



TEACHING PRACTICAL LIFE SKILLS FOR TODDLERS & PRESCHOOLERS

IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICAL LIFE ACTIVITIES

Practical life activities give the child an understanding of his environment and how it works. The child enjoys all types of work. He also enjoys keeping the environment beautiful for all to use. This work builds the child's self-esteem, making him feel of value. In addition, practical life activities also develop manual dexterity.



In the school and home, adults must never complain about their work in front of the child. At a young age he learns by imitating the adult. If adults dislike work, the child will learn that all types of work are to be avoided. He will apply this to school learning as well as manual skills. He must have a respect for all types of work well done.

The child must not be conditioned to work only for himself. As a mature adult he will choose the type of work that he is good at and that he enjoys.

In doing this work he will earn a living, but at the same time he will be contributing to the society in which he lives. By working well, he will retain his self-esteem and be happy. All types of necessary work, done well, contribute to the good of the whole society. Young people should adopt the kind of work that they enjoy doing. Academic, medical, manual, and most other types of work are creative.

In the home and school, children should be encouraged to put things away in the right place and to clean up any mess they have inadvertently made in working. In this, the adult sets an example. In the home or school there must be shelves, etc., supplied at the child's height so that he can do this.

The number of possessions or occupations must be limited to the few basic ones. No one can choose from among too many things. Very few people can keep a great number of possessions in order. Only well made, well designed, worthwhile occupations should be given to a child. To give him masses of cheap, trashy toys is an insult to his developing intelligence and prevents him from learning.

If a child does not want to put his things away for himself, or before he understands how to do so, the adult must give generous help. "Shall I help you?", "If you don't want to, I will do it today.", "Who would help Johnny put his things away?", etc. In this way, the children learn to help each other and the child who is helped will be the first to help others later and to do the job himself.



At home, it should not be "Clean your own room," but "Let us all clean the kitchen today, and tomorrow the living room, and perhaps the next day your room." The mother soon has plenty of willing help and older children think of household tasks with pleasure. They will also have learned how to do the work properly. Later as older children, when their developmental need to do this work is over, they will help willingly and cheerfully, knowing that everyone helps to run the home which belongs to all the family.

These activities must be taken seriously and taught seriously. The child must be given the dignity of a worker, for he works very hard.



We do not praise him, that is to treat him as an inferior, but we take pleasure in his achievements. He feels our interest and delight. We can say such things as "Oh! It is nice to have such a clean table!", "What a beautiful, shiny bell." "It is so nice having someone to help me." In giving the exercises of practical life, we treat the child as a serious student. In his early years, he goes through a period when he wants passionately to learn to do all the work he sees the adult doing. At first, he likes to learn the work of the home. This age will pass, but if it is used, the child will know how to do everything well in the home environment. He will grow intellectually. It requires real intelligence to run a modern home. We should admire the housewife who runs a home well, making a comfortable and beautiful environment for a happy family. This work requires a high degree of intelligence and skill.

The children in our care are preparing for maturity. When fully mature, they will probably take on the responsibilities of a home and family. From the beginning then, one of the first aims must be to raise children with the skill to do this well. Nature urges the child to acquire these skills. The child who, as a small toddler, is allowed to help his mother in the house, and learns these skills from her, grows in intelligence, is deeply satisfied, and develops confidence and a good self-image. He knows he is doing useful work, and that his work is of value. He feels that he contributes to helping in the home. He knows he is independent and able to manage for himself. Great harm is done to his development when he is told, "I am busy. Go and play." It is like saying, "You are of no use for anything. Here is a toy. It is not worth giving real things to you. The real things are mine."

The child who really lacks confidence has lost the confidence and courage every child starts with in the first years. One of the reasons is that his help was not acceptable to the mother or adult in charge. Children lose the urge to learn these skills by the second period of development. They like then to learn to cook, to use electric machines, but not to do things they should have learned earlier.

Nature allows a certain time to learn each thing. Dr. Montessori called these "sensitive periods." If this time of special sensitivity is not used, it is lost. It does not come again. We must understand the force of the urges and also that they are transient. There is no time to go back. We must go on to the next stage of learning. If we have not made use of the first stage, how is the second stage to be successful? The foundation is not there; it is more difficult for the child and those who teach him.





If, in a Montessori school, we accept children of 3 years for part of the day, we must understand that the practical life activities are of prime importance. We must teach each step correctly and intelligently. We ourselves must know the right way to do the activities.

