

# How to Create a Montessori Prepared Environment

## *Toddlers*

The first undertaking of a Montessori teacher is to set up her classroom. In Montessori the classroom is called the Prepared Environment. Parents can also create a Prepared Environment at home. A Prepared Environment not only includes the physical materials, it also encompasses the atmosphere and the rules that govern the environment (home or school).

### **Preparing the Environment**

In the home or school for the child of this age, much attention must be paid to the safety of the environment. It is a recognised fact that the child will develop more fully; mentally, emotionally, and physically when she is free to move and explore in an ever-enlarging environment instead of being kept in a crib, playpen, swing, or walker. The exploration of the environment is vital.

From birth on, when a child is free to leave his bed and to move about his room, and later the other rooms - careful attention must be paid to assuring safety: covering plugs, taping wires to the wall or floor, removing poisonous plants and chemicals.

The easiest time to prepare the environment is before birth, the parents crawling around the child's room to see what the child can reach or will be attracted to and then to make it safe. As the child's environment becomes larger, encompassing other rooms of the house, and as she begins to crawl quickly and to walk, the adults must continue to childproof the house.

During the first three years the child will absorb, like a sponge, whatever is in the environment, ugliness or beauty, course behaviour or gentleness, good or bad language. As parents, we are the first models of what it means to be human.

Quality and beauty of the environment and the books and materials is very important in attracting, satisfying, and keeping the attention of the child. If the child is exposed to beautiful rattles and toys, she will help create a world with the same high standards as an adult. Toys, rattles, puzzles, tables, and chairs made of wood instead of plastic develop an appreciation for nature and quality and show a respect for the child.

Pictures on the wall, hung at the eye-level of the child, can be beautiful framed art prints or simple posters. Rather than ugly cartoons, that adults assume are preferred by children, we see that children are drawn instead to the great art, which has stood the test of time. Children also enjoy seeing their own artwork framed and displayed on the wall. The children's pictures can be changed frequently, as they create new artwork.

Rather than keeping things in large toy boxes, it is more satisfying to the child to keep them neatly on shelves, hung on hooks, sorted on trays, and separated into baskets. This also makes putting things away much more logical and enjoyable. It is possible to put shelves in the child's room, family room, and wherever else the child may play, before the child is born. Parents can begin immediately to keep the child's things on shelves and continually set the example of putting toys away where they belong when they are not being used.

Here are some things to keep in mind when organising a child's environment:

- 1) Have a place in each room -the bedroom, the kitchen, dining room, living room, bathroom, garage, and so forth - for the child's few, carefully chosen belongings.
- 2) Think carefully about family activities and the materials used, in all areas of the home, and arrange the environment to include the child.
- 3) By the front door, have a stool to sit on and a place within reach to hang coats and put shoes. In the living room, have shelves for organising a few of the child's books, toys, puzzles, or games.
- 4) Don't put out too many items at one time. A few baskets or trays holding tools or toys that are being used at the moment are sufficient. Don't put too many items in each basket. IF a child has 100 lego pieces, that is too many for him to manage. Start out with 10 or 15 in the basket. This way he can learn how to completely put away the lego pieces. More lego pieces can be added to the basket as and when required. He gradually learns how to manage more and more legos.
- 5) It is a good idea to rotate books and toys - taking out those that have not been chosen lately and removing them to storage for a time. A monthly rotation works well. An older child can help with this. This is done after observing what the child is actually using, and removing those things which are being ignored, or which have been outgrown. Be sure to leave the favourites!

## **Furniture**

Shelves are an important component of the child's environment. Shelves do not have to be expensive; they can be as simple as boards and bricks. They can also be as elegant as any other furniture in the home. It is wonderful when a family can afford a child-sized bookcase in each room of the house for the child's belongings.

Solid wood tables and stools, which allow the child to sit up straight with the feet flat on the floor for drawing, playing, fixing, and eating snacks are very important. Not only will good posture be developed, but also she will be better able to concentrate and focus in this position.

Small solid wood benches, useful next to the front door for removing shoes, in the bathroom for removing pants and reaching the sink, in the kitchen for reaching the sink are very important for the child's work and independence.

A low bed is preferred so she can easily climb in and out of it.

