



Do try this at home:

Parenting the Montessori way

Ever wondered how to use Montessori ideas at home with your children? Feel suspicious of prescriptive parenting manuals? Then this new book might just be for you. **Kristin Hulaas Sunde** interviews the author, **Kathi Hughes**.

“Lots of parenting manuals overlook the baby as a person,” says Kathi Hughes, the author of *Learning together: what Montessori can offer your family*. When she was first approached to write the book she felt “very reluctant”: “So many parenting books would be thrown across the room because they don’t suit me. How would I know how to parent your kids?”

What she does know, however, is how the method can work at home. As a mother of three and trained Montessori teacher, she home educated her son, Peter, until he started Year 3 aged seven last autumn. She is still at home with Owen, aged five and Abigail, two.

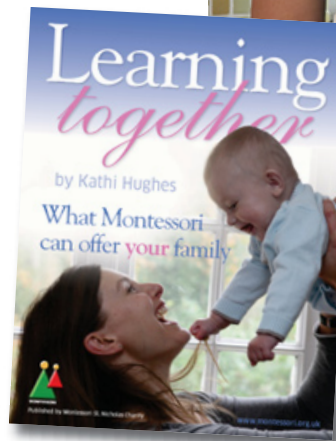
The idea behind the book was to use her personal and professional experience to raise awareness of the Montessori philosophy, and offer practical ideas for how to use it in everyday life.

Its key message is simply to follow

and observe your child, and respect him or her as an individual, Kathi says. “People are desperate to interact – talking and chatting and answering questions that haven’t been asked yet”. Instead, “take a step back and just watch what they’re doing. Maybe they discovered their feet today?”

Simply taking time out to observe can be the key to helping everyone in the family relax and get along better: “As children go into pre-school and school, time together is often so limited. You lose a lot of the enjoyment with so many activities and a hectic schedule.”

She recalls feeding a newborn Abigail while watching her boys playing through the glass in their conservatory: “I couldn’t interact, just watch. Not interrupting made a big difference in letting them get on with



it, and also giving me information about where they were at.”

Kathi herself had experience of Montessori from an early age. Her mother was “very big on independence and let me do things for myself”. Kathi was placed in a Montessori kindergarten aged two in their native

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Continued from previous page

▶ city of St. Louis in Missouri, USA, and stayed there until she went to school aged seven.

In the American system, children spend half days in kindergarten for a year until they start school aged six or seven. "I think the two to six age range is closer to what Maria Montessori wanted," Kathi says. "In the UK children at nursery are just aged two and three, because you lose the four-year-olds to reception".

By the time Peter arrived, the family had moved to the UK. He attended a Montessori nursery until he was four, but instead of placing him in reception Kathi and her husband decided to home educate. It was easier, she says, because they came from "outside the system".

"We never had a curriculum", she says. "Worksheets end in tears." Her home is "not a sterile Montessori environment – it's a house". And what they do there is "constantly evolving – something will work for a few days or months and then you'll have to do something else. It's about observing what's going on and finding ways of adapting to that. Nobody's perfect – we have mess and battles over laundry."

Kathi feels Montessori-style parenting is different because it "puts the focus on your child as an individual, as opposed to the generic 'child X' presented in many parenting manuals". "It shows you how to enjoy your child and follow them on their path of learning. They're



toddlers and older children.

"For the older children I tried to include lots of ideas, without saying 'set up a Montessori school in your own home'. Just live your life in an ordinary way," Kathi says. "In a family you naturally have different ages and they learn from each other. Just go to the kids, see what they're interested in and respond."

She says the easiest activity in the book is just going for a walk with your child. "Put on your shoes, open the front door and see what happens. You don't have to live in the countryside, or in a perfect picture postcard. Have a chat about what you can see and what's happening around you. It could be two different colours on someone's front door, or a wonky aerial – asking 'how do they watch telly with that?' You see so much more when you walk at a kid's pace, things you've never noticed before."



the UK and spread awareness of the method's benefits beyond the practitioner and nursery community.

Kathi is adamant that the book is not advocating that all families must adopt the Montessori approach. "I wouldn't advocate anything, personally – that's one of the reasons I was reluctant when I was first asked to write the book."

Instead, the book has a relaxed, 'no

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all so amazing when you sit down and watch and talk to them – when you just take the time to enjoy them."

So how different is it to be a Montessori parent from being a teacher? "Not that different really, once you think about what Montessori really is," she explains. "When I was training, so much was about learning to use the materials. In some way it's easier at home because you know your own children, as opposed to in a class."

And no materials are necessary for practising Montessori at home. Written in an informal, accessible way, the book simply aims to give new parents a fuller understanding of their child's potential, tools for unlocking it, and concrete ideas for things to try at home. There are ideas to use with children of all ages, from newborn babies through to

The book is not meant to be a step-by-step guide to parenting, nor is it a 'how to' manual: "There is a right way to be a parent, but it is your way. You know your child best," it states.

Drawing on *How to Raise an Amazing Child the Montessori Way* by Tim Seldin, it aims to relate Montessori methods to today's realities. "It has short sections and chapters," Kathi explains, "because new mothers don't have a lot of energy. You can read a few pages before you make your sandwich and come back to it another time, instead of tackling long complicated chapters."

With publication set for spring 2012, the book is priced at £5.99 and available from the Charity. Some copies will also be donated to parents and family-centred organisations. The overall aim is to raise the profile of Montessori in

pressure' approach that simply encourages parents to develop and broaden things they are already using successfully: "If you and your children are happy, here are some ideas that could fit in with what you're already doing."

The bottom line is that parenting is always a work in progress: "I'm constantly reminding myself of all these things," Kathi says: "It's so much easier to say them than to do them."

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