

Development of the Will

By Molly
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The task of the child in the first plane is to build up consciousness, movement, intellect, and will. We want to help the child judge and make decisions from a developed and strong will, not simply from his emotions.

All humans have emotions. They safeguard our survival, they help us get our needs met, and they enrich our relationships. But maturity and self-discipline result from the ability to contain our emotions when necessary and to use them effectively within a structure.

All human movement should come under the control of the will. The eminent AMI trainer Miss Margaret Stephenson used to refer to such control as "knowledgeable movement". Through his work with the exercises of practical life, the child chooses to control his movements. This ability helps him to later realise "I can choose... I can control my movements". The limits inherent in the practical life materials also contribute to the development of the will and self-discipline. "I see there are no remaining carrots. I must wait until tomorrow". "Maria is using the sewing basket; I will have to wait until she is done".

One study done at Stanford University demonstrated that four-year-olds who were able to delay gratification "were better at waiting as teenagers, and that they were also higher achievers, better socially

adjusted, got into trouble much less, and were overall happier" (Friel and Friel 21). The current atmosphere in many countries is one of overindulgence, which robs children of the necessary faculty of self-control.

As children grow older and become the leaders in the Montessori environment, they begin to perform activities more to contribute to the community than to serve an inner need, thus becoming more and more aware of the needs in the community. "I see this flower is very dry; I need to water it".

The adult does not always appreciate a strongly developed will in the child. As the will emerges, so does independent thought in both words and actions. An uninformed adult may see this development as a threat to his authority. But unless the will is developed, through the freedom to choose, the child can never learn to obey, a necessary ingredient in self-discipline. Often when a child is disobedient, we refer to his behavior as "willfulness". In fact, the opposite is true. He is lacking a developed will when he is incapable of following a command. We might say he is "will-less". Will power is necessary in order to obey.

Montessori says that most people think of will and obedience in opposition to each other and that education has largely been directed toward the "suppression or bending of the child's will, and the substitution for it of the teacher's will, which demands from the child unquestioning obedience" (*The Absorbent Mind* 220).

The child must develop the ability to balance two forces – impulses and inhibition. Disciplined behavior is an expression of this balance. We need both of these factors in our life. Without impulses we cannot take part in social life, but on the other hand, we must be able to inhibit, restrain, correct, and direct our impulses. The balance of these two motor forces is a result of prolonged practice and repetition, resulting in habits of mind. With practice, the child develops the ability to perform these actions without thinking about them.

Montessori says we see the emergence of the will when the child makes a deliberate act. What are these acts of will that we see in the child? Each time the child chooses from a number of objects those that he prefers to work with – that is an act of the will. He takes work from the shelf, works with it, and then returns it. When he agrees to give something to a friend – that is another act of the will. When he waits for something – that is an act of the will. It is the inhibition of an impulse. That expressed patience is an act of the will. When the child persists for a long time with an activity – that is an act of the will. When he corrects his own mistakes – that is an act of the will.

When a child walks on the line with a glass of water on his head, this is an act of the will. In the silence activity, he restrains all impulses, all his movements, and when he rises as his name is called and moves, oh so carefully, to avoid making a noise – these are all acts of the will. Throughout each day we see the child perform so many acts of the will.



Dr. Montessori gives us one definition of the will: "It is the intelligent direction or inhibition of movement". Movement is the external expression of the will. It is through movement that we see the will made visible. All human actions – walking, speaking, writing, and so forth – are acts of the will. We also see restriction of movement as an act of the will. To restrain disorderly movement or anger requires a developed will. To not impulsively grab something when we want it – or, as an adult, to not cut someone off on the freeway because we are angry – demonstrates a developed will. These are all voluntary actions – actions of the will. There are many adults who cannot inhibit their impulses when required, adults who cannot respond appropriately in a given situation. This ability needs to be built up by the individual, but in response to the needs of the group.

In our ignorance, in order to educate the will, we think we must break it and substitute our own in everything the child does. By enforcing our will on the child, we either keep the child motionless or will the child to act according to what we decide he should do and say. When we ask the child to be still and motionless, we substitute our will for the child's. When we dictate what the child should think, how he should act, how he should dress, who his friends should be, we substitute our will for his.

We cannot instruct the will. We cannot help the will to develop by instruction, by demanding that it develop. The will evolves through continuous activity on the part of the child in relation to the environment. The child must continuously act in the environment – an environment especially prepared to meet his needs. The will has to be built up by the child's own powers through experience.

We can easily differentiate between impulse and willed movement. There is a parallel between development of the will and coordination of movement. To develop control of movement the child must move. He must actually practice using his muscles. Just as we have gymnastics to develop the muscles, it is necessary to have a system of exercises to develop the will. This is true to develop all aspects of the psychic life. To develop the will, the child must have practice – repetition – so he will gain strength and direction. We must give the child freedom to choose and to repeat so that he can strengthen this power until it is perfected, until it becomes a habit.

