

THE Montessori METHOD



Barbara Isaacs offers ideas on fostering children's independence and responsibility...

Children attending Montessori settings are encouraged to be independent in every aspect of their life at nursery. They are given opportunities to make choices about their activities, and therefore spontaneous engagements with the environment and child-led activities flourish. Freedom of choice is promoted on the understanding that there are also some rules linked with the freedom – such as making sure activities are left ready for another child to use. This type of social focus promotes freedom with responsibility, as well as social awareness and initiative, because once children know the routine they are in charge.

The approach requires consistency from the adults, as well as an understanding that children need to be shown, helped, reminded and given time to undertake tasks such as washing up after a snack – and remember, the job may not be done to our adult expectations, because children need opportunities to develop competence through repetition. The bonus for the child is a feeling of achievement, and control over their actions and environment.

Paint a picture

There are many routines in the daily life of the Montessori classroom which promote this sense of achievement such as the setting of a table, helping oneself to a café-style snack and also washing up dishes at the end. Children are also encouraged to think about their friends by returning activities where they found them, for example placing books back on the bookshelf or making sure that the unused resources from the art trolley are returned to their appropriate boxes and baskets.

A good example of such a routine is painting and washing the easel afterwards. As most children enjoy painting and using water, this routine offers the practitioner a perfect opportunity to introduce the whole cycle of activity starting with deciding to paint and finishing by leaving a clean easel and washing one's hands. Consider the sequence of steps required for this activity and how they support all aspects of learning and development:

- making the decision to paint
- remembering to put on an apron and rolling up one's sleeves
- deciding what size paper to use
- attaching it to the easel
- choosing the colours to use
- painting the picture
- writing one's name on the picture, either by oneself or with the help of the practitioner
- taking the picture off

- putting it out to dry
- filling up a bucket with enough water to be able to wash the easel
- squeezing the sponge/cloth
- wiping the easel and the paint pots if necessary
- making sure they are clean
- rinsing the sponge or cloth
- emptying the water from the bucket
- checking that there is no spilled water and mopping it if necessary
- washing one's hands
- taking off the apron

Each step also requires its own skills and procedures – indeed they involve an array of problem-solving, remembering, thinking and physical skills.

This method also requires a different approach from the adult, who must make sure that the environment is ready and enables children to perform all these steps on their own – for example, the apron, paper and paints need to be ready for use, the picture drying area needs to be accessible and manageable for the child, the bucket and sponge need to be nearby, as does the mop for drying up any spills. And just imagine the child's face at the end: a triumph of autonomy!

If you are tempted to try this, but are anxious about it working, why not try it as part of your outdoor activities first. You will be amazed how quickly the children will be eager to participate, and if you persevere, you will be able to introduce it inside within a couple of months. Why not empower the children to be in charge of their painting activities?

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