

Montessorians Helping Students with Learning Differences in the Practical Life Curriculum

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Children in a Montessori pre-school program who indicate delays in coordination, language, attention and/or perception are at risk for learning disabilities. Students in the elementary program or beyond who have difficulties with reading, decoding, spelling and written expression are showing the characteristics of dyslexia. Those who demonstrate challenges in comprehension, math, attention, social skills, and oral and written languages are indicating the characteristics of a related disorder.

Regardless of the area(s) of academic weakness, these learning differences are caused by processing disorders. For these students, though intelligence is normal or higher, perception of language and/or math patterns or symbols is slower and less accurate than that of the average student. Montessori's practical life curriculum is a gift to these students.

In the practical life curriculum, the student is being helped to take care of himself and his environment. Each activity that the child is presented requires eye-hand coordination, fine motor skills, order, and sequence. To be accomplished, the activities require sustained attention. Each skill that the child masters increases his competence. As competence is improved, the child's self confidence is enhanced and therefore his self esteem is improved.

Practical life activities should be part of every Montessori classroom regardless of the age of the students. Especially with students who are at risk or have diagnosed learning differences, these activities are needed for a longer period of time.

In the 3-6 classrooms, the traditional practical life activities of spooning, pouring, cutting, dressing tasks, snack preparation, washing, etc. provide skills which can increase a child's independence. The Montessorian must analyze the way(s) in which each child can be successful with each activity. The younger or more challenged motorically may need an activity limited in differences or adapted to their level. For example, pouring — limited to 3 large beans to be poured from 1 small pitcher to another of equal size, each with a lip or spout. An additional assist would be placing a red circle in the bottom of each cup giving the child a place to aim. The pouring activities may move up slowly in difficulty as each level is achieved. Pouring activities can be continued for older students in food preparation that includes measuring dry and liquid amounts.

At all ages, the Montessorian should be aware that students with learning disabilities usually have underlying spoken language weaknesses. After the initial presentation in which the activity is presented silently, in subsequent presentations, the teacher should attach language to the activity and the objects in the activity to increase vocabulary and verbal expression. An example is: The pouring activity has been presented and the student is exploring and

improving in this skill. At the end of the activity, the teacher may say: This is pouring. What is the name of this activity?

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| What is this object? | This is a pitcher. |
| What color is the pitcher? | This pitcher is clear. |
| What size is the pitcher? | This pitcher is small. |
| What do you do with a pitcher? | You pour from a pitcher. |

Generally, the language should:

- Give the student the label (name) of the activity/object,
- Have the student repeat it,
- Ask the student questions about the object, which would describe the object (color, size, texture, etc.)
- Ask the student the function of the object. (What do you do with a _____?)

In the Elementary or Middle School class, the opportunity to continue practical life activities offers students who still need improvement in eye-hand coordination, fine motor skills, order, sequence, attention and language the practice they require. These activities also allow the student the flow of more demanding academic activities interspersed with less demanding (and tiring) tasks, while allowing the student a chance to be productively involved rather than wandering or avoiding work tasks.

Some of the age appropriate practical life activities for students as they get older include:

- Food preparation,
- Cleaning and maintenance of the classroom – washing, polishing items and furniture,
- Polishing (silver, copper, brass, pewter),
- Packing a suitcase,
- Organizing a locker, notebook, folder,
- Making models (aircraft, ships),
- Sanding a table,
- Changing a tire,
- Manicuring,
- Gardening
- Presenting practical life activities to younger children.

Some of these suggested activities are the same as in the 3-6 classrooms and are presented at a higher level of difficulty or as a chance to refine a poorly developed skill. In some cases, a student may have come to the Montessori school after the age of 6, and not been exposed to the practical life curriculum, so that the attention to detail and careful completion of work has not been presented at this level.

If a 6-9 or 9-12 teacher feels that these works are inappropriate for the student, then so will the student. If the teacher believes that the essence of the work ethic and pride in all tasks

done well is introduced through practical life activities, then the older student's attitude will usually mirror that of the teacher.

Students with learning disabilities do not proceed smoothly through the sensitive periods, as the average student does. They have areas of strength and areas of weakness. Some perceptual areas are "arrested" at a younger level of development. The continuation of the practical life activities over a longer time period provides an opportunity to master eye-hand coordination, fine motor skills, order and sequence in a learning task and improve sustained attention. All of these skills are critical for success in academic work.