## **The Environment and the Mind**

All adults are influenced by their first environment and nothing can help create beauty in the world as much as giving beauty and quality to the very young.

We must not only think of the quality, but the quantity. Visible posters, pictures, toys, etc. always affect the mind. It has been shown over and over in children's environments that cluttered shelves, which are visually blocked out by the adult, are a constant visual barrage for the young child, causing stress. Too many pictures and posters on the wall do the same. The Chinese art of placement, Feng Shui, teaches that clutter, even hidden under a bed or piled on top of bookcases can cause stress.

The same hold true for the sounds in the environment. With time the adult brain learns to block out the sound of a TV or radio, but a child is always aware of it. Sometimes a child can become upset by visual and auditory stimulus of which the adult is completely unaware!

Preparing the environment before birth frees parents to devote time to be with and enjoy their child after birth. A neat, attractive, enjoyable, organised, and uncluttered environment can help create a more peaceful life for the whole family.

## The Child's Research

Some people call the search for limits "testing", but there is negative connotation to this word. When a child is trying to learn the rules and procedures of the society in which she lives, this is a very positive undertaking. It is actually important research.

A good example is the research question, "What is the meaning of the word 'No'?" I remember an incident in our home between a good friend and her two-year old daughter, Julia. The two-year old had climbed up on the piano bench and was reaching for a bust of Mozart kept on the piano. As she reached toward it she looked expectantly at her mother, obviously for some kind of a response. The mother said, "No, don't touch it." Julia stopped, lowered her hand, and then reached toward it again. The mother said, "No" again, a little louder. Again, the daughter reached and looked at her mother. This happened several times with no resolution.

I watched this communication, and the confusion on both sides, and offered the suggestion, "I don't think she knows what 'No' means and is trying to find out".

The mother laughed and said, "Of course." Then she went to Julia, said "No," gently, and as she said it, picked Julia up and moved her across the room to a pile of building blocks. Both were completely satisfied.

In the first exchange, perhaps the child thought, "No" meant "I am waiting and looking and expect you to eventually pick up that statue. And I am getting mad at you."

In the second exchange, the message was clear. "No" meant, "stop doing what you are doing and move away to another part of the room or another activity." (and, thanks to the clear and gently way of speaking, "I am not mad at you.")

Children do not understand the language of reasoning until around age six. They need clear demonstrations along with words. It is very helpful for parents to realise that their child is not trying to be bad, but she is being a normal intelligent human being trying to find out how to behave. She is carrying out research.

## **Teach by Teaching, not by Correcting**

The most powerful tool parents have for sharing their way of life and their values is the example they set. In every waking moment of the child's life, especially in the first three years, she is learning and becoming more and more like those people she finds around her. She will imitate the way of walking, moving, talking, the vocabulary, the handling of objects, the emotions, manners, taste, and the respect and consideration (or lack of) for others, and on and on. The first important thing we can do is to surround her with the kind of people we want her to emulate. These are her first teachers.

The second is to avoid correcting when the lesson can be taught in another way. (Of course, if a child reaches for a hot pan handle we correct!) For example, if a child is continually slamming the door very loudly, the best approach is to: 1) Note that the child needs to be shown how to close a door carefully and quietly. 2) Choose a neutral moment (which means not an emotionally charged moment when the adult is upset by the door slamming). 3) Give an amusing, exaggerated, and interesting lesson, showing the child how to close the door - turning the handle so carefully and slowly that there is no sound whatever. Try other doors, do it over and over, as long as it is being enjoyed by both.

With these lessons you can teach brushing teeth, putting away toys, pouring milk. Manners lessons, like saying "Please" and "Thank you", come from the culture in which the child lives. We used to practice over a large bowl of popcorn, offering and thanking over and over and sometimes laughing hysterically at the end of the lesson, at the exaggerated and fun manners.

When parents and children begin to spend more active time together the need for these lessons comes up often and can be enjoyed by both adult and child. And life becomes more and more pleasant.

## Offering Choices

Another way to show respect for a child, and at the same time extract the desired behaviour, is to offer choices.

One summer I discussed this philosophy with my eight-year old niece. The following day she and I were sitting on the lawn talking and I noticed that she was watching carefully as a mother and small child were having a verbal battle across the street because the child wouldn't let the mother put on her shoes.