In *Education for a New World*, Montessori writes, "Whereas the breaking of the will is instantaneous, the development of it is a lengthy process, because it is growth, and depends on aid from the

environment" (88). She continues by explaining, "this long process of developing the will may be compared to the spinning of thread; developed by activity in an ever-widening field of action, the thread of will becomes stronger and stronger" (88).

As the will grows stronger and solidifies, the ability to obey emerges. Obedience is necessary in human life. It is a social right, an essential element of human social life. We cannot live in a society without obedience. Montessori says, and history testifies, that obedience without knowledge can be a negative force. Obedience must be based on knowledge. Blind obedience can lead to disastrous social consequences, as we have seen with leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini. When masses of people are obedient to unethical leaders, the result can be devastating.

When the child enters the Montessori environment, he cannot always comply with a request. For the new child this may be difficult. The adult may be asking for something that the child cannot yet give because his will is not well developed. Obedience requires an understanding of what is requested. It also requires the ability to obey. Obedience is an act of the will and an act of the intelligence. It grows through practice – the practice of voluntary activity. Obedience grows in the child as he gains control of himself.

Obedience is acting in accordance with the will of another. It is a willingness to accept the will of another and follow the instructions of others. Many adult-child conflicts are caused by the adult's failure to understand how the will develops and how this development leads to obedience. Obedience is not merely compliance. Forced obedience is not the same as obedience. If we make the child behave by fear, intimidation, cajoling, it is an imposition of our will over that of the child. In *Education for a New World*, Montessori states, "If a child carries out the will of a teacher because he is afraid, or because his affection is exploited, he has no will, and obedience that is secured by suppression of the will is truly oppression ... but the finesse of discipline is to obtain obedience from developed wills, and this is based on a society by cohesion, the first step to organised society" (91).

Ideally, beginning in the home, then in the toddler environment, and continuing in the Casa, we give the child the possibility of practicing from the very beginning. Preliminary exercises engage the will of the child. The whole area of exercises of practical life gives practice to the will. Grace and courtesy exercises give practice to the will. Emotionally charged situations such as apologising to someone or waiting to get someone's attention require so much self-control and discipline. When walking on the line or participating in the silence activity, the children must collectively agree to control themselves and work collaboratively.





The will is another potential that the child must develop in obedience to natural laws. If the child does not encounter obstacles to his development, the development of the will happens naturally, just like the potential for language, or music, or math.

If obstacles do occur, if children have not had the opportunity or freedom to do things for themselves and make choices, this deficit manifests itself in their actions. It may exhibit itself through refusal to enter into an activity. These are the children who do not want to do anything. They do not make their own choices. They will do only what the adult asks them to do; they do not choose from their own interest. They would rather sit motionless and listen or pretend to listen. These children are not necessarily troublesome, but they cannot choose work.

Children who are very disorderly and disruptive are another example of those who have not developed their wills. These children are usually called "naughty". Other children become ruled by their inhibitions. They are not at all at ease in the environment. They are fearful and timid.

All these types of children need the same type of help. And the correct help is inherent in the prepared environment. It is the responsibility of the adult to give knowledge of how to use the environment, how to show respect for the materials, how to wait for someone to finish. We give the child knowledge through giving presentations, allowing choice, and thereby helping him to develop responsibility.

The real nature of humans emerges through work – genuine qualities: love, which is different than attachment; discipline, which is different than blind submission; and the ability to relate to reality. Concentrated work, which builds up the personality, is set in motion by decisions – not simply by chaotic impulses. If we do not allow the decisions to come from within the child, the inner strength and clarity of vision required to make wise decisions will be lacking in time of peril. Montessori warns, "The child who has never learned to work by himself, to set goals for his own acts, or be the master of his own force of will is recognisable in the adult who lets others guide his will and feels a constant need for approval of others" (Education and Peace 23).

If we provide conditions that enable the child to build up his individual personality, becoming confident in his abilities, we see a natural movement toward cohesion in the group. The ultimate goal of independent functioning is the ability to support the needs of others and to contribute to the whole. This is the heart of Montessori education: cooperation with others in an effort to forward civilisation in a unified and peaceful fashion. This is also the essence of what it means to be a disciplined human being with a fully developed will. To be disciplined we must see ourselves as a part of the whole, realising that our own personal needs do not necessarily take precedence over the needs of others. We witness this profound sense of community and self-discipline in our Montessori environments.

We must constantly remind ourselves that it is the small, seemingly trivial actions and choices on the part of the child that ultimately result in a fully integrated and strong-willed human being, able to make prudent and wise decisions and choices.

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