

Full Transcript of Following Your Child

Following Your Child: A Montessori Philosophy of Parenting



The video opens with various shots of children from infants to six years old who are joyfully interacting with their parents (hugging, reading books, talking, listening), freely crawling or walking around their home environment, putting away their own clothes, dressing themselves and getting their own snacks.

How do we nurture a child's natural desire to learn?

What does a child need to feel safe and secure, confident and happy?

What does it mean to respect a child?

What is it that allows a child to reach his full potential?

The images shift to a 3-6 classroom.

For many parents, these are the questions that have drawn them to choose a Montessori education for their child. You do not need to be an expert in Montessori philosophy to sense that children thrive in an environment where they can move around freely... where opportunities to engage their minds and senses surround them... where they are encouraged to be independent and responsible... and where they are loved and respected for who they are.

One of the first things a new parent notices about the Montessori classroom environment is the fact that it is child-centered. The furniture is sized for the children in the classroom. The adults speak to the children at their own level, with respect and patience. The materials that the children are working with are colorful and are neatly arranged on shelves, just begging to be touched. Each child is engaged in a hands-on activity...



Nancy: You know what, it is the love of learning. That is what captured me the first time before I was a parent as an educator, it was that I saw children happily engaged, involved in what they were doing and I saw incredible comprehension and understanding. The hand being the teacher of the child, it made so much sense because that is how I learned my best lessons too. The enthusiasm and eagerness with which children learn is what caught me.

Images shift back to the home. We see children who are relaxed and confident, who function independently in many aspects of their lives.

If children thrive in a Montessori school environment, what would a Montessori approach to parenting look like? In this video we will visit the homes of several families who have found ways to integrate Montessori philosophy into their homes and into their approach to parenting. You may choose different ways to make the philosophy work in your home. There are several excellent books on Montessori in the home that can assist you in learning to parent using a Montessori approach. Some of these are listed on the cover of this videotape.

The First Years of Parenting



Probably no one is more interested in learning than a new parent. Every new mother or father wants their child to have the best

opportunity to reach his own potential, to be confident and happy and excited about learning about the world around him.

Luckily children are born with a natural desire to learn. In the first few years of life, they are learning faster than at any other time in life. They have a tremendous need to explore the world around them, and will do so with great joy if they are given the love, respect and support they need.

It is essential that an infant feel secure that his needs will be met. A baby needs to bond with his mother and father. Love and affection and gentle positive words have great meaning to a newborn child. Throughout childhood, it is important that mother and father hold an unconditional regard for their children as the parents are the first and most important reflection to the child. They act as a mirror and reflect back what they see and the child accepts this as his self concept.

Over almost a century of observing preschool age children, Montessorians have identified three basic needs to develop their physical, emotional and intellectual abilities. These are: a need for movement, for order, and for language.

Movement

One of the most powerful gifts a parent can give her child is the freedom to move around the home unencumbered. Take the time to make your home a safe environment for a child to explore. Put away things that are breakable or dangerous for a child to touch. Remove small objects that can be swallowed.

Whenever possible avoid the use of playpens and walkers that restrict your child's ability to move about freely.

The whole world is new and interesting for all of her senses. The fabric on the sofa, the texture of the carpet the coldness of the tile floor are all rich sources of information for a small child. Observe your child and provide her with new things to touch and taste. Anything that can be held will be tasted. Anything that makes a sound is fascinating. Anything that moves is interesting to follow. Every sense is in constant use trying as it does its best to create a sense of order.

Cassie: Making your house kid friendly. Making your house more accessible for them instead of trying to constantly tell the children NO you don't touch that sort of just organizing it so that you weren't having to do that all the time. It certainly drove my mom crazy, because when we were growing up we couldn't touch anything and she couldn't believe I was putting all the good stuff away. You know, I don't want them to break the crystal candlestick so why don't I just put them away.

If you find yourself saying no, the environment probably needs to be changed. No child wants to be stopped from their joyful exploration of the world around them. Find ways to make your home environment meet your child's need for movement and exploration.

Order

Children need to have a sense of order in their lives. Knowing what to expect, even for an infant, leads to a sense of security and confidence. For infants and toddlers, order is established through a regular routine.

Nancy: He doesn't have an internal order yet, that is just developing for him. To have the routine each day allows him to feel comfortable. And be able to predict, then things are going to go a lot

better. Order seems to be pretty important to all of us and so we do have a routine where we try to stick to regular eating times, sleeping times and napping times. I think Sam feels comfortable when he can predict what is going to happen since he doesn't know time right now, the routine allows him to predict what is going to happen.

As children get older, explain to them what is going to happen during the day if anything is new or different. If daddy is going to pick them up from school rather than mommy, let them know that. If they are going to have a sitter today, they appreciate being forewarned. Respecting children's need for order in their lives will let them face each day with confidence.

Preschool children also need an orderly environment that will not over stimulate their senses. Peaceful or soothing voices and sounds are comforting to a small child. A bedroom that is not cluttered with toys makes selecting an activity a simple process.

