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Montessori Monthly

Manners, Naturally

By P. Donohue Shortridge

“Being considerate of others will take your children further in life than any college degree.”

This quote, often attributed to children’s rights activist Marian Wright Edelman, came to mind recently. Walking toward my local market, I could hear the jovial banter between a father and son, who were about ten steps behind me—something about a birthday later that day and their mission to get the cake.

Listening to his vocabulary and articulation, I estimated the boy to be 4 years old. Just as I reached the front door, the boy rushed past me, yanked the door open, and was halfway into the store when Dad called him back. “Let’s hold the door open for this lady, son.”

I looked at them both as I entered, said “thank you,” and then we were all off, each into our separate worlds—they to the bakery department and I to the produce section.

Dad managed the episode with grace because he didn’t react as though his child should know better; he understood that the boy’s rushing was due to 4-year-

Maria Montessori placed “emphasis on the natural world, and our place within it, (as) a central theme in (her) curriculum.”ⁱⁱ Learning in nature meshes perfectly, it seems, with the Montessori philosophy which holds dear the innate interests of the child, independent discovery, and learning through all the senses. “Nature is a great place to let children follow their own curiosity, imagination, and interests,”ⁱⁱⁱ and provides a way for the Montessori directress to “follow the child.”



Among the most important elements of a child’s experience in nature is the companionship and support of an adult, whether a teacher, parent, relative, or friend. As adults, our attitudes, expressions, and way of communication about the natural world shape our

old exuberance (it would be different if the boy were 10). At the same time, the father did not let the opportunity pass to demonstrate to his son what to do.



That is the secret. We teach our children manners in the million moments we have with them. The episodes often come up without warning and can catch us off guard. What should we keep in mind so that when an opportunity presents itself to show our child what to do, we too will handle it with grace? Our children adore us.

They love us with their entire being. Whatever we do, they want to do. They want to be close to us; they want to watch us, hear us, learn from us, and be loved by us. They want to be just like us. So instilling manners, aka “social competence,” is simple and natural in these early years, from the age of 3 or 4 on. Now is the time.

Young children want to know—actually, crave knowing—the right thing to do. Their bodies and minds have grown beyond the toddler stage. Now that they are sturdy on their feet and language can be employed in meaningful communication, they are ready for the next phase of self-construction: socialization. They encounter the world as if asking, “What am I to do here? And would someone please show me how?” Correcting is not the same as modeling. Like the rest of us, children are easily shamed. If the father at the market had said, “Watch out, son, you’re in that lady’s way,” the boy would have felt judgment, rather than learning what he should have

children’s understanding of it. In fact, the adult’s “own sense of wonder, more than his or her scientific knowledge, (is that) which will ignite and sustain a child’s love of nature.”^{iv} So how do we provide positive experiences in nature for our children? The following tips may help to get you started.

Begin in your own backyard or neighborhood park. Getting outside does not need to be complicated. Begin by visiting a place that is familiar and comfortable to you and your child. Look around with your child. What sparks his or her interest? Can you find a tree with rough bark? What do you think might live in the tree? What living things can you spot? Squirrel nests are abundant this time of year, how many can you find?

Observe and Tell Stories

Children are the world’s most enthusiastic storytellers. Even every day events sound exciting when told from the perspective of a four year old. Begin by sitting quietly in nature. Try to use all of your senses to notice what is around you. When we sit quietly, we may be more likely to notice the grasshopper flitting across the lawn, or the squirrel eyeing us from a tree than when we are walking and the scenery is constantly changing around us. Begin by sitting for two-three minutes, then ask your child what they noticed. Sometimes there may be little to report, other times they might be lucky enough to watch a turkey vulture circling in the distance, or a honeybee gathering nectar nearby. Share your own childhood nature experiences and memories with your child.

Wonder and Question

Children have many questions: Why is the sun so bright? What kind of bug is this? How old is this tree? Although we may know the answers to their questions, sometimes a simple answer is not the best response. Consider a child who looks at a tree and asks you how old it is.

done. Thus, even Naturally if we are annoyed or embarrassed by our young child's behavior, our exasperation is not the lesson—there is another way. Trust that the conduct is not malicious but likely stems from the child not knowing what to do. Then demonstrate what we want our child to learn. Dad didn't need to say anything further to his 4-year-old son; the boy absorbed the lesson. And if Dad does the same thing the next time and the next, the lesson will be reinforced.



