

MONTESSORI IN THE HOME ENVIRONMENT

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Paper presented by Amy Kirkham at the China Centenary Conference: The Adult and Child Grow Together

Zao shang hao! I am honoured and delighted to be in Hangzhou, 'Heaven on earth', to participate in your celebrations of one hundred years of Montessori. Over the past day and a half we have marvelled at the beauty and grace of children and adults working together as they danced and sang a welcome.

We have followed the development of the child from birth to twenty-four years. We have heard the wisdom of great thinkers—Confucius, Lao Shi, Montessori. We have reflected on the spiritual preparation of the adult and discovered the importance of the prepared environment created to meet the needs of each developmental stage of the child. We have seen different classroom environments and this morning we will visit the home.

I would like to acknowledge the three families who so generously gave permission to share some of their family life with us: Thank you to the Dallam/Grainger family, the Lennard/Jones family and the Lim/Kirkham family. The children you will meet this morning are aged between two weeks and four years. The adults range in age up to ninety-four years.

Montessori sees education as more than just the exchange of information. 'Education as an aid for life' means we are helping the child develop to his or her fullest potential and to become a member of the community. A child adapted to his or her particular culture, time and place.

When I say 'we are helping' I refer to both the family as well as the school. The prepared environment of the classroom is organised specifically for the range of ages it caters for (whether it be for the under 3s, 3-6, 6-9, 9-12 . . .). The home environment, in contrast, needs to cater for a much larger age span; from children or babies through to adults. The school and home environments should not duplicate the other, but compliment it.

If the child is given the correctly prepared environment, Montessori says: "we see little unhappy nuisances transformed into happy, active children. The proverbial house-wrecker becomes the most attentive custodian of the objects which surround him; the noisy and disorganised child is transformed into a tranquil and orderly being." (*The Child in the Family*, p. 27)

Unlike plants and many animals, the young child at birth enters a world which does not cater for him or her. The child arrives helpless, dependent on others, defenceless. The child enters into a world designed by adults, for adults. This world environment may appear to be confusing, chaotic and disordered to the child.

Montessori said "If we had to live just one day in an environment such as the one we prepare for our children, I believe we also would find it painfully uncomfortable. We would have to waste all our energy in defending ourselves, battling always with the same words: 'No, leave me alone, I don't want to!'. We would end up by bursting into tears because there was no other means of defence." (*The Child in the Family*, p. 42)

The home environment has to cater for the needs of all household members. The household may consist of parents, children and sometimes extended family.

Pressures of having to get somewhere by a particular time, the need to attend to other members of the family, the hundred and one other things which have to be completed can mean that the child

becomes 'lost' in the situation or is caught unaware, resulting in frustration on the part of both the adult and the child. It can also be easier (and faster) to dress the child, feed the child, carry the child and so on rather than letting the child do it for and by himself.

Montessori principles can be applied within the home. Principles of respect, co-operation, compassion, gratitude, independence, responsibility. Aren't these the principles we would like to see in our homes? Aren't these the principles we would like extended to us and that we should be extending to others?

The adult is also part of the home environment and Montessori says "must adjust himself to the child's needs if he is not to be a hindrance to him and if he is not to substitute himself for the child in the activities essential to growth and development." (*The Secret of Childhood*, p. 109)

The adult cannot do the growing and developing for the child. The child is the only one who can do this. This does not mean however that we only take the needs and wishes of the child into account.

Independence

The child should not become the 'ruler of the house' but the home can cater for both the adults and children with very minor alterations and in the end this can save time and conflict as the young child wants very much for you to 'help me to do it myself'. The child is striving for independence.

Small changes can be made to accommodate the child and help the child become increasingly independent.

These don't have to be expensive alterations, for example, consider the attachment of a piece of wood to a tap so the child can turn it on and off independently (using it like a lever).

There can and there should be designated places for the child to put his or her belongings. The child should have some of their own space in all the rooms the family gathers together, not only just in the child's room.

