

CHALLENGING MOMENTS

A story about parenting

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Parenthood is a rewarding experience; it can be filled with many joys, hugs and precious moments as moms and dads grow with and through their children. But, parenting also has its challenging episodes when frustration impedes accomplishment, causing fussing or temper tantrums, or when peer pressure sometimes forces parents to act in ways that are not always in their own best interest or in that of their children.

In meeting these awkward moments, the task is how best to facilitate for the child; how best to help her solve a difficulty without a great fuss, giving in or taking over and doing the job for her. In other words, the ideal resolution would be to lead the child and oneself through an uncomfortable moment without embarrassment for all involved.

Parenting magazines are full of helpful advice for parents. Experts are quoted ad nauseam on all aspects of child raising, often leaving the reader confused, overwhelmed or discouraged. Consequently, I hesitate to proffer any more 'shoulds', 'oughts' or other formulae for dealing with challenging moments. Instead, I will offer a few examples of how we as Montessori teachers meet and sometimes circumvent rough spots in our days with the children. These may serve to suggest a fresh outlook or perhaps a new perspective on meeting uncomfortable situations.

Creating a safe and secure environment meets a child's need to feel comfortable. Calmness and a reassuring voice coupled with slow and deliberate movements help a child to become engaged and involved. Sweeping children off their feet with great enthusiasm and hoopla, in an attempt to entertain and distract them, often fails to bring a level of comfort. Without a sense of security in a situation, children resist becoming engaged and involved.

Finding ways to engage a child is another Montessori technique we often put into practice. In a Montessori classroom there are many materials and activities available to the children. Not all of these will have the same appeal to all of the children. The secret to engaging each child individually lies in the classroom director's skill in finding a way to make an activity interesting to a particular individual. The aim is not to entertain or to add bells and whistles, but to facilitate and entice interest with clear and concise demonstrations. Montessorians show rather than tell and if showing one way fails to engage the child, the adult changes the demonstration to clarify or to invite from a different point of view.

Providing meaningful activities for children means that we offer children things to do that are purposeful and age appropriate. Three to five year olds imitate adults. We see this constantly in their play as they make meals out of the contents of the sandbox or drive their cars and trucks wherever they will go. To provide meaningful activities in the Montessori classroom we offer the children materials that help them to become independent through the use of tools that work. Three year olds can sweep the carpet with a carpet sweeper, thus helping to clean house with us, but using the vacuum cleaner is not appropriate at that age and therefore, not meaningful.

Offering activities that provide opportunities for independent action, repetition and concentration make life in the Montessori classroom more conflict free. These qualities are often built into the Montessori materials, so we have an advantage here. The child's cry, 'help me to help myself', might be a good criteria for selecting a toy, a class or a place to go with children. Direct experience is preferable to listening and looking at this age.

Not interrupting children is another Montessori trait that can circumvent conflict. In the desire to protect children from becoming frustrated or losing interest adults frequently offer needless help or simply take over for a child. In the Montessori classroom we consciously work at 'hands off', not quizzing or questioning, but observing and waiting to step in when the moment is right for the child's need and not for our own. A child who is constantly interrupted forms the habit of quickly giving up without much effort and fails to learn the positive value of concentration.

Offering realistic and positive choices helps a child to know what he can and cannot do. The whole classroom full of materials is too vast for any inexperienced three year old to choose from but there are many things he can do. For the younger children, we frequently suggest perhaps one of two or three choices. With time and experience the range can be extended, but limiting the field and letting a child know what it is possible to choose from can be very helpful in avoiding spills, breakages or getting in over one's head; all situations that can be frustrating to parents and children alike.

Limits set in a firm yet gentle manner are absolutely necessary to the smooth functioning of a Montessori class or of daily life in society. Children need to experience limits and how to respond appropriately to them. Life in association with others is dependent upon grace and courtesy, and that means that we show children strategies that allow them to act respectfully towards one another and to the things in the environment. Inappropriate behavior is stopped in the Montessori classroom, consistently and firmly. Wherever and whenever possible this is done positively by showing a child a more suitable approach to achieving his goal or by offering an alternative choice which might meet the demonstrated need.

In conclusion, I must stress that even in the prepared environment of the Montessori classroom, none of these strategies work like magic. Few work the very first time but through repetition and modeling by adults and peers, the messages are conveyed and practiced as part of the overall life of the classroom. As adults working with young children we must be active constantly in observing and responding in ways that facilitate the notion that our goal is to help the child, not to confront, not to do her work for her, but to limit frustrations through our support and consideration.

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