your child to experience some situations that are not just as they would want. If you will go to extreme measures to insure your child does not cry, you will probably be undermining their long term ability to handle adversity. I consider sleep training an important first step on this road. Helping your child to find rejuvenating sleep without you is a great skill, and generally pretty quickly achieved with focus and commitment. And sign language can really assist you to meet the needs of your infant without the need for them to cry until you figure out what they want. We can fall into the habit of responding to crying because at first that is a child’s primary way of communicating their needs to us, but many times this habit gets ingrained for both child and parent well past when a child would be able to get calm and communicate through sign language or actions.

Children need to feel their feelings, and there is no reason or rush to “fix” the feelings. Give them space and time to feel their feelings, but be attentive to HOW they express their feelings. They need to be safe and respectful with others – and themselves. Keep an eye out for self-harm as a possible emotional response. Be aware that if they are emotional due to a boundary set by you, they may not be ready to

“hug it out” with you right afterwards. Remember to ask if they would like a hug, and don’t take it personally if they do not want a hug in the moment.

Feelings are appropriate, but we generally become less rational when highly emotional. We are all more able to think and be creative to find a solution to the situation causing high emotions.

You can teach ways to handle big emotions, regaining a sense of control, again starting from birth. Some effective ways to handle big emotions include:

- Deep Breathing – this is one of the most effective ways to calm down, get oxygen to the brain and regain the ability to problem solve and move forward for children and adults. There are many ways to teach deep breathing.
 - Breathe in for 3 counts and out for 3 counts
 - Smell the roses, blow the bubbles
 - Imagine blowing out a candle
 - Hot chocolate breathing
 - Blowing on a pinwheel
- Manipulation of something, like a stress ball, a fidget toy, or hugging a stuffy
- Identifying and naming feelings, then talking about what caused the feeling and what might be done to change the situation
- Visualization – picture a favorite place like the beach, and focus on all the details, the sound, feel, smell, etc.
- Listen to music, generally calming or positive message music is best
- Inversion – getting the head lower than the heart, like doing child’s pose, or laying with your head hanging off the couch
- Having a calming corner, a soft space to relax and be alone until ready to calmly interact.
- Taking a fresh air walk

You can model when you are feeling something, like “I am frustrated that there is so much traffic. I want to be at home. I am going to play some soothing music to help me relax.” Or “I am frustrated that your toys are all over the living room. I am going to do hot chocolate breathing and when I am calm I would like to talk to you about that.”

Parents need to be very mindful that they are not causing or extending big tears or tantrums by being more responsive and attentive when a child is having those behaviors. When your child is crying or upset, naturally you want to help them feel better. But if you give them lots of eye contact, hugs, or other attention while they are upset, they might begin to seek opportunities to be upset or to lengthen their emotional response in order to get your attention. Make an effort to be attentive when they are calm and communicative, or self-sufficient!

It is very helpful to practice ways to calm our emotions when the child is not emotional. You might practice breathing just before eating dinner or going to bed at night, you might have a poster with picture of people having different feelings and talk about and name some of the feelings each day. You might practice visualizing a favorite place with your child. You might ask your child to help you design a calming corner with what they think they would like to have when feeling upset. In our classrooms, we often use the “silence game” as a bit of a meditation, finding calm and awareness together.

A child who is having anxiety or appears to be responding to a feeling of shame or pain, however, should be attended to immediately and given a solid, long embrace if they will accept it, until they are calm. Language varies when they are feeling that the world is not going the way they want it to.

Often, your child will be upset or have a fit in response to boundaries that you have set. =) The response should be just as it would be if they were upset at something else, like a toy getting broken.

When your child is upset:

- Acknowledge the child's feelings – giving an appropriate name for them
- acknowledge what caused them to feel that way (if possible)
- Give them an idea for how to find calm
- Let them know you will talk with them about it once they are calm
- Remove your attention and eye contact until they are calm
- As soon as they are calm, return your attention and try to clarify what they were responding to and help them to work through what options they might have – but don't just give them whatever they wanted!

Example: "You look frustrated because you want me to read you a story right now. Take some deep breaths and when you are calm I can talk to you about it." Then go back to what you were doing, removing eye contact from the child. (child calms) "Your body and voice are calm now. Were you frustrated because you wanted me to read you a story? I can read you a story after we eat dinner. Why don't you choose 2 books you would like me to read after dinner and put them on the coffee table." (this is an example of saying "yes" but with a deferred timeline or behavioral expectation.)

A key element in this process, as the adult, is to remain calm yourself. And to practice the options for finding your own calmness before interacting. "Mommy needs a little time alone to calm down. I will be back in a few minutes when I am ready to talk."

"A child's character develops in accordance with the obstacles he has encountered... or the freedom favoring his development that he has enjoyed." ~ Maria Montessori