Parents are the most potent teachers of social norms. What we show our children, they will do. Even so, for our lessons to adhere, we must be consistent and positive. And most important, we must model the behavior we want to instill in our children. As Maria Montessori said, "What is social life if not the solving of social problems, behaving properly, and pursuing aims acceptable to all?"

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Reference

Montessori, M. (1995). The absorbent mind. New York: Henry Holt, p. 225.

Suggested Reading

Aliki. (1997). Manners. New York: Greenwillow Books.

online at amshq.org/Family-Resources/Family-Support-Materials.

Nature and the Montessori Child

Monica Stein

When I was five years old, my cousins and I put on our bathing suits and ran

Upon receiving an answer—of ten, twenty, or one hundred years—the brief conversation is concluded and the child continues on his way. Consider the difference if you wonder with your child, engaging his or her curiosity instead of answering it. For example, ask how old your child thinks the tree might be and why. Does it look like it has been here for a long time or a short time? Do you think it grew yesterday? Why or why not? Pretty soon, you are having a conversation in which your child is drawing from past experience and current observation to answer his or her own questions.

In the words of Montessori, "[I]f for the physical life it is necessary to have the child exposed to the vivifying forces of nature, it is also necessary for his physical life to place the soul of the child in contact with creation, in order that he may lay up for himself treasure from the directly educating forces of living nature." It is our hope that you will have the opportunity to share in such outdoor experiences with your child, laying up treasures not only of an understanding of nature but of shared memories together.



We have to respect that process - which doesn't mean they always get to do what they want. One of the operative words in Dr. Montessori's writing is the word "train". We do need to train our children but we need to train ourselves "not to destroy that which is good" in the nature of our children. The second part of respect is to respect the personality of your child. Your child is not a blank slate.

down to the shallow river near their house, nestled in the Polish country side. I'm not sure whose idea it was to build "islands" in the river, but we soon got to work hauling stones, grass, leaves, sticks, and anything else we could find to our individual building sites. We began with the heaviest building materials that would not get swept away by the current, and topped them off with softer materials to make our islands comfortable to stand on. We had a blast! At the time, I knew I was having fun but I did not realize that—in the process—I was also learning about mass and gravity, water current, and surface tension; refining small and gross motor skills; and building relationships and memories with my family which would last a lifetime. Experiences in nature hold the promise of authentic learning in which the mind, body, and spirit of the young child is educated and nourished. In her book, *To Educate the Human Potential*, Maria Montessori writes that "the stars, earth, stones, life of all kinds form a whole in relation with each other, and so close is this relation that we cannot understand a stone without some understanding of the great sun! No matter what we touch, an atom, or a cell, we cannot explain it without knowledge of the wide universe."ⁱ The most authentic education, then, is one which takes into account all that is around us and seeks to understand it as an interconnected and beautiful whole.



They are already imbued with the unique characteristics of who they are. The artistic bent is already there. The math bent is already formed. The leader, the follower, the giver, the taker, the extrovert, the introvert are already dna'd into your child. Right or left handed, right or left brained are already formed.

So how do you cooperate with nature? You become an observer. That is the next step in becoming a Montessori parent - you train yourself to observe. What does your child gravitate to? What gives them great joy? What occupies them endlessly? These are all clues to who your child is becoming. You are fortunate that you have a trained helper in your child's Montessori teacher. Your next parent conference should ask more than what has she done but who do you see her becoming. It is hard to cooperate with nature if you are not aware of the nature of your child.

Monica was previously the Early Childhood Specialist at the Cincinnati Nature Center in Ohio where she designed and led nature based preschool and toddler enrichment programs, and mentored classroom teachers as they strove to include more nature and science in their everyday curricula.

UPCOMING IMPORTANT DATES

**Tuesday, October 30 - Illini Studio
Photos Toddler Room**

**Wednesday, October 31 - Classroom
Fall Celebrations**

**Thursday, November 8 - Puppy &
Horse Rooms Field Trip Parkland
Planetarium**

**Friday, November 9 - All School
Parent Teacher Conferences/Child
Care Only**

**Saturday, November 10 - Barnes &
Noble Book Fair**

**Wednesday, Thursday & Friday,
November 21-23 - Thanksgiving
Holiday NO SCHOOL/NO CHILD
CARE**



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