

Discipline – Developing Self-Control

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A child is born with no control over their bodies or their behavior. They are helpless and need the complete care of someone who will nurture them and protect them. As they grow and develop they gain control of their own body, lifting their head, gaining strength in the trunk and then sitting, gaining control of the arms and legs, usually crawling, pulling up and then walking. In about one year they have gained control of their body and language is developing. They can understand what is said to them and are beginning to use words. Now that they can control more of their world, it is not necessary to wait for someone to move them from one spot to another. They can even tell their caregiver what they want or need.

No one however expects a child of one year to control their behavior. The parent continues to work to see that the child has enough food and rest to feel content and most babies respond to positive experiences with the growth of emotional well being. When the child is hungry, tired, over stimulated or frustrated it is the caregiver who helps to work out a solution.

Parents do not expect children at age one or two years old to always be calm and cooperative. They know that a child of this age can go on sensory overload and melt down.

Between two and three years of age there is a period in which the brain reorganizes itself. Up until now it has had no inhibition control. If a young child wants something, he wants it and he wants it now. He does not understand waiting; in fact, he cannot do it.

As the brain develops at this period the ability to inhibit actions is growing. By age three, most children can understand that they may have to wait until the parent can do what they are asking. They are becoming increasingly cooperative because the neurological system is maturing and allowing them to control their behavior.

Self-discipline is learned by most children through imitation of those around them and with gentle but firm boundaries provided by their caregivers. If the parents are reasonably consistent in their expectations and use rewards and removal of privileges, most children find the world reasonable and cooperate with their caregiver.

Some children do not evidence the same easy development as just described. These children often have motor delays or disorders, speech and language delays or disorders, and behaviors, which are not within normal limits for their age. These behaviors include attention issues, lack of inhibition control, continued temper fits, confrontational and oppositional behaviors, and/or obsessive and compulsive behaviors.

In these children, the neurological functioning which allows the child to “put the stops on”, is lacking. Since it has not developed normally, it must be taught, if the child is to be successful in group situations. Discipline should always be done with love and support for the child.

All of the techniques for teaching self control to any child apply also to the child with control issues, but they take longer, require more consistency and very clear expectations.

In the Montessori system of teaching self-control, there are six components.

I. **Structure**

There must be a structure appropriate to the age-level of the students in the class, with freedoms and limits clearly defined.

A. Prepared Environment

B. Rules of the Room (All based on consideration of others.)

II. **Imitation**

The teacher is an example. She must follow the room rules and use the manners she teaches to the students.

III. **Direct Teaching**

Grace and courtesy lessons. Part of the curriculum includes the following presentations:

A. Exercises in opening and shutting doors, cupboards, windows, boxes, drawers, bottle tops.

B. Social Relations - shaking hands. Greeting a visitor. Offering something to someone. Inviting someone to do something. Making way for someone to pass. Asking someone's pardon. Walking in front of another person. Watching another work. Asking for something. Asking to do something. Sitting on a chair. Rising from a chair. Eating properly. Serving juice.

IV. **Work**

Through meaningful satisfying work the student is occupied in challenging endeavors and time is spent in a positive way. The time for or the need to use negative behavior is lessened or gone. The student becomes "normalized."

V. **Independence**

The teacher never does anything for a student he can do for himself. She fosters independence, which enhances a student's self-concept. She allows students to settle their own differences if they can, and helps them if they need her guidance.

VI. **Correction is Specific**

If a student abuses materials in the class, he is shown how to use them properly. It is explained why we care for our materials. If he continues to abuse the material, he is calmly told he may not use it unless he can do so properly.

Other examples: Running - go back and walk.

Loud and disruptive - quiet chair to gain voice and body control.

Techniques of discipline or teaching self-control include:

Isolation

Isolation is particularly effective in curbing attention-getting behavior (tantrums, whining, yelling) or non-social behavior (fighting, hitting).

Steps to follow:

- A. Always tell the student what you are doing and why. “Johnny, We do not hit others. Let’s sit in this chair and get control.” You may have a specific quiet chair or quiet place.
- B. Isolation should take place immediately following the misbehavior for a period of time sufficient to gain control. You may say, “You may come rejoin us when you can talk in your voice and not a whining voice.” If the student cannot gauge this himself or bounces out of his chair immediately, take him back to his chair and explain again that he must stay there until he is in control. You may have to sit with the student until this point is reached. If a student remains in the chair longer than is necessary you will want to go to him and ask “Are you ready to join us now?”
- C. Never isolate a student in a dark or frightening place.
- D. When you decide to isolate a student, be consistent.

Repetitive Behavior

Certain behaviors can be corrected through repetitive behavior such as hanging up one’s coat rather than dropping it on the floor, or closing a door without slamming it.

Steps to follow:

- A. Show the student the correct behavior you expect.
- B. Tell him why he will repeat the behavior (because the proper behavior is necessary to the class’ well-being and his behavior will not be accepted).
- C. Tell him how long he must repeat the behavior. Say, “Johnny, you will hang your coat up, drop it on the floor, and hang it up again for 1 minute. I will tell you when to stop. (Set a timer or check your watch as you sit with him.) Begin.”
- D. After the one minute is up ask him, “Johnny, why did I have you hang up your coat repeatedly?”
- E. Stay with him. He must go through the actions to feel the behavior you want. Be consistent and stick fairly to the time limit.

