

Supporting your child's learning at home

You have chosen to send your children to a Montessori school. What can you do at home to support that learning? **Bénédicte Florin** draws on her own experience as a Montessori parent of two boys aged 7 and 9.

1. Develop problem-solving skills by NOT providing the solution to a problem or puzzle

We let our children explore and find out for themselves through trial and error. When asked to help, we don't solve the problem for them; we just give encouragement and maybe hints. You can do the same with questions they ask: instead of giving them the answer straight away, you can show them how they could find out the answer themselves. You can model questioning and looking up references (books, dictionaries, online resources) to find answers to questions. This encourages your children's inquiring mind.

2. Allow extended periods of free time

Then the children can work undisturbed on an activity of their choosing, explore it, repeat it, perfect it



Allow extended periods of free time so children can work undisturbed on an activity.

Set up the home environment in such a way that children can perform the tasks of their daily life.

until they are fully satisfied (as they do at Montessori classes with the three-hour work cycle). We try to have only a few extra-curricular activities; we keep a lot of empty space in our weekend and holiday schedules. As a result, we see our children fully engaged and concentrated in their work for several hours at a time, sometimes together, sometimes independently. Being in charge of their own time helps them develop self-direction, creativity and responsibility, with the wonderful advantage that they are never bored.

3. Select 'open-ended' toys, games and activities which can be used in many ways

We keep toys/items that will promote exploration and creativity and that can be expanded or combined with other toys/items. We (ruthlessly) discard toys that can be used only in one or two ways (the 'push-a-button-and-something-goes-beep' kind) and those that are restrictive or too directive. Good toys are tools for our children to express their creativity: they are a means to our children's self-expression

and growth. My all-time favourite is the basket of wooden blocks that our children have had since they were babies, which has grown over the years and which they now use to build supports for multi-level railway tracks. The ability to use the same item in multiple ways is again a way for your children to develop original and creative problem-solving skills: they look at what they have at hand and they think of how this can help them achieve their goal. In the same spirit, we usually have a well-appointed arts-and-crafts corner in our home, with all manners of materials.

4. Model the use of appropriate and precise language and insist on the children using it

By using appropriate language you model the virtues of respect and civility. By giving your children a sense of the richness of your languages (in our family, we speak two languages, hence the plural), you give them the means to understand their world better (they learn that each object, each living being, each concept and each quality



has a precise name) and you give them a tool to express their own ideas with clarity and conviction and communicate well with others.

5. Take family meals together

We always have our meals together, seated at the dinner table, with the children taking full part in the conversation. We avoid snacking or eating without being seated at a table. My French influence is clearly visible here: for us, a meal is not a pure intake of food, it is a jolly gathering of people and an opportunity to exchange news, ideas, thoughts, and opinions. Here again, providing a regular opportunity for family conversations develops your children's thinking and communication skills, as well as consolidating their sense of belonging to the world.

6. Empower your children to perform their daily tasks independently

Our home environment is set up in such a way that our children can access all they need to perform the tasks of their daily life. For example, clothes, crockery, food, microwave oven are all easily accessible to them. Our children

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know how to lay the table for themselves, cook their porridge, put their dishes away, load the dishwasher, make their beds, sort the dirty washing, place it in the washing machine, hang the washing up to dry (we have a couple of lower drying racks), fold their clothes and put them away and various other tasks. I see these as part of life, like brushing your teeth, so there are no rewards for doing these tasks, except for the intrinsic reward of becoming more of a fully participating human being. I must admit that we are unfortunately not always successful with this, but I also find that when we are it works wonders. In my experience, the best way to motivate your children is to empower them, first by demonstrating to them how to perform the task from end to end (e.g. how to load the dishwasher, put the powder in, start the machine, unload it and put dishes away), explaining its dangers (toxic powder: wash your hands afterwards) and indicating escape

routes (press 'stop' if you selected the wrong programme) and then by giving them full control as well as responsibility for the task (and – most importantly - resisting the temptation to interfere).

7. Remove the television

In our home, we do not watch television. This is probably the one single habit we have that most supports our children's learning because it frees a lot of time for all the other habits mentioned above. More than any of the publicised negative effects of television, it is the fact that any time spent watching television is time lost for learning to live that I find the most disturbing. Here are some beneficial side-effects (of not watching television) that I have observed in our children: they are always both mentally and physically active, they don't rely on external stimuli to entertain themselves, they are never bored (until someone recently mentioned it to them, they didn't even use the word!), they use their 'downtime' to reconnect with themselves (for example by reading, playing quietly or being creative) rather than becoming disconnected from themselves by

plunging into someone else's world (on the television). I know it's hard for most people to give up their television but you could try putting it away (and I mean: physically removing it from your lounge) for a month and observe what happens.

8. Avoid computer games or electronic games

Our children seldom play computer games and don't own any electronic games. While there may be some good computer programmes for children, the average computer game or electronic game is restrictive, directive, does not allow much exploration of the wider world, cannot be expanded or combined with others, does not allow much creativity and therefore does not fulfill my criteria of a 'good toy'. Moreover it is disconnected from reality, it removes your children from the real world and prevents them from exercising their control over the real world they live in. For small children it



Matthew prepares the family's lunchboxes.

blurs the line between fantasy and reality. For all children, it prevents social interactions and communication with others. Lastly it promotes physical inactivity. Like the absence of television, the absence of electronic games will give your children more time to learn to live. This being said, using a computer as a tool (to write, to research) is another story (see Healy 1998).

There are other good habits which I think our family would do well to pick up – such as providing a greater variety of experiences in the natural environment and more opportunities for social engagement – but I have limited myself to those things that I believe we do well.

I hope these ideas will inspire you to reflect on your own family's habits and to maybe adapt them to better support your children's learning in the Montessori way. I wish you a wonderful time with your children. ■

Reference

Healy, Jane M. 1998. Failure to Connect. How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds – And What We Can Do About It. New York: Touchstone.

Bénédicte Florin's first encounter with Montessori dates back to the late 1960s and early 1970s when she attended a Montessori preschool and primary School in Geneva, Switzerland. Bénédicte is now the chairperson of the Montessori Primary Trust at Otari School in Wellington, New Zealand

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