

Practical Life Materials Demonstrations

Overview

Montessori educators believe that children strive for independence and thrive in an environment that encourages them to take on the basic tasks of life. In the Practical Life curriculum, the exercises provide the children with many opportunities to work on these skills and to build the fine and gross motor movement and coordination to become more self-sufficient.

The Practical Life Curriculum can be organized into four general content areas:

The Control of Movement, Care of the Person, Care of the Environment, and Grace and Courtesy. All of these skills help the child to be independent and to function successfully in the Montessori learning community.

The Practical Life materials are beautiful and children are naturally drawn to work with them. As the child moves from the simplest activities to ones that require more dexterity and concentration, he or she gains self-confidence, independence, self-esteem and self-control.

Each of the activities has a planned sequence. By learning how to complete each material in an orderly manner, the child's mind becomes more disciplined and precise. Because a child can choose an activity and repeat it as often as desired with no time pressures, the activity is mastered independently. All of the activities are hands-on and thoroughly engage the child. The teacher shows the child the step-by-step procedure to complete each task and the child is then free to choose that activity. This structure provides a sense of order, sequence and precision leading to greater success and the ability to concentrate. These skills provide the foundation for learning mathematics and language.

Preliminary Exercises – Age 2

The Montessori 3-6 classroom is multi-age and it is important for new members of the school community to learn expectations of the classroom. The older children serve as role models making the classroom a community of learners. Children learn to walk carefully and respectfully around each other's work. This control of movement is practiced by "walking on the line." When working at a table, children learn to carefully pull out the chair and then replace it when their work is complete. The practical life curriculum also teaches children to wait patiently for their turn to do an activity or to speak to an adult in the classroom

1. Dressing Frames

Large Button Frame

Getting dressed involves many skills. Fine motor movement and hand-eye coordination are developed through repetition of these materials. Children love the dressing frames and are motivated by the desire to become independent in this important life skill.

There are many dressing frames including, button, buckle, zipper, and tie frames. In this demonstration we will show the large button frame, which is the first dressing frame, and

the bow frame, which is one of the most difficult.

In presenting Montessori materials, the teacher sits on the child's dominant side. As the presentation is made, the hands should avoid blocking the child's view of the step-by-step procedure.

This is the beginning of the dressing frame. This is the large button frame. It is a little difficult to present since you have to use your hands so much. Try to keep your hand down as you present how to unbutton. You can see the wear on the button frame because it is used so much and this is a new button frame.

Everything is unbuttoned, so we are going to button it back up. There is also a small button frame with smaller buttons.

Bow Frame

Tying a bow is a complex process. The Montessori presentation is designed to make it as age appropriate for a 3-6 year olds' physical capabilities. The bow frame has several bows for practice. Each step is repeated with each bow prior to moving on to the next step. This approach reinforces the child's ability to recall and perform that step during the next use of the material.

The presentation may be repeated, until the child can perform the steps independently.

This is the bow frame. It's done in a series of steps. First, the bow must be untied. Many times, I share the bow frame with the child. I'll take the first bows and the child will take the last one, depending upon the child's skill. Whatever is on the right side goes on the top. As we trade sides, this time it is the white.

I'm ready to tie the knot; going to make a bridge, come around to the back and pull. Come around to the back. My little trick is to have the string say hello to the child as it's going around to the back door. Says hello and comes around. That's not part of the initial presentation though; it's my little trick of the trade. Comes around to the back and pull. Now it's time for the knot, for the bow. We check to make sure that we still have lots of lace. Wanting to come around, drops off. Now we're going to poke into the hole, my other fingers are going to take it and pull both at the same time. The role of practical life is to give the children the skills they need for life. It focuses on fine motor and gross motor skills that will help the child within the classroom. It helps the child care for themselves and the environment.

They have materials that are familiar to a child, that are from home so it's often the material, the area that you start with first with children because they are familiar, they're comfortable, they're easy so that they'll build the concentration, the coordination, the control of movement, the confidence that a child will need throughout the classroom. Again, and there is the bow frame. And then usually what I like to do is, the next time I do three bows and then the child does two bows and then the next time I do two bows and they do three. Then they do it on their own.

2. Dusting

This is dusting. Just folding the dusting cloth on the fingers. I'm going to go left to right. It's indirect preparation for writing, for reading. There's a little catch at the end to make sure I'm getting the dust on the cloth and taking a look, pointing out the dust then going back and dusting. This is one of the earlier materials for the younger children. There's not as much that they can do to care for the environment in the beginning. When it's done, fold it closed, take it to the laundry and get a new cloth to put into the basket for the child.