Cassie: I guess I have learned, since Jacob was younger that the more you have out the less they seem interested, so I really try to rotate so a lot of the extra goes down in the basement and it is really funny because they will go down in the basement to find something and go OHHHH, and it is a toy that they have had for three years and suddenly it is brand new, they are so excited. They are totally into board games right now so on their shelves I've got all their board games out right now and I was thinking a couple of weeks later, I will put those downstairs and give them a rest.

Language

We see parents talking to their babies while diapering them. Singing softly while rocking. Listening to their children explain something to them, etc.

From the moment of birth, a child is aware of the sound of your voice. Even before the words make sense, an infant is taking cues from language and the tone of your voice. Talk to your baby often. Tell her what you are doing when you are changing a diaper. Name the food you are feeding him. Language is a skill that is much more easily learned during the early years of life.

As your child gets older, make time to listen to her thoughts. Much can be learned from just paying attention to your child. All children crave attention from their parents and thrive when they feel they are worth your attention.

Respect

Montessori philosophy is based on respect for the child. In order to respect the child, we must know our child. To know our child, we must learn to observe our child. If we carefully observe our children's behavior and interests, their ability to move and take on new tasks, their need to feel secure and relaxed in their environment, we can get many clues as to what it means to parent from a Montessori perspective. Each child grows and develops at his own pace. If we can follow her cues as to what her needs and abilities are, and do our best to provide a home environment that satisfies these, she will grow confident that she is accepted for who she is and not expected to fulfill her parent's or anyone else's timetable for development. This approach Maria Montessori called "following the child" and is at the core of Montessori philosophy.

Cassie: I guess one of the things is following the child and just letting them be interested in exploring what it is they are interested in instead of me trying to constantly set the agenda. Also I think making things available for them, I mean we live on ten acres, we have a lot of wildlife and so this some I made sure they have binoculars, they have magnifying glasses, I made a critter box to keep caterpillars and frogs and all that kind of stuff that I don't want to touch.

Nancy: I would just say if we are trying to follow the child, so as he grows and changes, then we also need to provide things that are appropriate for him at that age. I do think that if you find that they are misbehaving or acting out or getting into things, it is a pretty good indicator that you better be looking a little more closely at what their needs are.

Learning to be an observer of your child is a lifetime skill that takes time to develop. If something is not working, it is time to try something else. Become a student of your child's developmental needs and focus on what is appropriate for her at her current age level and ability. Focus on activities that interest your child organize them so your child can be successful and keep them easily within reach.

Following your child demonstrates that you respect him for who he is - that you understand his capabilities and have reasonable expectations for him. It is important to spend quality time together both working and playing. It is important to listen carefully to your child and sincerely engage in thoughtful communication. When a difficulty arises for you as a parent, it is important to express yourself in an I statement, such as "I feel irritated when you yell at your sister" instead of shaming your child with statements like, "stop yelling, you are driving me crazy." Children who feel this sense of respect are usually remarkably well behaved.

Nancy: To get down on Sam's level and to look him in the eye and to let him know what it is that is concerning us. You know sometimes, just having left the two's, it takes more than that. Sometimes it may take him actually sitting with me or me having to calm him by rubbing his back, so that we can get redirected into something that would be appropriate. Our premise is that they want to be a part of things, they want to cooperate, they want to feel valued and loved and so there is usually a gentle way of doing that. If they are not cooperating, I am usually looking at myself to say, "what's wrong, what I am doing."

Independence

Children want to feel independent and thrive when they are given opportunities to be responsible for their own care. Often a parent can adjust the home environment or an activity to allow a small child the chance to participate in family chores. In a Montessori classroom, children quickly learn how to put on their coats or shoes, to wash their hands, to put things away... even to prepare a snack. Each room in your house offers unique opportunities for your children to become more independent in their daily lives.

I also like the idea of them participating in daily life. You know helping me sort the clothes. Helping set the table. Being responsible for getting their own drinks. Things like that that they didn't need me for they could really do for themselves.

The Kitchen

Cassie: That looks like part of the kitchen cabinets but that is a coat closet. We wanted it to not be messy or look like a coat closet but I wanted something accessible for the kids so that when they come in they can put their book packs there. The other day she surprised me because she went and got a hanger, hung her coat up. I went, "good for you!"

Parents are often surprised to discover that children find many household objects just as fascinating as their toys. They want to use the same tools that they see mom or dad using.

Nancy: In the kitchen we had a low cupboard with small shelves in it and that is where Samuel's toys are. He has the kitchen things that he loves, his beaters and his tongs and his pans that he likes to beat on and he has his play dough in there and he has some crayons in there so that is

where he goes when we are in the kitchen. There is a desk in the kitchen and there is a seat for him if he wants to draw or color or paste – all the kinds of things that he likes to do.