Shelves for toys and books makes selection and tidying up easier for the child. The child can clearly see that everything has its place. Shelves and drawers can also be organised so the child is able to reach and select clothing easily and independently. Order is important to the child. The principle of feng shui tells us when there is disorder, there is disharmony in the mind and body.

If the child has a low bed the child can get in and out of bed easily and without having to rely on the help of others. The child can choose to go to bed when she is tired. The low bed (with no bars) also gives the child a clear view of their room/environment and the freedom to explore it. Of course this means that the room must be carefully prepared for the child so everything is safe.

If possible (and it is not always possible) allow time for the child to accomplish things for themselves. For example give the child an extra ten minutes to get their socks and shoes on so you don't end up having to rush and do it for them.

Involve the child in meaningful tasks such as helping to do the washing or preparing food. The child wants to contribute and participate. The child firstly observes and absorbs the life of the family and as the child masters the skills of sitting, standing, walking, carrying and working with her hands she wants to do real work.

The child can easily participate in helping to look after the garden and animals/pets in the household. If the child sees you care for plants and animals, she wants to do this. Nature is amazing in its richness and diversity. The child will appreciate the variety of textures, colours,

sizes, shapes and smells.

All tools/utensils used by the child should be child sized where possible in order to allow for the development of independence. Montessori says: ‘. . . having given the child real things in a real world, we expected to see his joy and delight in using them. But actually we saw far more than that. The whole child’s personality changed and the first sign of this was an assertion of independence. It was as if he were saying: “I want to do everything myself. Now please don’t help me.”’ (*The Absorbent Mind*, p. 155)

The child’s absorbent mind helps to create functional independence and supports the child’s adaptation to their particular culture, time and place. In this day and age the world seems to be becoming a smaller place. People are constantly on the move and there are more multicultural communities living and working together. The child’s exposure to their own culture as well as to the cultures of others helps to build tolerance, respect and peace. It is the richness of the environment that influences this as well as the opportunity for the child to fully experience and participate in life in a meaningful and purposeful way.

The Role of the Adult

Parents generally want to offer the best of everything to their child. The danger here is that there can be an over emphasis on material goods. Because we want to offer the best to our children we work harder and longer in order to be able to afford the fastest, shiniest . . . most up-to-date of everything that the media tells us our children need in order to develop and lead full lives.

In Australia expectant parents can attend a whole pre-natal session on ‘what to buy’. So we see the cot, playpen, bouncer, things which dangle, shake, have lights, make music and entertain the child. But do these really entertain the child, or do they overwhelm the child? Interestingly, so often these also involve the use of batteries. We can buy toy bears which sing and tell stories, so suddenly instead of having human interaction, the child is now being brought up by battery operated objects!

The message to the new parent, wanting to do the best for their child is that you need to spend money in order to provide for your child. However, we have already seen that simple changes can be made within the home which require little or no money. It is time and opportunity that the child needs more than material goods.

The adult must include the child in everyday life. We need to support the child and prepare him for life. Remember this is ‘education for life’. It can be argued that perhaps now more than any other time in history, the child needs to be prepared and given the skills to live in society. It seems the more affluent we become the more likely we are to become disconnected to our children, our families, our community. Somehow we always seem to be in a rush and there is less time to be in the here and now.

The ultimate gift to the child is the knowledge and ability to live as a contributing member of the community. This also includes the development of feelings of self worth and self esteem through active participation in the daily life of the family.

The child is an individual, but the child is an individual within a community. Including the child in visits to the market, butcher, grocer, bank, post office and so on all help the child see the life of the community.

The child’s early social experiences are important as the child carries these experiences and attitudes with them through life.

‘It is our responsibility to children, and, therefore the future of humanity, to provide them with a

model of relationships with other people that involves respect for the individual and that allows everyone who lives together to express an opinion and take decisions. All this begins very early, at birth itself. By the age of three, the model for the human being that is developing within the child is complete. The child wants freedom and respect, and we should create family and social groupings in which these values are real and operational.' (*Understanding the Human Being*, p.160)

Montessori believed the society the child lives in as an adult would be influenced by these early experiences. She felt that the creation of a cohesive world was possible through the child. Her hope for the world, for peace, and for lasting positive changes lay in the children and the men or women they would become. It is the child who will impact social generations from now and into the future.

