

Montessori Philosophy and Effective Parenting

"The greatest development is achieved during the first years of life, and therefore it is then that the greatest care should be taken. If this is done, then the child does not become a burden; he will reveal himself as the greatest marvel of nature." ~ Maria Montessori

"Don't Ask!"

Well, OK, that was meant to grab your attention! But really, there are many situations where it is not appropriate or helpful to "ask" your child. =) Asking a child a question when they really mean to be giving direction is one of the number one behaviors I see that undermine a parent's ability to respect, direct and hold boundaries with their child.

There are two big areas in which you should be very careful about asking your child something which we will touch on today. **The first is when you are not likely to accept their answer unconditionally.**

In the Montessori philosophy we want to allow as much freedom of choice as possible. We want children to learn to make their own decisions and to follow their paths of joy and curiosity. Children are worthy of our respect at all times, and we want to be demonstrating and teaching how they can behave respectfully toward parents and others. Just like all humans, children feel respected when they are given choices, and allowed to contribute to plans and decisions. Whenever possible DO ask your child. Give them as many choices as possible. But be sure that choices are not overwhelming.

YOU NEVER WANT TO BE IN THE SITUATION WHERE YOU END UP OVERRIDING OR DISRESPECTING THE CHILD'S CHOICE IF YOU HAVE GIVEN THEM A CHOICE OR ASKED A QUESTION.

For younger children Keep choices limited to 2 or maybe 3 options.

"For breakfast you may have scrambled eggs or oatmeal."

"We have an hour to play today. Would you like to go to the park or for a bike ride?"

"Would you like to wear your red shirt or your blue shirt?"

Once you have offered a specific choice, do not allow any other options – even if they seem reasonable. You are teaching your child that what you say, you mean, and to respect your boundaries. Later, closer to 5, you may start teaching about compromise and negotiation, but your child needs to know when you will negotiate and when you won't. Get the second one nailed before you work on the first!

If you offer two choices and the child asks for a third, you can say, "your options today are A and B, you can decide, or I will decide for you."

If you ask a child an open-ended question, like "What would you like to wear to school today?" and then you override their answer "Well, we don't wear *pajamas* to school, silly." Then you are actually showing them disrespect and that you will not honor their response. Similarly, if you ask a child a question to which you will not honor the answer "no", "Are you ready to leave the party?" (when they likely are not!) you are showing them that no has no real meaning, and they will test you when you say no as well.

You can use environmental controls for choices too. For example, you can place a limited set of clothing options in a drawer and they can choose any option in the drawer. Or you can put snack food

options on a shelf and they choose any of the options. Your control is what you put in the drawer or on the shelf.

Another great way to guide a child is through the use of charts and/or calendars. For example having a schedule of the morning or bedtime activities so they can determine what happens next themselves. Using a calendar to help the child to know when is a home day, when is a school day, when is a half day when is a full day, when will you be leaving on a trip, when will Grandma come to visit, etc.

“Democracy begins at birth. The child must know what is going to happen to him, that he will not be seized suddenly, that his permission will be asked first.”

When communicating with children, always do these things:

- Stop what you are doing and give your child your full attention
- Get close to your child, don't yell across the room, the house, the yard, etc.
- Get down to your child's level, kneel, sit, try not to lean over.
- Ask for their attention by requesting “eyes on me” if they are not looking at you.
- Wait for them to look at you. Be sure they are looking at you when you are communicating. Let them know you will wait for them to look at your eyes and then calmly wait until they do. Do not move forward with communicating until they are looking at you. But accept even a fleeting look at first, building up to full eye contact over time if it is challenging for your child. You may need to gently hold their hands to keep their body with you until their mind follows. Ask them to repeat back to you important points. If they can't remember, repeat the point and say, for example, “say, we walk in the restaurant.”
- Make a statement anytime you are requiring action. “It is time to clean up your activity.” “Please brush your teeth.” “We need to go to the grocery store.” **Be careful not to add “OK?” to your statements =) That makes it sound like the child is in control and has a choice. Be polite and kind but clear and direct.
- Use rich and correct language, helping your child to practice a new word, describe its meaning, and help the child to make the sounds in the word correctly.
- Be careful about your response to inappropriate or unpreferred behavior – anger is generally not effective, and laughing or engaging in a long discussion could lead to a child seeking attention through misbehavior.
- Follow through with communicated needs, requests, boundaries or consequences. We generally give a child one reminder about what behavior or action is expected and what the consequence will be if they do not comply. After that we simply state, “You need to X because you did not Y” and follow through.