Cassie: When we were setting up dishes and things like that, I tried to think like they do. So I knew they were going to be near the refrigerator a lot so to the left of the refrigerator is the cabinet where we have cups, plates, things that they need. I mean I have cups and plate other places but those are the things that they go for. And it is cute now because their friends will be over and they don't even ask. I never even showed the neighbor kids.

The Bedroom

Nancy: I think providing low drawers so that Sam can get things. I ask him the night before to lay out the things he would like to wear to school the next day so that we will be ready in the morning. He loves being able to open the drawers and get the socks that he wants and the shirts he wants. Obviously they are different choices than maybe what I would make for him and yet he is the one that is learning to dress himself, he needs to be comfortable tomorrow just like I do. It is really cute because sometimes he likes to come into my room and pick things that he thinks that I should wear the next day.

In Montessori infant and toddler classrooms, the beds are usually at floor level, allowing the children to choose when they want to nap or explore their environments. At home many parents choose to provide their children with the same freedom of movement.

Cassie: It is much safer actually and the child's play space at that time is the floor and it is very accommodating for them to be able to crawl in when they need to rest and to crawl out when they are finished. So that was the point of having it down low. Many times, he would crawl in and read books and babble and tell stories (his version) so it was really lovely. He was very appreciative of having that. At least we weren't worried about him falling out either cause he could come in and go out, as he needed.

The Bathroom

In a Montessori classroom, the every day tasks of life are an important part of the practical life curriculum. Children are encouraged to learn to wash their own hands. When your toddler is ready to accomplish these tasks on his own, you can set up the bathroom environment to make it easy for him to do it on his own.

Cassie: Just keeping things at their level is a real simple way of making sure. I mean you can't go into a room and put in child size potties as cute as they are at school. That is just not going to happen in a home. But making sure at a sink that there is a step stool there so that they can reach the towel, they can reach the soap.

Responsibility

Taking the time to help your children learn to take care of certain responsibilities on their own may seem difficult at times. When you are busy, it may seem simpler to just put on their clothes or make their beds rather than to take the time to work with them to learn to do these tasks themselves. Organizing the environment to make it easier is half the job.

Cassie: In their bedroom – and I had done this since they went into their big beds when they were three. I just made it so that it is easy for them to make up, real simple comforter that they can just toss on in front of the pillow.

Children who are expected to take appropriate responsibilities within the home often rise to the occasion and take pride in being independent. It is not always something that is easy to work on. Remember to follow your child. If the task seems to frustrate her, step back and consider if she is really ready. Some children take responsibility more readily than others do. If she refuses to do what is expected, consider if she is tired, distracted or angry about something else.

Cassie: I mean every child is different, so what works with Jacob won't necessarily work with Sarah. They seem to respond well if I just try to listen to them. And a lot of times they may be misbehaving because they are frustrated, or they are tired or something happened earlier in the day that I might not know about and so I just try to elicit from them what is going on. A good example is last night our Sarah, she has sometimes a difficult time with things ending and so she will be very frustrated and very angry and a lot of times I will just say are you sad because we had to leave or you had to stop playing with these children, "yes." And then she can calm down and tell me how that makes her feel and then she is okay.

Montessorians realize that even when a child is unhappy about doing a particular thing, it is possible to provide her with some sense of independence by offering two acceptable choices. It is usually possible to avoid being harsh if you respect their need to feel some sense of control. The key is to limit the choices to what is acceptable and then give them a choice.

Nancy: Sometimes the choice might not be the favorite, neither choice may be too favorite but at least we are allowing him to make the choice for example, I can think of last night, "Do you want to take your bath upstairs or downstairs?" "Well I don't want to take a bath tonight." "Well I appreciate that you don't want to take a bath tonight but you are really dirty, we are playing outside, did you want to go upstairs for a bath or downstairs." "Or do you want to take a shower or do you want to go in the bath?" Those might be the choices so, it's freedom within limits and its not, the choice was not, "do I want to take a bath or not" It is where do you want to take a bath.

If a child feels that he is respected in significant areas of his life, he usually finds it much easier to accept that there is a good reason when there is no choice.

Some parents will tell me at school that their kids won't wear a seatbelt or won't ride in their car seat. You see that's not a choice, is what I tell them because they are not old enough to make that decision yet. Sometimes people get confused but freedom within limits would say, "We don't go unless you are in your car seat." So that's never been a problem for Sam, he's never had any other choice.

When appropriate choice is made, the child reaps the rewards of his success through achievement and cooperation. When an inappropriate choice is made, either a natural or logical consequence should occur. The child is given the opportunity to learn from mistakes and is given the hope of doing it appropriately the next time

We reprise some of the images from the video with new ones of warm parent-child interaction.

As your children grow from infants to toddlers to school age children, it is fascinating to observe how quickly they are growing physically, emotionally and intellectually. It is a challenge to recognize these changes and to support and respect their need to become ever more independent. Children, like all human beings, thrive in an environment where they know they are loved and respected. Where they are free to explore without being constantly interrupted or told to stop. Where they can use all their senses to learn about the wondrous world around them.