

HOW TO TEACH MOTHERS THE MONTESSORI OF CHILD CONTROL

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FOR all mothers of young children there is a message of supreme importance in Mme. Montessori's methods.

It is unfortunate that those who are trying to spread an understanding of her method have put all the emphasis upon its use in school. For the truth is that the animating spirit of her work means just as much for mothers in their homes as it does for teachers in their schools. Moreover, it seems to me that we are inclined to lose sight of that animating spirit and to put too much dependence upon the material aids for the working-out of her ideas.

We are forgetting that behind the clocks and the towers and the color spoons there is something vastly bigger and more important—the spirit of the whole system.

I spent last Summer a goodly part of every day for four months in the Casa dei Bambini in Rome, and during my stay in that city I was a guest of Dr. Montessori in her own home. This close companionship with her and the opportunity it gave for discussing her ideas and the splendid practical results I constantly observed in her schools impressed me very deeply with the importance of her message to the mothers of little children.

The underlying principle of her work is a self-development of the child. Everything that a child tries to do from the moment of his birth is a part of the innate necessity of growth. All his squealing and gurgling and squirming, all the kicking of his little legs and, later, his efforts to grasp objects are but the outworking of the imperative principle of development. As the child grows older the parents begin to interfere with this natural growth by curbing his desire for activity. He wants and needs to touch objects, to feel and handle them, to tie and untie things, to play on the floor, to climb over chairs. But he is told he must not touch this and must keep his hands off that; that he must sit still and be good. He is dressed and undressed, fed and waited on; his toys are brought out and put away, he is helped to play his games, until these well-meaning but utterly mistaken efforts to care for him so interfere with the natural processes of growth as to make him a helpless dependent upon those around him, and, very often, a tyrant also when he can not have the instant attention of those to whose service he is accustomed.

Contrast this with the child that has grown in accordance with Montessori ideas. He has been allowed to hold and handle objects devised for this special purpose, and has become wonderfully left. He has trained his little fingers and hands in lacing and tying and buttoning and putting things together and taking them apart—all the small activities in which he has shown a desire to indulge.

With the greatest satisfaction he will apply his training to his own needs, and gain by doing this what is of more value than the act itself. The child who has manfully struggled with the buttoning of his little waist, and has finally succeeded, has done a great deal more than merely button a waist. He has strengthened the muscles of his fingers, hands, and arms and has trained them to work less clumsily; he has done something toward developing the faculties of attention and concentration and the power of overcoming difficulties, and, finally, he has filled his little soul with the joy of accomplishing what he had undertaken to do.

It is evident that this principle of self-development, of allowing the child to train himself, as he will do gladly and happily if he is not interfered with and helped, is just as applicable in the home as it is in the school, and that the mother could make use of it from the very beginning of the child's growth. The little



ITALIAN CHILDREN SINGING THEIR LITTLE PRAYER BEFORE EATING. AT THE SERVING TABLE ARE TWO WAITRESSES AGED FOUR AND FIVE



MRS. A. RENO MARGULIES



AMERICAN CHILD ENGROSSED IN MAKING HIS FIRST WORDS WITH THE MONTESSORI MOVABLE LETTERS



MADAME MONTESSORI WHEN SHE BEGAN HER WORK

one is normally a harmonious part of the life of the home, and if he is treated upon that assumption and given opportunity for self-development and for growth along normal lines he will be in entire harmony with that life.

The first essential in carrying out this idea practically is liberty—the sort of liberty that allows the child to follow his own inclinations as long as they do not interfere with the rights of others, do not injure him, and do not conflict with the general good. In the children's houses the little ones move about freely, talk together, choose their own occupations and work at them as long as they like.

If a child does not wish to join in some little exercise of marching or singing he does not do so. Perhaps he is very much interested in composing a word or a sentence with the movable alphabet, or feels he must finish the long stair he is building. So he keeps right on, perhaps joining in the singing while he works,

until his little self-imposed task is finished, when, if he likes, he falls into the marching column.

The principle works out with perfect success. The children are busy and happy and respect one another's rights because their own are respected. In the Casa dei Bambini there are no "naughty" children. I saw one little fellow who, when he first entered the school, was mischievous. He was merely indulging a habit he had acquired at home, where the innate childish need of activity had had no outlet in the right kind of occupation.

Now he wanted to tease the others and interfere with their work, and he declined to do any of the things with which they were occupied. Apparently but little attention was paid to him. If he knocked over another child's tower or muzzed up the words he was making the teacher reproved him gently, saying, "I wouldn't do that," while the injured one looked sorry a moment and then went happily to work to repair the damage.

If the boy repeated the offense he was presently sent to sit in a little chair by himself. But no compulsion was put upon him, and after sitting there for a while he would again mingle with the others. But gradually he began to show more interest in the work of the other children and to think less about making mischief. After three or four days he asked to be allowed to help set the tables. And by the time a few days more had passed he was a part of the little community, as busy, as happy, and as well behaved as any of them.