Removal of Privileges

This is effective if the privilege removed is one meaningful to the student. If the student doesn’t care whether he has a particular privilege, removal of the privilege will be ineffective. Find something he really cares about.

Be realistic. Do not set time periods which are too long, and to which you will not adhere. Remove a privilege for a day—let the student try again tomorrow.

Behavior Modification

Certain behaviors, often annoying bad habits, can be corrected using a behavior modification chart. This chart requires the student to mark his paper each time the inappropriate behavior takes place.

Steps to follow:

- A. Work on only one behavior at a time. There may be several you wish to extinguish. Choose the most annoying.
- B. Discuss the chart with your student. State simply and clearly the behavior you want to change. Elicit his cooperation. You are working together to change a behavior. Write this on the chart.
- C. Each time your student behaves improperly, such as interrupting you while you're talking to others, give him a signal that tells him he must mark his chart. You may see an initial increase in the undesired behavior. Be patient and be consistent with the chart for at least a two week period. If behavior is still erratic, combine other techniques, such as repetitive behavior, along with the chart.

Reminders

- A. After the disciplinary action has taken place, it is over. Forget it and return to life as usual.
- B. Should the improper behavior appear again repeat the correction for a longer period of time (two minutes instead of one) and follow the steps as you did before. The correction does not need to be more severe, just consistent.
- C. Always carry through a disciplinary action in a calm, fair manner. Act rationally. It's the behavior you dislike, not the student.
- D. Be certain the correction fits the crime. If a student uses a tool improperly, he should lose the privilege of using it. Tantrums should be accompanied by isolation only for the duration of the tantrum. Staying in isolation for an hour for spilling a glass of milk is excessive.
- E. Be consistent. Your student must know you mean what you say. If you don't carry through with your initial demands, the steps taken will be ineffective.
- F. Disciplinary action does not need to get more severe, it just needs to be consistent.
- G. Instead of saying, "No, don't touch," No, do not do that," say "This is mine, you may play with this, it is yours." "Please do it this way."
- H. Open, honest direct communication between a teacher and a student is vital. When a behavior is not what a teacher likes to see in the student, he should discuss why the student is behaving in this manner. Listen carefully. It may not be a reasonable explanation to you, but it will show you the student's logic development.

Let him tell you how he feels; tell him how you feel.

Sometimes our behavior is causing his breakdown. We may become aware of a behavior we need to shift.

In any classroom a student with these challenges will take more of the teacher's time. For the average pre-school student, normalization is achieved in several weeks or months. For

the student with behavior difficulties, the staff should expect that it will take directed effort over a longer period of time, perhaps all the years between ages three and six.

What are the facets of the Montessori classroom that are helpful to children who have difficulty with learning or controlling their behavior?

- A method which provides for individualization of instruction through the child's interaction with the didactic materials proceeding at his own rate for mastery
- Specific procedures/techniques for training attention
- A classroom structure, clear in limits and privileges, which assists the child with faulty inhibition control to develop those skills
- An emphasis on work organization, which gives a child a model for learning how to set up and go about work tasks, the result of which can be a lifelong habit of investigation
- Manipulative materials, which provide the child with multisensory perceptions which help concretize abstract concepts
- Specific techniques for increasing gross motor skill development, eye-hand coordination and fine motor skill facility
- A concentration on the specific labels for people, objects, and ideas and their attributes and functions that foster oral language development
- Presentations of academics in small sequential steps with scientifically researched materials to further skill development in language, math, geography, history, physical and biological sciences, art and music
- An environment of encouragement to try, a de-emphasis of failure, which encourages the child's desire for independence, an emphasis on respecting the teacher and classmates that fosters consideration for others

What must the Montessori teacher expect or provide in working with children who have self control issues and/or learning disabilities?

- Greater teacher presence in the learning environment, for longer time periods
- Direct assistance on attention, focus, and concentration
- Structure for behavior
- Guidance in selecting and performing tasks
- Specific and direct oral language development
- Direct teaching of language and/or math symbols
- Pre-writing and writing practice with a multi-sensorial technique
- Language presentations modified with the techniques or programs for children with specific reading disabilities

Can a Montessori teacher be successful with all children, no matter the degree of difficulty in learning or the behavior they display?

Not in my experience. Though many children can be helped by the Montessori philosophy and educational method, some will need treatment by experts in behavioral disorders.

How long should I try to work with a child before deciding he should be referred elsewhere? That decision depends on many factors including the tolerance of the teacher for the stress of working with the child, the disturbance the child is to the others in the class, and the degree of difficulty of the behavior. Does the child have difficulty with interrupting, or is he biting and hitting others? A child should never be allowed to remain in the environment if he is

hurting others. Each child must be considered on a case by case basis. The head of the school and the teacher should try to work with the parents and other professionals to assist the child in changing their behaviors. The school should never feel like a failure if it cannot effect all of these changes. It is acting professionally if it refers the child to another program that may be a better place to address the child's needs.