Finally, my niece said, "Look at that silly mother. She is doing that all wrong. She should have said. 'Do you want to put your shoes on yourself, or do you want me to put your shoes on?'"

She was right. The normal healthy two-year old who is just beginning to be able to function independently on many physical and mental levels is not interested in being told what to do, but very interested in being given choices.

Let us say we are in a situation where a certain action is necessary - such as a child getting down from a table on which he has climbed. The worse approach is to say, "Get down from there!" The child will be embarrassed and will try to save face by refusing. Try saying, "Do you need help getting down from that table or can you do it yourself?"

Even in casual every day situations giving choices makes the child feel that you respect her opinion. "Do you want to wear the red gloves or the blue ones?" "Are you ready for bed now or do you want to have a story first?" "Do you want your applesauce first or your pasta?" (Rather than "Eat your food.")

I know of no behaviour on the parent's part more assured of creating a peaceful atmosphere in the home of a two-year old than that of giving choices.

## Selecting Toys for the Home Environment

When picking out a toy for a child, imagine just what she will do with it. Does it invite purposeful activity? Decision-making? Imagination? For how long will my child play with it? Will it encourage the child to explore, to spend time with it?

Imagination is a wonderful tool of humans, but it cannot be created out of nothing. Creative imagination is based on, and directly related to, the quality of sensorial experiences in the real world. A rich imagination enables one to picture a solution (solving a puzzle, for example) and to work toward it. The more experience a child has with real information, purposeful activity, and solving problems, the more useful, creative, and effective her imagination will become.

We picked out rattles and other manipulative toys for the child in her first weeks and realistic mobiles, which had different colours and grips - so that the child would be invited by the toy, and challenged to explore. We do the same now. Eye-hand coordination is developed when it is obvious, visually, that a toy goes together in a particular way, for example, a cube in a square hole and a sphere in a round hole. It is no small thing for a child to learn to direct her muscles to do what her eyes see should be done. And the challenge of such activities helps the child develop coordination and concentration. All of this must be considered when selecting toys for the child at this important developmental stage.

The use of wood helps the child appreciate the natural world, the colours, shades and grains of wood, and the varying weight of wooden toys in a variety of sizes and densities. Quality shows a respect for the child and teaches the child respect for belongings. Beauty and durability are important at all ages for the child's tastes are being formed at this time of life. A beautiful home or a beautiful world can only be created by those who have learned to appreciate the satisfaction of living with simple, natural beauty.

## **Organising and Rotating Toys**

Toys should be kept in the area where the family lives, not only in the child's room. A cupboard in the kitchen can be made available to the child with pots, pans, and other items the child can use while parents are working in the kitchen. Adaptations can also be made in other rooms.

Shelves are much more satisfying for storing toys than toy boxes. Shelves allow a child to see what is available to him so he may then choose with what he would like to work. When he is finished, it is then easy to put his work back on the shelf where it will be accessible to him the next time he wants to use it. Toy boxes encourage dumping of toys, show disrespect to the child's belongings, and display no order to the environment, as they tend to get lost and/or broken in a toy box.

Having order in the environment creates a feeling of security in the child, and trust in the environment. Baskets, trays, and small boxes neatly arranged on low shelves can be very helpful in creating this order. If the adult carefully and continually puts the pieces of puzzles or toys back in the basket and on the shelf in front of the child, she will eventually imitate and join in the activity. Sometimes the "putting away" into baskets is the most enjoyable part of play.

If you watch a child, you will see which toys he plays with most and which ones just get dropped and forgotten. Try to keep only as many toys available to the child as can be kept neat and uncrowded, in baskets on a shelf.

## **Learning to Put Toys Away**

Limiting the number of toys available at any one moment and having a place for every toy, helps with the task of teaching the child to put toys away. But most important is the example set by the others in the environment. In a Montessori community, this lesson is much easier than in the home because the teacher is dedicated to the child completely, all day long. She will constantly put things away, carefully, slowly, and as the child becomes aware of this, he naturally wants to learn to do this - just as he wants to learn everything else.