Behind this apparent and real liberty is the watchful eye of the teacher, seeing without seeming to see, and without giving to the children direction of which they are conscious or upon which they can rely. But she is ready with an unobtrusive word of suggestion whenever it is necessary.

In this atmosphere of liberty, with occupations designed to bring him into conscious touch with the world in which he lives, the child develops a remarkable degree of self-reliance. If he encounters difficulty in his work, can not make his little wooden insets fit properly, or forgets just how the laces go, he prefers to work it out for himself. And his joy and pride in his achievement when he fully suc-

ceeds show what an important thing it was for him not to have help.

As it is so likely to do with children of a larger growth, self-control follows in the steps of liberty. They gain a self-discipline that is of a thousand times more worth in the formation of character than the results of enforced demands.

I have seen them, without a word of direction from their teacher and under circumstances that might have produced disorder among adults, submit to temporary disturbances of their work, and after a few minutes, during which perfect order had reigned, go back to their occupations as if nothing had happened. And it must be remembered that some of them were not more than 3, and all were less than 6, years old.

It was really a wonderful exhibition of self-control and, like everything else I saw in the Montessori schools, proved how surely self-discipline will result from the self-dependence in which the children are trained, or rather, are allowed to train themselves.

The periods of "silence" which they have every now and then are a valuable factor in developing self-control, as well as in training the attention. All the children sit in their seats

while the teacher stands, either facing or behind them, and for a few minutes they are still. You could hear a pin drop. The little ones listen intently, and when presently the teacher speaks a name, in the faintest whisper, that child hears it, rises softly, and, on tiptoe, making the least noise possible, crosses the room to her side.

It is all a game, and they enjoy it greatly, but besides the rest which it gives them after the morning's activity, they are at the same time learning to concentrate the attention and getting most valuable training in self-control. Indeed, without one's seeing, day after day, these tiny things, busy and contented, developing naturally and harmoniously, it is impossible to realize their extraordinary and quite unconscious attainment in self-discipline.

The self-governing bodies of students in our high schools and colleges have already proved that the very best means of keeping order among them is to make them individually responsible both for themselves and their group, while the success of the George Junior Republics has shown that freedom and responsibility together can straighten into good citizens even those who have been perverted by bad surroundings. Mme. Montessori has merely applied the same prin-

ciple to children, and she has proved that human nature is the same at three years that it is at fifteen or twenty and just as willing to live in harmony with a wholesome environment.

If the occupations we find in the Children's Houses were not so perfectly suited to the needs of the children this self-development through work would be impossible. One of the secrets of Mme. Montessori's wonderful success is the way in which she has linked together provision for both muscular and mental growth and has matched this with such accuracy to the needs of the little bodies and brains.

The occupations generally given to a little boy or girl aim at nothing but temporary amusement. The one thing desired is that the child shall be so entertained that he will not come bothering around his elders for the next hour or two. Toys do not afford either mental or bodily development. On the contrary, they tend more and more to the things that hamper and starve rather than feed the growing brain.

There is nothing in mechanical contrivances to lead the little, venturing thoughts on to effort and achievement. They not only hinder the child's mental growth, but by giving him entertainment with so little expenditure of his own effort educate him out of self-reliance instead of into it.

As Dr. Montessori has worked out her method, she provides for each child, according to the stage of his mental development, occupation that relates him to the life of his environment, makes him a part of what is going on around him, and leads him on gradually to more and more complex things. His work is at the same time his play, and affords food for mental, moral, and physical growth.

The children in the Casa dei Bambini show the greatest joy in their achievements as they surmount, unaided, the little obstacles so mountain high for them, and are stimulated by their successes to go on to other triumphs. Working together in this way, they develop the most delightful comradeship, eagerly watch one another's efforts when something comes along unusually difficult, and they unreservedly admire and take pride in one another's success.

Some mothers have an idea that babies 2 and 3 years old are too young to be benefited by such training, and even fear that the little brains might be injured. But it seems to me that, when a system of training shows such uniformly excellent results, the earlier the child can be put under it the better. There is no danger whatever to the little brain. The unfolding intellect is bound to grow anyway through these baby years, and the Montessori method simply helps it to grow right.

It is most unfortunate that mothers as well as teachers are not having instruction in these principles, so that they could begin to apply them earlier and could bring the home treatment of the child into harmony with that in the school. American parents are beginning to realize the importance of this training, for I learned before leaving Rome that a number of American families had tried to engage places for their children in Dr. Montessori's Children's Houses and also instruction for the mothers under her direction.

Mme. Montessori has not yet said the last word in the formulation of her system. She is engaged now upon experiments for the carrying out of her principles with children above the age of six, so that they can be employed in the elementary school grades. She is also perfecting her method in its application to music and rhythmic exercises to be used in the Children's Houses.

But mothers need not wait for further developments. The system has already a message for them that ought to arrest the attention of every one who has young children.

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