We must teach all the household exercises needed to run a good home. We must analyze each exercise to be taught and give the necessary steps in order that the child can practice each step repeatedly until he has gained the skill and knowledge to go on to the next step. We ourselves must enjoy these activities. The child

must feel we enjoy them. He will not want to learn work the adult dislikes.

In the western world, a number of people suffer mental breakdowns today. They are cured when they begin to enjoy work. No amount of play helps. We must bring the children up to enjoy all forms of work. They will imitate us closely. We must enjoy what we are doing in front of them.

Children must feel that the school belongs to everyone in it, just as a good home belongs to the whole family and to all who stay. In Spain, when you visit a house, even as a stranger, you are greeted and told, "This house is yours." This is the feeling we must give the children. "This belongs to everyone in the school. Not, "This belongs to the school," but, the school belongs to us all."

Dr. Montessori called her schools "Casa dei Bambini." The English translation is "The Children's Home." This is the atmosphere we must create for the children under six years at home and school . They must practice and learn those things they would learn in a good home. In English we have this very special word, home. We do not say, "This is my house," but, "This is my home." There is a world of difference.

The practical life activities will be those the children see done in their own homes. They will be carried out in as realistic a manner as possible. In our classrooms, the practical life materials are stored in the sink area in much the same way as a mum stores these things in her own home. The various cleaners are stored under the sink. Brooms and aprons are hung within easy reach. Tableware are kept in a partitioned drawer. One or two of the preliminary exercises are kept ready on trays on a low shelf, but most of the materials are stored as they would be in a home.



When the teacher wishes to show a child a particular activity, she collects the materials needed for the exercise with him, showing him where they are kept and which to select. After the lesson, when the child has finished using the materials, the teacher will help him return them to their place in good order.

When a child wishes to practice an activity, he will need to remember which materials and cleaners were used. He will need

to select them for himself from among the other cleaners and materials.

The child will need to act intelligently; he must remember the cleaner and the type of brush or cloths needed. When he works in this way, he works as an adult does in the home, the way he sees his mother and father act. The exercise has meaning for him. Nature is urging the child to imitate and so learn the adult's work, to orient himself in his environment, to become independent.

The work satisfies these needs when it is real life experience. When these exercises are not related to life, they are meaningless, dead.

Little children like order and neatness, so there is a place for everything. However, with lively, active, intelligent children, it is not a meticulous neatness. Everything is clean, but it is not the hygiene of a hospital. It is hard to describe the difference between normal neatness and order and an over-concern with the exact care for the storage and preservation of the materials. We all know the difference between a well-run home, which everyone can use and enjoy and a house which has such a fastidious housewife who keeps everything so perfect that one feels uncomfortable.



In a class of little children, there is a hum of activity. There is activity, concentration, work, socialization, laughter, and movement. At the end of the day everything is miraculously back in its place, nothing is lost or broken, but the room does look as if it had been used. The materials look a little worn through much handling.

Children of this age like order. They make a great effort to remember where everything is kept and to return things to their right places after using them. Making this effort is an exercise for the mind. The children need to be observant. They must memorize the environment. They must be aware when something is out of place. If the environment contains too many things, they cannot do this; there is too much to remember. If the environment is cluttered with materials, it is too confusing. There is too much choice and the children do not work well. In a good classroom, there is everything necessary for the development of the children using the room, but very little else. Materials not in use are kept in a stock cupboard outside the classroom.



Every exercise of practical life must have a useful purpose. The purpose must be understood by the child or the exercises become boring and

burdensome. For example, before a child can help bake cookies, he must know how to sift the flour, crack and whisk eggs, measure wet and dry ingredients, etc. These skills are learned and practiced separately, but the child must know the purpose of the exercise he practices. The child who loves to sift flour must know that flour must be sifted for making cookies; otherwise, his actions would be aimless and foolish. He would not feel he was a worker. The flour he sifts must be placed in an airtight container and stored for baking purposes.

Before this exercise is introduced, the adult/carer should make a simple recipe with the children watching and helping. Bread making would be a good choice, as every child could have a piece of dough to knead and form into a loaf. The adult /carer should read the recipe to the children, and demonstrate exactly how the ingredients are measured and how the flour is sifted. After this, the exercises for sifting flour and measuring dry and wet ingredients should be shown to individual children and they can practice, knowing the reason for doing so.

Therefore, it is of paramount importance that the child learns these skills effortlessly and seamlessly integrating them to into life to become independent citizens of the world.