Ideas for creating positive communication:

- Create “I will” statements with your child to help remind them how to respond, for example , “I will listen the first time,” “I will wait my turn to speak,” “I will use my manners”. Give the child direction on what TO DO instead of what NOT TO DO. “Walk in the restaurant.” Instead of “don't run”.

- Create a plan for tough situations, and write it down and post it where you can review the plan before going into a situation that may be a struggle or a challenge.
- Preview upcoming events or expectations for your child. “We are going to the grocery store today after nap time. When we are the store I need you to stay near me, walk, and only pick up items that I ask you to pick up. If you are not able to do this then you will need to ride in the cart.” Repeat this preview before getting out of the car at the grocery store, asking the child to repeat back to you the expectations and the consequence.
- Use visual charts and calendars showing what needs to happen, when, and the order it needs to happen in. This can be paired with stickers for success, and consequences when unsuccessful. Add a timer for time sensitive sequences. Timers do not feel personal or subjective. A child has no idea how long 3 minutes is, so it just feels to them like 3 minutes is over whenever you say it is, and they may keep asking, “has it been 3 minutes yet?” or just hope you will get distracted and stretch 3 minutes into 15 if it is time to leave the park! A timer keeps everyone honest and is not subjective. A visual timer – one where the child can see the time go by, is even better.
- Allow for a “re-do” when things don’t go the way they should. At school we say “Let’s try that again” many times a day. If a child runs across the room, we smile and say, “Let’s try that again.” If a child plops their job tray on top of another tray on the shelf, we smile and say, “Let’s try that again”. This is a great phrase when you know you have clearly set the expectation and observed your child meeting the expectation in the past.

Turn over the power of decisions and freedom of choice whenever you can. Notice if you are overcontrolling things that do not need to be controlled. But know when you should not, and in those cases, don’t ask!

“Education is a work of self-organization by which man adapts himself to the conditions of life.” ~ Maria Montessori

“Early childhood education is the key to the betterment of society.” ~ Maria Montessori

“Moral Education is the source of that spiritual equilibrium on which everything else depends and which may be compared to that physical equilibrium or sense of balance, without which it is impossible to stand upright or to move into any other position.” ~ Maria Montessori

The other time we don’t ask is in deciding things to do or places to go.

I have the benefit of my children now being adults and sharing their experiences growing up with me. I realized fairly early on (my children were probably 4, 5, and 7) that many children’s first response to something unknown is to say they don’t want to do it, or go there, or eat it.

I felt it was important to introduce my children to as many experiences, skills, careers, general knowledge as I could so that they would have an understanding of where things come from, how they are made, what sorts of jobs there are, types of music and art, etc. We used the Santa Cruz 4-H youth development club as a means for much of this exploration and opportunity. But I found that if I asked my children, “Would you like to go and harvest vegetables from a farm to help less fortunate people?”

They would say “No, I don’t want to.” But when I put them in the car and took them to do just that without asking them, they had a blast, wanted to do it several more times, invited friends to join them, learned a lot about farming and the grocery store system, and even wanted to go see the food bank where the vegetables we harvested would be taken. This activity is called gleaning, by the way, and I recommend it for adults and children.

Similarly, when I put them in the car and told them along the way that we were going to help plant trees along Bay street on the west side, they groaned and said they did not want to. But once we arrived, they dug, carried, watered, and worked until every last tree was planted and talked about how cool that was and how proud they were to help all the way home. Of course, I just wanted them to participate and if they had tired out and been ready to go home after an hour of participation, we would have, but they had not wanted to leave.

So if you have an idea for a life experience, just make the decision, participate and show joy in the activity yourself, and be open to signs that your choice was not a good fit for your child and call it quits as appropriate. It is a great idea to debrief after these experiences, perhaps talking over dinner about their experience, what they learned, what they saw, what they liked and did not like.

“Personal health is related to self-control and to the worship of life in all its natural beauty – self-control bringing with it happiness, renewed youth, and long life.” ~ Maria Montessori