

Parents Q&A

Clare Healy Walls and **Barbara Isaacs** answer your questions on table manners, crawling toddlers, fairy tales, the national curriculum and computer access for children.

Q My niece of two and a half eats with her hands all the time. I think her mother and father should teach her table manners but they say that is not the “Montessori freedom of choice way”. What is the Montessori approach to table manners?

Dr Montessori recommended that the most important thing in the child’s development was meaningful freedom of choice. However for the choice to be meaningful it needs to be structured. That means the child must be shown how to do things in a clear and orderly way and there should be real feedback to the child so that she can learn through her own mistakes.

The parents are right when they say she must have freedom of choice. But perhaps they have misinterpreted the surrounding structures. Do they show her how to eat with precision and order, making it a fun game by slowly and deliberately cutting the food, putting it into the mouth with her fork or spoon in a precise way and then slowly chewing? Then she should be shown how to clear her plate, cup and cutlery, pile them in a particular place and so on. This is the core of a Montessori objective demonstration. You do not mention the mistakes she has made; rather make it fun to do it in this precise and orderly way. And of course the environment must also be prepared for this. She should be able to access her own plate, table mat, cutlery, cup and so on. She should be given sufficient time to carry out her little tasks with her food at her own pace. In a Montessori school for children from infancy onwards

there are many food routines in the day. Children love the activity, the order and of course anything to do with food is fun. At the same time they have freedom of choice.

Q My son of 8 months is crawling around our home. What can I do to stimulate him in this period?

An infant crawling is at one of the most crucial stages of development in life. He has not yet acquired the ability to explain his needs and yet he is able to move. His inner drive is telling him to do things that very often are not in line with what is allowed by the adults. He needs to follow his inner horne (preconscious will) and if he cannot do that Dr Montessori pointed out that he will develop deviated behaviour like tantrums, extra shyness, lying, or bullying. Of course we cannot allow the crawling infant to do everything he wants but we must try to remove as many obstacles in his environment as possible. In the home you can start by removing very dangerous objects and substances to safe cupboards. Try to avoid situations where you have to say “No!” Do not remove all the breakable things. You will find that if you show him, in a quiet dramatic way, how to handle certain things gently then he will enjoy using them in carefully. Make your lower cupboards accessible and fill them with interesting things – stacking boxes, saucepans, spoons and so on. Create some very low shelves with his toys laid out. Leave plenty of space, only placing about one toy every 30 inches (75 cm) or so. His things



are more attractive when he can see clearly what he is choosing. You may change the toys every so often but remember that his sensitive period for order is very strong. Do not forget that a crawling infant likes to pull up to standing as much as he can. Make your sofa and some other steady chairs or poufs available. Lastly why not attach a big mirror to the wall at floor level? Provide baskets of cloths nearby (wet and dry) so he can learn to clean his face after food. He will love that. Finally try not to interrupt him as he uses things. Allow him to make noises, but you do not have to show him how to make them. Let him get a sense that this is his world. Montessori believed children were their own best teachers if we would just remove the obstacles.

Q I recently read in the media that Tim Burton and his wife bypassed sending their son to a Montessori school because of its policy against fairy tales. Can you please explain Montessori’s reasons for this?

This question about not having fairy tales in Montessori settings sparks an on-going debate with every group of Montessori students and continues to challenge Montessori practitioners.

I certainly cannot find any direct reference in Montessori’s own writing in which she would advocate against fairy tales, after all, they are the bed rock of all children’s literature. There is evidence that Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales were on the list of books in the first Children’s House and were recommended as suitable for reading aloud whilst children were working on insets for design. (*Advanced Montessori Method*, Volume II)

Standing (1957:1998 p.334-6) elaborates further by pointing out that introducing fairy tales to 2, 3 or 4 year olds may not be appropriate. It must be from this text that the misunderstanding originates. His argument is that this age group should be exposed to real experiences, which are essential in underpinning cognitive structures from which imagination emerges. He elaborates further by recommending that fairy tales are read as fiction when the child is capable of reading by him/herself.

From another perspective, young children really enjoy fairy tales such as the Gingerbread Man, Three Little Pigs, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella and Snow White in which the powerless win against all adversity, often with the help of some supernatural powers. I believe that they appeal to young



children because they themselves are powerless; they have very little control over their lives and so the outcome of these fairy tales provides them with hope, even if somewhat misguided. They identify with those who are weak yet manage to succeed.

I really do not believe that this should be an issue in today's Montessori Nursery schools. We should understand and appreciate the heritage these stories bring to the lives of our children and have a deeper understanding of the nature of children's creativity and imagination.

Q I would like to continue my child's Montessori education by sending her to a Montessori primary school. Apparently the children are not tested. How does this fit in with the national curriculum?

I wonder what the reason is for your desire to continue your child's Montessori education. Is it her independence, ability to focus on a task in hand, enthusiasm to find out about things of interest, her social skills or sense of responsibility? Or is it your child's knowledge of the environment, language and communication competence? Does your child enjoy her Montessori nursery and the friends she has made there? Maybe when you consider some of

these questions, you will realise that the testing is not really the focal point of your child's education. You may be aware of the current national debate about children learning to pass the national tests. There are other ways of assessing the effectiveness of your child's education.

Are you aware that children in Montessori nurseries have opportunities to be guided in problem solving by the use of the control of error? These opportunities continue at primary level too. Every time a child does an arithmetic equation they test their maths skills by being able to check if their answers are accurate by using a master card. We also use gapped work cards which give children opportunities to test their general knowledge and spelling. These and other strategies give children skills in self assessment and encourage time management as well as perseverance without over-reliance on adult feedback. Many Montessori schools also make standardised tests available to children as they prepare to leave the primary schools so that they get used to them.

To answer your question about the Montessori primary curriculum fitting in with the National Primary Curriculum, I can reassure you

that a well-organised and managed Montessori primary school will cover all the key components of the primary strategy in literacy and numeracy as well as other areas of the national curriculum

Q We try to implement the Montessori approach by giving our children respect and trust, and as much freedom as possible at home. Our children are home educated and have a limited access to the computer and computer games. What are your views – is this limitation of access in conflict with our belief in the children's freedom?

I believe there are two elements to this question. One is about our understanding and interpretation of freedom and the other one relates directly to access to computers and media.

Considering Montessori's view of freedom she speaks about the close links between maturity of the child and his or her responsibilities. If, as parents, we believe that certain aspects of the environment can be damaging to our children we need to establish ground rules that limit freedom of access. Adults need to explain the reasons for ground rules to the children and should be consistent in implementing them, so that

children know where they stand. The explanations need to be appropriate to the age and maturity of the child. This applies to every freedom available to children at home and at nursery/school.

There is a strong body of evidence that over-exposure to television, computer games and the internet is detrimental to children's development, therefore it seems reasonable for parents to limit access, irrespective of whether their children are home educated or not. As parents, we take responsibility for our children's well being. I would not say that your decision is in conflict with the Montessori ethos. However, make sure that your children understand why the conditions of access to these media are in place. Limit access in discussion with your child and set the parameters appropriate to his/her age and ability to manage the access. Also make sure they are offered opportunities to engage in other activities; encourage them in their hobbies and participation in sport, crafts, music, and so on. If they have these opportunities it is very likely that the screen-orientated interests will not predominate their lives and they will not necessarily feel deprived of the screen experiences either.

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At the Heart of Montessori series, by Clare Healy Walls – six books on the Montessori method for all age groups www.originalwriting.ie

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