Of course, it is much easier to get into the habit of putting a toy away right away when it is obvious where it goes on the shelf. It is more difficult when all of the toys are out and all the shelves empty. This habit of putting toys away, if developed early, will be helpful in many ways throughout life. The parent can sometimes make a game of this by playing at "putting away" instead of making it a distasteful chore.

## Respecting Work and Concentration

One of the most important elements of Montessori philosophy is that of respecting the concentration of a child. When the child is engaged in something safe and purposeful (meaning an activity requiring effort of both the mind and body - not watching TV!) this is considered a child's important "work" and the adult's role is to respect and protect it.

*"The first essential for the child's development is concentration. It lays the whole basis for his character and social behaviour. Praise, help, or even a look, may be enough to interrupt him, or destroy the activity. It seems a strange thing to say, but this can happen even if the child meekly becomes aware of being watched. After all, we too sometimes feel unable to go on working if someone comes to see what we are doing.*

*The teacher's [and parents'] skill in not interfering comes with practice, like everything else, but it never comes very easily. What advice can we give to an interesting occupation: they should not be helped unnecessarily, nor interrupted, once they have begun to do something intelligent.*

*--Dr. Maria Montessori*

From: The Joyful Child

# Montessori Prepared Environment Preschool

The first undertaking of a Montessori teacher is to set up her classroom. In Montessori the classroom is called the Prepared Environment. Parents can also create a Prepared Environment at home. A Prepared Environment not only includes the physical materials, it also encompasses the atmosphere and the rules that govern the environment (home or school).

## Preparing the Environment

The child from 3 to 6 is being introduced to the world. We do not believe in pushing a child, but we believe strongly in providing an environment rich in all areas of learning so that the child can choose, from his own intuition, what he is ready to learn. Young children show an amazing interest in a wide range of subjects.

A rich environment creates interests and extends the child's experience, widening her grasp of such things as music, art, history, geography, science, language, and maths. Observations, over the years, of the child's built-in curiosity and interest in all these areas of study and accomplishment, have taught us to focus on the preparation of the early environment and allow the child to choose and to teach herself. The adult's challenge is to be sure that the environment offers all of the key experiences necessary for the laying of this foundation.

Rather than relying on verbal lessons, computers, TV, or videos (or other examples of passive learning) because the subject is academic, we rely on the same abilities developed in the areas of practical life and good toys.

We create an environment rich in experiments, games, materials, and books which the child can select as the interest arises, providing experiences of hand and mind working together for an intelligent purpose.

## Organising the Environment

*I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn. --Einstein*

The environment is extremely important at any level of the development of the child. To show respect for the developing sense of beauty, to aid the growing independence, and to inspire the child to activity, we choose the best of everything for the environment. Pictures on the wall can be framed art prints or simple posters.

Children at this age often prefer to work on the floor instead of at a table - on rugs or pieces of carpet that can be rolled up when not in use. This marks the workspace just as would a table. In the classroom, we use a variety of colours and shades, plain in design so that the child can focus on his work.

In the home, rather than keeping things in large toy chests or boxes, we use trays and baskets for most things. The child's belonging can be sorted in baskets, boxes, and on shelves, into types of clothing, blocks, and other toys, puzzles, art materials, kitchen tools, etc. This makes finding and putting away easier and enjoyable.

In the classroom, materials are attractively arranged on shelves according to subject - language, math, geography, history, science, music, and art. Each piece of material has a special permanent place so that children know where to find it and where to put it away for the next person when finished. Materials are arranged from the most simple to the more complex.

Tables and chairs of the correct height are important at every age to support the body in good posture while the child reads, writes, works. As the child grows, the table and chair should be changed to support good posture at every age.

## **Environment in the Home**

There are two important things to keep in mind in organising a child's environment in the home:

- 1) Have a place in each room for the few, carefully chosen child's belongings: By the front door have a stool to sit on and a place to hang coats and keep shoes. In the living room have a place for the child's books and toys - neatly and attractively organised. Think out the activities and materials for all living spaces and arrange the environment to include the child's activities.
- 2) Don't put out too many toys and books at one time. Those being used by the child at the moment are sufficient. It is a good idea to rotate - taking out those books and toys that have not been chosen lately and removing them to storage for a time. Children grow and change and they need help to keep their environment uncluttered and peaceful.