3. Spooning

This is spooning. This is usually the first area a child comes into, starting off when they're three. The idea is that they're working on their fine motor skills and that's what the idea of this material is, to help them do that. Also, working with spoons, which is a basic, for life activity.

4. Pouring

This is pouring which is the next activity after spooning.

This is the pouring of the grain. One thing that I should say: that, if a child is left-handed, they will fix it so that they're pouring with their left hand. What they're using is usually their dominant hand here. My control of error is to check to see if I've spilled any. And then since my dominant hand is right, I'm going to return it there. This is very important material for a child, especially in the beginning. This control of the fine motor so the more often that they do this, the more repetition that occurs, the better they'll get at it. As a directress, I have to actually perform it perfectly but a child will often do many spills so the repetition will emphasize the fact that, the actual perfection of the pouring. Also, this is again, an exercise for life. This pouring occurs in many other places in the classroom and is very necessary to thrive in the classroom, to be able to perform this. Children often do this material a lot because it is to them, they love the sound of the beans, they just love the flow of the pouring. So often they just have this desire and this need to come to this material, to pour it. Often, older children come back to this material because they may have done something that was very big, like one of the math materials, and they come over here and it just calms them and soothes them. So, also with this sequence, I said that this is after

spooning, both of those are done with grains before we move to water because we want some, already some repetition made here so that they are more successful with the water. Again, we're emphasizing one particular thing and then the next material makes it just a little bit more difficult.

Pouring Water

This is pouring water. This is done after the pouring of the grains, of the rice, of the beans, the dry pouring. These pitchers should always be clear, as much as possible, for the child to be able to see the amount. The pouring is done basically the same as the pouring of grain. The point of consciousness is when the pouring is done and there is the drip, waiting for the drip. And when it's done, the pitchers come off. We use the sponge, watch for water. Now, bring back the pitchers and then usually I pour again. Any water? The child will gleefully point out that there is water. And then the child should go ahead and pour. There are other pouring waters where you may use a funnel; you may use many different items, the ratio of one pitcher to two glasses or three glasses. Water should never be poured back into a pitcher from a cup; it should always go into a separate container. Because the idea is, that if anything is in a pitcher, you do not want to pour whatever is leftover in your cup back into the pitcher.

5. Table Washing

This is table washing. Again, this has a very logical sequence. Everything has its place on the rug. This is only done in the tiled area because this is the instance where we're starting to use water. This has a large motor that we're using. We'll also be using our prior knowledge of pouring water that started all the way back for the pouring of the grains that we've shown already. Again, this area works on the concentration and the coordination so here's a very big gross motor thing. Also, during the sequence, you'll also notice some things about moving left to right that will help later on with preparation for writing and also for reading.

The wetting of the table prepares it for the soap so that we get lots and lots of suds so this is a good work for children, it's a lot of movement. Again, it also helps them when they see a dirty table; you'll instantly see them want to take it, wash it up, get it all nice and clean. We're moving left and right. Always slow on the edges, and moving left to right. It's just as if you were writing on a piece of paper and you have to come to the edge of the paper, you start to slow down so that you don't go past the edge. Again, moving left to right, checking the sponge, seeing all the soap on there. Asserting the control right there, if there's too much soap, the table's not going to get cleaned. And then, the last step to washing the table is drying the table. Again, in the same motion as when we were scrubbing it. Again emphasizing left to right. Slow around the edges, just as if you were writing on a piece of paper. So there's the logical sequence of washing the table. Then we just clean it up to put it away. Again, all that pouring work that we did was very useful in all the things that you have to pour. All those natural things that people do at home to make sure things are nice and cleaned out are things that we even include in the classroom. And as always, when we have something cleaned up, we're always going to leave it prepared and clean and dry for the next person so that it's completely ready for them. So that every child, when they see something that they'd like to do, can just go to it and do the work.

6. Folding

This is folding, the idea to prepare the child for folding in the classroom. Indicating the line, this is the line we're going to fold over. These are the basic folding shapes, there are more. The practical life area always has something to look for, something to point out to the child, the points of consciousness, what you want them to be aware of. Here, I'm wanting them to be aware of what their fingers need to do and then where to fold. And that is folding. When we're done with the last one, it's opened and put into the basket.

