

Engage, Don't Entertain

Meaningful Work, Concentration, and Challenge

Many folks over the years have noticed and commented on how Montessori classrooms tend to be quieter and less chaotic than other types of classrooms. There are, I believe, three main elements that cause this to be true. The first is the right to individual work. The second is meaningful work. And the third is the opportunity to concentrate.

Young children are not able to manage the emotional stresses of trying to share materials. With adult supervision, they can peacefully handle taking turns. But if left on their own, a shared activity most commonly leads to conflict! Letting each child use a material in the manner that they wish and for the time that they wish, removes that conflict and stress and allows the child to fully engage with the activity and to build concentration.

The other thing I see is that teachers and parents try to manage a child's energy by trying to either "wear them out" or keep them entertained. But this often leads to heightened energy, and heavy reliance on the adult, or screens, to be the entertainer. But if you offer a choice of interesting and engaging purposeful things to do, you will see the child dive right in and do them. Especially if you are doing it too.

My granddaughter loves to help stack fire wood, fold clothes and towels, use the vacuum/mop combo to clean floors, help cook, dig holes and wheelbarrow sand, or rocks, pull weeds, dust, empty the dishwasher, feed the animals, put washers and nuts on bolts – all the things that we are doing as part of daily life.

As a parent, you can create an environment that facilitates concentration, challenge and meaningful activity by understanding the function of concentration. Think of a time when you got interrupted while in a conversation and completely forgot what you were talking about, or a time when you were trying to get something important done but kept getting interrupted. Think of a time when you were super excited or engaged in something and someone interrupted you to tell you something they thought was important or corrected you on what you were doing. How did you feel? Did it distract you, hurt your feelings or confidence, change your focus, redirect you into something else? Do YOU need to be encouraged while in the middle of an activity? How does disruption change your process?

Dr. Montessori discovered the central role of concentration in a child's development. She wrote:

"The first essential for the child's development is concentration. It lays the whole basis for his character and social behavior. He must find out how to concentrate, and for this he needs things to concentrate upon. This shows the importance of his surroundings, for no one acting on the outside can cause him to concentrate. Only he can organize his psychic life. None of us can do it

for him. Indeed, it is just here that the importance of our schools really lies. They are places in which the child can find the kind of work that permits him to do this." (*The Absorbent Mind*, 1967.)

Concentration is the action or power of focusing one's attention or mental effort. Adults have had practice in tuning out distraction, but children are highly sensitive to stimuli and are easily distracted. Honoring the child's need for concentration looks like protecting their environment while they are still gaining skill and ability.

"At some given moment it happens that the child becomes deeply interested in a piece of work; we see it in the expression on his face, his intense concentration, the devotion to the exercise."
—*The Discovery of the Child*

"Praise, help, or even a look, may be enough to interrupt him, or destroy the activity.... The great principle which brings success to the teacher is this: as soon as concentration has begun, act as if the child does not exist." —*The Absorbent Mind*

***note about distracting "encouragement"*

How does the Montessori school support concentration?

1. by offering a **prepared environment** (a space that facilitates the child's ability to engage with it)
2. by preparing **interesting materials with varying levels of difficulty** (especially practical activities and materials which engage the senses)
3. by **removing obstacles** that might disrupt or distract the children.

"The child who concentrates is immensely happy." —*The Absorbent Mind*

Similarly, a parent should seek to prepare an environment which supports the child's power of concentration at home. The parent becomes a protector of their attention and an observer of their work. The adult must be able to differentiate between purposeful play, and chaotic activity.

What is purposeful activity?

- Purposeful activity for a child is a process that focuses on a goal which the child can relate to, a goal that corresponds to their need to care for their environment, to understand their world, to gain new skills. Children especially enjoy activities that engage them in the activities they see adults doing around them.
- Activities in practical life support children's development of concentration more than any other Montessori materials because they focus their attention on a purposeful and

repetitive movement or process. Next come activities in sensorial experience and observation. And finally activities with specific academic or pre-academic skills development.

- In Montessori we adapt all regular chores for the children so they can enjoy completing them successfully. For example, you might buy a sponge at the supermarket and cut it twice to make 3 small sponges which are the perfect size for small hands. Create a space accessible to the child where they can access child sized brooms, swiffer mop, sponges, towels, tissues, drinking water – all that they need to care for their environment and themselves.
- Provide a range of materials to work with that the child can access and choose from, including matching, sorting, spatial awareness, counting, cause and effect, puzzles, imaginary play, open building, like blocks, Legos. Magnatiles. Always try to imagine what the child will DO with item. If it does not have a clear and apparent purpose, they will probably get creatively silly with it instead of finding a calming focus.

When is it appropriate to interrupt a child? In the Montessori environment there is a deep respect for the child. The child is rarely interrupted while they are focused on their work.

