

How can Montessori influence our parenting?

Over the last year **Tessa McTaylor** has been discovering how to incorporate Montessori philosophy into her approach to parenting. Here she discusses the importance of toddlers walking outdoors.

Dr Montessori placed real emphasis on the need for toddlers to go walking in the outdoors at their own pace, “guided by what appeals to them” (1988, p149). She explained the difference between how an adult generally walks to a destination but a young child walks for the experience and is spurred on by the interesting things they see around them. “The child’s way is like that of the first tribesman to wander the Earth. No one said, ‘Let’s go to Paris’, for there was no Paris. ‘Let’s take a train’...there were no trains. Men walked till they came to something useful or interesting” (ibid). At 18 months old, Lincoln just loves exploring our neighbourhood on foot, and we make this our main activity on our days together. Rather than heading out of our gate to somewhere specific, I follow Lincoln’s lead, letting him set the pace and direction. Our ‘somewhere specific’ comes every few steps when he finds his next discovery, whether it be the cover over a water main, a daisy, a pathway, a wall to balance on or a puddle to splash in, and we continue on in this way until I can see he is ready to come back home.

There are times when I ask myself (and am also asked by others) “what is so different about taking a Montessori approach to parenting?” Using this example of walking with Lincoln, at face value I would probably say there is nothing different. We are certainly not

Lincoln, aged 18 months loves exploring the neighbourhood.



the only toddler and parent out walking, and I would have walked with my child even if I had never discovered Dr Montessori’s writings. However, what I think is different is the value that I place on this activity because of what Dr Montessori revealed about the nature of childhood and how to best support the child’s natural development. Our exploring time is not just about getting fresh air or soaking up time and it is certainly about far more than just exercising his legs. My knowledge of the Montessori approach helps me identify Lincoln’s current needs, interests and sensitive periods. I know that he has a real need to be active and practise his body movements with lots of repetition as well as increasing his level of challenge. He loves to make his own choices and discoveries and uses all of his senses to learn about his world. He is very social and enjoys practising greeting people (social graces), and is just beginning to want to have a name assigned to all the things he encounters. I truly believe he is able to drive his own development and so I find it really reassuring that the one activity that meets all of these needs at the same time is the activity that perhaps brings him the most joy.

He has made his own perfect ‘match’ and this is why I hold this experience in such high regard.

Interpreting this one experience to this degree is possibly also something that stands out between myself and other parents, whether Montessori inspired or not, but I find it useful to me in many ways. I find it useful to remember how important and even necessary this experience is for Lincoln in those moments when we have stopped to pick up yet another stick, to wave and shout “hi” and “bye” at every car that goes past or repeatedly go up and down a slope along the way and I am feeling eager to rush him on. I also find it helpful to remember what a positive experience it is when I start to feel concerned that I have not ‘achieved’ anything in my day, or wonder if Lincoln should be doing gym classes instead or maybe we would be better going out in the car looking for exciting destinations. Even when we are heading off out the gate, with no set plan, I never think we are going walking for no reason. My understanding of the Montessori philosophy means that, in fact, we are going walking for the most important reasons of all – to enrich Lincoln’s life and assist his natural development. ■

References

Montessori, M. (1988). *The Absorbent Mind*. Clio Press: Oxford.

Tessa McTaylor is a Montessori teacher in New Zealand. She is the mother of Lincoln, 18 months and has been writing about her experience of becoming a Montessori parent, since he was a young baby. This article was first published in *Montessori Voices*, December 2009.