7. Silver Polishing

This is silver polishing. There's many different polishings in a classroom. There can be silver, there can be wood, a brass polishing even, up to shoe polishing. This has a very logical sequence to go through. As you can see, I have it all laid out. It's very important that this sequence is laid out for the control of error for the polishing. And so I'm going to go ahead and begin polishing. Each step, the first one with the cotton ball, was to put the polish on it. Because of this having a logical sequence, the children who are able to remember that to follow through that sequence and to do each step, by our observing of what they're doing, that tells us that they're ready, maybe for another material. Math is a very logical area and if they're able to follow this sequence then, more than likely, they're ready for that area of the classroom. Now I'm removing the polish, especially most of all, the extra because then the last step that I will be doing will be actually shining the object. This can help beautify the classroom but it's also, again, an exercise for life

that the children will be able to do. Silver is an actual material that can be found in many homes especially for special occasions and so it's often a special thing. That, and it's also a beautiful metal. The children love to do this material because of how they take pride in the classroom and if they may see something that needs to be polished, that may need to be cleaned, they're very quick to get it out, to get the material out, to polish it, to make it beautiful because this is their classroom and they are partially responsible for the beauty of the classroom.

8. Food Preparation

The child has already done some cutting with food like bananas with knives, spreading with knives and so we are moving on to another step.

This is carrot cutting. The child has gone to the refrigerator and has chosen a carrot and has washed the carrot in the sink and we are now going to prepare the carrot for peeling. Here's the peeler – emphasizing the side that the peeling is going to be used on. Going through the motions of peeling. Children like this exercise because it involves eating.

Now I can set up for

them and they may choose the amounts that they'd like. Sometimes there is a knife there for them to spread their peanut butter. I'm going to turn the carrot around and so that they have all of their needs. They have to have certain nutritional needs. I like the fact that

we're cutting a vegetable, peeling and cutting a vegetable, hopefully one that children will want to eat. It's hard to emphasize the turning of the carrot, so often you have to be specific, the carrot needs to be turned. And we'll look for any more peels. And this is where safety comes in. This is not a very sharp blade but it goes with the fact that you need to push down. We don't want to eat the end of the carrot so we're going to cut those off and then get our carrot cut into portions, keeping the fingers well back. Pieces can go into the container. Usually the child takes their bag and gets a pen to write their name if they do not wish to eat them. The carrots can be put into the refrigerator to be taken home or saved for lunch. After this is done, the child is shown how to clean up. How to use the sink faucet, clean each of the items and then to dry carefully with the towel set aside to dry dishes.

This is orange juice squeezing. The child has taken an orange from the refrigerator in a sealed container so it is nice and chilled. The emphasis is put onto the center of the orange to go into the center of the juicer and then to push down and squeeze, down and squeeze. After a short while you turn the orange over to show how you are squeezing the pulp... and turn and squeeze. You need muscles for this one. Turning it over to check again. It is getting shorter and thinner and thinner. It smells good. The good thing about food preparation there is grating cinnamon and the mortar and pestle work with cumin and nut cracking so not only does it incorporate food, but it incorporates smells. Orange juice squeezing is usually one of the last steps in the practical life area for food preparation because you have to squeeze and turn. It takes a lot of muscles. It is usually a skill the older children are able to accomplish. The idea then is to be able to pour your juice out and then to drink your orange juice. After the child is done the child is shown how to clean up at the sink at the faucet and to make sure the orange rind is put into a safe place. People may have a trashcan or they may have a compost pile to add the orange to.

9. Hand Washing

In this presentation you will see a bar of soap being used. Some states now regulate that liquid soap must be used. This change is easily incorporated into the presentation. The child brings a pitcher of warm water to the table for use in the exercise. An apron is also provided for the child to wear during the handwashing activity. So this is hand washing, We're going to show the child that if there's any items that they are wearing, that there's a special dish to hold those items. And then we already have our water. I have asked the child to get warm water for hand washing. I'm going to pour like they've been presented and leave just a little bit inside the pitcher. First the hands are wetted. A child has smaller hands so that it's much easier for them. And we'll get a little bit of soap. And we're going to do the back of the hand, the fingers, in between the fingers and the wrist. The other side: fingers, between the fingers and the wrist. And we rinse. Again, this is easier for a child who has smaller hands. Let some of the extra drip off. Now we need the nailbrush, a bit of water, and some soap. Rinse, rinse off the brush, and then the hands are dried; fingers, the wrist, other hand: fingers, between and the wrist. We're done with this towel, it is hung up to dry, and then a child gets a new towel, and it's time to clean up. Carefully, the child is shown to pour water into the bucket.