- We interrupt when it is a matter of safety. Creating freedom within boundaries teaches children about operating within a social and moral societal framework.
- We interrupt when it is a matter of consideration for others or the environment/materials. We hold the child accountable for respecting the people around them and the environment in which they engage.
- There will be times when a child must be interrupted. At these times, it is ideal to let the child know ahead of time, for example: "It's almost lunchtime. We will need to stop working on the puzzle in 5 minutes." You could offer a choice, "Would you like to clean it up, or set it aside and work on it some more after lunch?"

How do I encourage concentration in my child?

- **Prepare your environment: use a child accessible shelf and have a designated workspace that is child sized and child friendly.** Set-up a shelf with only 6-10 activities for the child. Keep activities on the shelf which you see your child repeating again and again. When they ignore an activity, it may be too challenging or too simple and it's time to change the level of difficulty by adding or removing a step or exchanging it for another material. **Have a defined workspace** where the child can bring their activity. For babies this is probably a carpet on the floor in front of the shelf; for toddlers and preschool children, this is a low table and chair near the shelf. Make sure this workspace stays clean and ready to use so that the child is able to focus on completing the activity they chose completely and have success in the end.

- **Provide many opportunities for practical life** (cooking, cleaning, self-care). More than anything else, children love to concentrate on these activities. We have talked about this many times through the previous sessions – setting up places for a child to access their own snacks, clean their face and hands, hang up their jackets, put away their clothes, etc.
- **Avoid interrupting** their state of concentration. Interrupting can take many forms, some as well-intentioned as giving a kiss or applauding them. Remind yourself to stay silent when they are focused on their work and give them the space they need to concentrate and learn.
- **Observe without intervention** and ask yourself these questions: how does your child interact with their space? Do they have what they need to be successful? What is distracting them or drawing their attention away from what they are doing?
- **Invite them to repeat an activity:** repetition is the key to mastery, and concentration comes through the internal desire to achieve mastery. Re-introducing a material or task can initiate a renewed interest, so before removing an activity from your environment, be sure your child is done with it.
- **Lower the noise** level in the space. When the space and the people around the child are peaceful, the child will be more aware of themselves and their surroundings. It's very easy for babies to become overstimulated and for toddlers to become overwhelmed. The more difficult it is for the child to find concentration, the simpler and quieter their environment should be so as to not distract or overstimulate them. The order of the space should be clear and consistent so the child can find security in the space and relax enough to find peace and focus. Consider visual "noise" as well. Keep walls simple, easy to look at with lots of blank space.
- **Do your own purposeful work:** Model concentration yourself by focusing completely on one thing at a time like reading a book or preparing a meal.
- **Avoid being a "fixer".** Concentration in children is a fragile thing. Well-meaning adults often rush in to "fix" things. A whimper suddenly demands that new toys be offered, a frown means a change of scenery is required. Concentration is broken by the adult trying to shift the focus of the child. Before stepping in, take a step back and observe. What is your child doing, have they asked for help, do you really need to step in? allow your child to engage in reasonable amounts of struggle to achieve confidence and efficacy in themselves and independence in their abilities. **Let them find their own solutions** to their problems. Often with a child who has trouble concentrating, trying to help them will immediately cause them to abandon their activity and move on to something else. Their point of interest is often the difficulty itself, rather than the task. This is an area that many parents find challenging. They don't like to see their child feeling frustrated or not getting immediate success at something. Sometimes this pattern of jumping in to

help or fix turns into a pattern of attention seeking through crying, asking for help, or saying that they can't do something (often something you well know that they can).

Remind a frustrated child how to find calm, where they can go to work on finding calm, and then leave them alone until they are calm, to avoid the attention seeking fit. We discussed this in our last session.

“The child who has never learned to work by himself, to set goals for his own acts, or to be the master of his own force of will is recognizable in the adult who lets others guide his will and feels a constant need for approval of others.” —*Education and Peace*

“... the child's individual liberty must be so guided that through his activity he may arrive at independence ... the child who does not do, does not know how to do.” —*The Montessori Method*

Whenever I find myself in a group of children whose energy seems really high, arguments and frustrations popping up regularly, I try to come up with something TO DO. Children will almost always choose something to do. Offering an art project, a scavenger hunt, a game, a movement song, a chore, a personal activity, almost always redirects that random high energy into engaged activity. Keep this in mind for birthday parties! They are often a sugar soaked, high entertainment, and high emotion affairs. Try to plan some activity centers, a beading project, candle making, flower arranging, a craft project, a scavenger hunt, a guided movement activity, and you may find things are little more peaceful.

I heard something second hand from a physician recently that really resonated with what I have experienced. The doctor said children need to be worn out physically, socially and academically in order to find peace and calm.