'The child has to acquire physical independence by being self-sufficient; he must become of independent will by using in freedom his own power of choice; he must become capable of independent thought by working alone without interruption. The child's development follows a path of successive stages of independence, and our knowledge of this must guide our behaviour towards him. We have to help the child to act, will and think for himself.' (*The Absorbent Mind*, p, 257)

Hands on experience has to be offered to the child as this leads to independence. The child needs to have the opportunity to experience it for himself. The adult needs to honour the process of independence and support the child towards this. The adult needs to give the child time, freedom, choice and to show the child how to work with the different tools. The adult then needs to step back, observe and allow practice of independent and individual activity.

'She is an enormously successful teacher (and here we can also substitute the word 'parent' for 'teacher') when she can say "The children can do everything by themselves, they didn't need me. These children are different because I have treated them in the right way. I have given freedom to these life energies, now they can go on and expand while I retire more and more". A teacher who can say this is a great teacher, she is a teacher for life.' (*The Child, Society and the World*, p. 15)

Summary

The home can be thought of as an environment offering protection and security. It is where a social unit lives together and traditionally, the family has been the basic unit of society. It should be a place where one feels secure and at peace.

The home is much more than just a 'roof over your head'. It is interesting to note that the Chinese character for home is the same as the character for family.

So when we speak of Montessori in the home environment, we could also say Montessori in the family. The home by its very nature has to cater for the needs of many, but it is the adult's role to be aware of and support the child's developmental needs and journey towards independence.

You, the parents, are your child's first educator, advocate and biggest supporter. Parents all over the world strive to offer the best of everything to their child. We all need to acknowledge the amazing creation of a newborn and do all we can to aid and nurture this new life so he/she can reach his/her potential. Montessori in the home environment, Montessori in the family, is where this all begins.

Offer your child new skills and the opportunity and time to practise these

Offer your child hands on experience leading to greater independence and freedom

Offer your child choices and gradually expand these as he/she is ready

Offer your child meaningful tasks and the opportunity for purposeful movement

Offer your child the opportunity to develop self worth and self esteem by showing him/her that he/she is an important member of the family who has a role and important contribution to make

Offer your child the opportunity to be an active participant in your family

Confucius said:

'I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand'.

We have only had time to see some home environments adapted for the adult to live with the child in the first plane of development today. One of the characteristics of the prepared environment is change. The environment must change as the child grows and develops. Susan Stephenson writes in 'The Joyful Child': 'The child needs the security of many object, rituals, systems, in the environment to remain the same. But as the child grows and changes, the environment must change to reflect his needs—not only the physical environment but the intellectual, social and emotional environments as well. The child constantly grows in independence and responsibility, and it is a challenge to keep up with this growth.'

Growing, learning, creating, teaching; Montessori in the home environment truly offers the opportunity for the adult and child to grow together.

I would like to finish now, by reading you a poem written by Gabriel Byrne. It speaks of his hopes and wishes for his daughter and is called 'A Prayer for my Daughter'.

**A Prayer for My Daughter
by Gabriel Byrne**

You are born in love and pain
Given to us for a short time only
Before we must let you go again
with love and pain

One day you will come to know
how close they are, one to the other.
You are a treasure, a blessing.
A prayers answer, a jig in my Irish soul
You are me and I am you.

You are both of us.
The love of your mother and me

Let me be worthy of you.
Let me lead you to truth, to beauty,
to the mystery of the universe

You will ask me great questions
and sometimes I will not know the answers.
Perhaps we are not meant to know some things
that is life too . . . a seeking

It may be our only purpose here.
All things are changing, always.
Yesterday is dust, tomorrow a dream.

Our gift is now

And so, my sweet angel, may you know love
and be loved in return.

May you know truth and laughter
and peace and happiness.

And may the great spirit of the universe
enfold you in his arms
and keep you safe, for always.