Pour. I'm doing this to make sure all the soap is out of the basin. And the bucket is then taken and carried to the sink and emptied. Now, I'll do that and then I've got to finish cleaning up. And then we're going dry the bucket, the basin and the pitcher. This towel is taken and hung up to dry and a new towel is brought and placed. If there's any water, the child may clean that up. The jewelry is put back on and the child places his apron back onto the holder.

10. Flower Arranging

This is flower arranging. We have already set up everything necessary. Again, the idea of, when there's a sequence, the directress takes it out, sets up the sequence, puts it back into the basket and lets the child create the sequence. We have gotten our water and our vase and are ready to get started. If a funnel is necessary, the funnel is already placed. A clear vase is always good for this, only about halfway. Any water left can go back into the large basin. We're ready to begin. The flowers have already been chosen. We're going to measure the flower. This is the flower I'm going to use. The bottom of the vase comes here and I can move the flower up or down to the height that I would like it to be. I'm going to place it inside the water and under the water and very carefully cut the flowers. The flower is going to be held under the water to make sure all the natural juices in the flower stay in so it can seal itself. Again, choosing the flower and the height, placing it underneath the water. I'm going to cut that one underneath and hold it there and then I'm going to place it in there. There we go. When the flower arrangement is done, the child chooses a doily that is located on the shelf and places it in the location of the classroom that they would like to display their flower arrangement on and then the vase is brought to the doily.

11. Sewing

This is sewing buttons. Again, since this is in the practical life area, this is again, an exercise for life. The children love doing this. They love finding very pretty buttons and sewing them. This way, they can also continue beautifying the classroom but something that even they can start doing at home. I find many parents that tell me that they often like to do this sewing of the buttons at home, repairing things. They'll even bring beautiful buttons from home. This is a basic art of sewing that is very important when you think about it; this is one of the basic important steps, to be able to sew a button on. This is the second sequence in sewing; the first one is where we sew in plastic grids with a very blunt needle so they've already had some experience with the needle. I do explain to them that this is a very sharp needle and they feel privileged and this is not often something they can use at home, a sharp needle, so they feel very special a lot of times. You can see the smile on their faces when they get the opportunity to do this material 'cause you're trusting them with that and they understand that it's sharp so you see how careful they try to be when they get this material out. When this is full, we just empty it and put a whole new piece of cloth on it.

12. Rug Rolling

Rugs are used for defining the space of the child's work on the classroom floor. This helps the child to focus and complete the activity in an orderly fashion. It also helps the other children in the classroom to respect the work area.

The idea is to roll it in the middle. I'm trying to point out with my eyes that I'm looking at the ends. Sometimes I'll even point with my finger that I'm watching those ends but rolling in the middle nice and slow, moving my body forward.

13. Control of Movement

Activities such as sewing, silver polishing and food preparation develop small motor skills. Children also need to develop large motor skills, which they do by sweeping, moving tables and chairs and putting away materials.

Walking the line helps develop balance and coordination. The line is an ellipse on the floor that is used for walking and for class gatherings. Using music, rhythms, or percussion instruments can make walking the line more challenging.

When moving about in the classroom, children monitor their movements so that they are careful to walk around the work areas of other children.

14. Silence Game

The "silence game" is a whole class activity where everyone tries to be as quiet as possible, sometimes closing their eyes. This activity helps the children to learn concentration and to become more calm. Additionally, most classrooms have a quiet space where children can rest, read or practice yoga separate from their classmates.

15. Paper Cutting

This is cutting. This paper is actually the third sequence. We have already worked with a straight line and a diagonal line and now we are putting the movements together for a curved line. They have already been shown how to hold the scissors prior to this step. Children have two styles of doing this, where their scissors move and I have seen children who make the paper move or they use both. Again this is a necessary activity for life. So this material is very important and it is also on our art shelf because we do lots of art projects that involve cutting. Again the papers are colored coded so that all the ones that have curved lines are yellow. The ones with the straight lines are green and the blue ones are the diagonal lines so that they know exactly where to find it and can use it.

16. Grace and Courtesy

Grace and courtesy are emphasized at all times in the Montessori classroom. The adults model this behavior by speaking quietly and talking to children at their own level. They do not interrupt children when they are working if at all possible because children are just learning to develop concentration. Children learn to wait patiently for their turn if another child is doing the activity. They always clean up after themselves and take responsibility for their own belongings. Children learn to greet others and speak politely, to say excuse me and thank you. As always the older children also serve as models having had more experience in the classroom community.