## **The Environment and the Mind**

Everyone at every age is affected by their environment. Habits of organising the environment reduce stress and aid the development of an organised, efficient, and creative mind. The Chinese art of placement, or Feng Shui, teaches that clutter, even hidden under a bed or piled on the top of bookcases, is bad for a person.

A child who joins in the arrangement of an environment, at school or at home, and learns to select a few lovely things instead of piles of unused toys, books, clothes, etc., will be aided in many ways with this help in creating good work habits, concentration, and a clear, uncluttered, and peaceful mind.

## **The Adult**

The adult model is always the most important element in the environment. It is from observing what we do, not what we say, that the child will learn.

## **Materials**

There are special materials or *sensorial* puzzles in the 3 - 6 class, such as the "pink tower", the "colour tablets", and the "sound boxes"; which give very clear experiences of important concepts such as "large and small", "darker and lighter", "loud and soft", and so on. These *sensorial* materials are not necessary in the home, where parents can find other ways of introducing these experiences in the daily life of children - feeling the temperature of the bath water, exploring tastes while baking, and colour or size with toys, clothes, etc.

Whether a toy is a "puzzle toy" with a specific way of using it, or an "open-ended toy" such as blocks and dolls, the child wants to know the procedures connected with it. We can show her where the toy is kept when it is not in use, how to carry it, and the basic possibilities for its use.

The most important result is that the child combines her mental faculties with the work of the hands, enjoys the experience of focusing and concentrating, and finds joy in the activity.

## **Cooperative Games**

In environments where children work and play independently and cooperatively, they learn the most valuable kind of socialisation - helping each other. In the home, or in the classroom, cooperative games help to lay this groundwork. In other games, we find that competitive play often stifles unity. Most competitive game cause players to feel isolated or left out. The action is secretive and the results can be hurt feelings or arguments. In cooperative games, children and adults feel good about each other because they enjoy sharing, helping each other, and making joint decisions. In short, the challenge shifts from defeating each other to helping each other.

After a group of children or a family learns to play cooperative games, it becomes easy to change the rules of any other game to make it less competitive. We consider this real 'socialisation' and preparation for positive interactions throughout life.

## Blocks

Blocks have been a favourite of children the world over forever. They can be made from simple stones, clay bricks, pieces of tree branches, or polished hardwoods. The attraction is that the imagination of the child is set free to create relationships between these physical objects.

Many mathematical and geometric relationships and architectural concepts are discovered, and physics principles are discovered as the structure gets too tall or too heavy. The child can also work out personal problems by playacting with blocks, animal models, and little people. In our experience, next to doing real family work, playing with blocks has been the greatest aid to developing concentration.

## Puzzles

Puzzles provide visual discrimination practice as the child figures out exactly how the elements fit together visually and eye-hand control as the pieces are fitted together. They teach the child that work/play is not just open-ended but can have a beautiful and logical structure. They more easily give practice in the beginning and ending of an activity and the satisfaction of completion. The progression of puzzles is first 1, 2, or 3 piece knobbed puzzles, then multiple-piece knobbed puzzles, simple jigsaw puzzles in frames with gradually increasing numbers of pieces, then cube puzzles, and regular cardboard jigsaw puzzles.

Just as a child is eager to know the exact techniques for using a kitchen tool, a woodworking tool, a gardening tool, or the technique of playing a musical instrument, she wants to know the exact ways to use "puzzle toys". A short demonstration on the use of the toy or activity prepares the child to be successful in its use. The child also learns respect for the materials when they are taught to use them properly. Playing with open-ended toys, such as dolls, blocks art materials, and so forth, is made infinitely richer by the child's knowledge of exact techniques in handling any toys or materials. We would be doing a child a disservice if we allowed her to use anything - blocks, a violin bow, a hand mixer - as a hammer, for example. This does *not* stifle creativity, but facilitates it!

Through the use of all good materials, the child learns how to think, to concentrate, to complete a train of thought and a cycle of activity, and to solve problems. She learns to bring the use of her body, and especially her hands, under the control of her will, to be self-disciplined. This is the foundation for the creativity of a professional artist or composer and for the creativity of a child at any age.

## Respecting Work and Concentration

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From: Child of the World