

Some Words of Advice to Teachers, 1924

By Maria Montessori

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Anticipating some of the questions which will certainly be put to me, I shall give some recommendations regarding mistakes which I have observed during my visits to Montessori schools. These mistakes, apparently slight and of a psychological rather than a technical nature, are small matters; but they are those that impede the full and harmonious development that every teacher would like to achieve in her class and precisely because they appear to be insignificant, they are the most difficult to discover and eliminate.

Environment

The teacher must not content herself with merely providing her school with an attractive environment; she must continuously think about this environment, because a large part of the result depends on it. The teacher, therefore, must:

- a) keep the didactic developmental material in perfect order. If this is not the case, the children will not take an interest in it and if they do not, the material becomes useless, as the entire Montessori method is based on the spontaneous activity of the child which is aroused precisely by the interest the child takes in the material
- b) make sure that every object used by the children has a place of its own that is easily accessible to them. Thus, the black and coloured pencils, the paper, the pen, the ink, etc., must be placed in such a way that the children can take them in an orderly fashion without the help of the teacher. The order in which the objects are kept teaches order to the children.

The teacher, therefore, should occupy herself with the environment rather than with the child and allow the former to teach the latter. For example, if for each broom there is a support preventing it from touching the floor and being damaged, the child will learn right away to put it like that; if there is a special hook for every used dishcloth, so that the wet ones are hung in the proper place, the child will become interested in this order and learn it.

Exercises of Practical Life

There should be exercises of practical life for all the children progressing according to age from simple to difficult to complex. Every teacher must study to decide which exercises of practical life are interesting and possible in her environment and make a list of them; because whereas the other material is already determined, the exercises of practical life are not. These

vary according to the environment but always remain a very important part of the work for they substitute the formal gymnastics of the other educational methods. So they must be interesting and sufficiently challenging.

The exercises of practical life should be done when they are necessary, regardless of the time, and not according to a fixed schedule. For example, the children should wash their hands when they are dirty, sweep the floor when there is something to sweep, etc. Many will object that, if allowed, the children will do nothing but exercises of practical life and drawing. This is not true and if it does happen, it is only because the teacher has not been able to present her material in an interesting way or because the exercises she has given to the children are either too easy or too difficult. The teacher should not correct this by forbidding the exercises or by allowing them only during a certain time of the day, but she must allow the children to complete those tasks that they are attracted to also during the whole day, if they wish to do so; she must merely make the other work so interesting that the children do not want to dedicate themselves exclusively to one thing. Still, the teacher should not panic if the children throw themselves wholeheartedly into a certain task: that is what we call an explosion and this continuous dedication to a specific exercise, if concentrated and thus spontaneous, always leads to excellent results. The teacher should know very well how to present the exercise of practical life to the children: remembering that she must teach it with absolute clarity in every detail, but then leave the child free to master it; she should not correct the child even if he does it wrong. What is important is that he does it by himself, without a word, without the help, without a look from the teacher.

She must give her lesson, plant the seed and then disappear; observing and waiting, but not touching.

Intervention of the teacher

Many teachers interfere in order to restrain, advise or praise the children when they should not, and instead refrain from intervening when it is necessary. The teacher should never intervene in an action when the impulse prompting it is good, neither with her approval nor with her help nor with a lesson or correction. She can destroy the good impulse of the children by intervening; or at least her intervention will cause the real "ego" of the child to withdraw within himself as a snail into its shell. I shall give some examples to illustrate this fact:

- a) A child runs to meet a person and embraces him affectionately but awkwardly. If the teacher chooses that instant to correct the child and teach him how to greet someone, he will feel hurt or at least embarrassed and, until he has forgotten this nasty experience, he will not want to greet someone anymore and may never be able to do so with ease. If the teacher realises instead that she has not taught the child how to do it well, she will prepare an amusing and lively lesson on the various ways of greeting people and a few days later teach this lesson to the child. He will not feel offended, learning with pleasure how to greet a person politely without losing his affectionate enthusiasm.
- b) A child tries to wash a small table: not knowing how to do it, he does it wrong. The teacher uses this opportunity to teach him how to do it right. The child loses interest; looking about, he scrubs the table top once or twice and then leaves it. If the teacher had waited, the child himself might have discovered how to scrub the table and he would have improved his action. In any case, the teacher should have chosen another moment to give

him a lesson: waiting for an opportunity when she would not run the risk of destroying a good impulse.

- c) A child has recently begun school: he is small and very shy. So far he has remained motionless, looking about, not interested in anything. Today, he gets up and very slowly, almost trying to hide himself, goes to fetch his first piece of material. The teacher sees it, full of joy she walks up to him and encourages him with a few words. The child feels caught, mortified and almost just as frightened of the approval as he would have felt of a reprimand. He blushes, returns fretfully to his table, puts the material down and stays there without using it. Perhaps the child will not do anything for a month and remain seated, looking about, even more unhappy and shy than before.
- d) A violent and rude child behaves gently towards another child. If the teacher, having noticed this, shows him her approval and encourages him to continue in this way, the child will feel almost ashamed of his first sign of kindness (which to him may seem weakness) and will do anything to repress and hide it, becoming more rude than before. If the teacher instead pretends not to have noticed, the child will feel a real pleasure in performing these small unnoticed kindnesses and will develop this quality with the exercise.

The teacher must intervene and reprimand the children whenever they do something rude or careless that has no good impulse and does not lead to perfection; for instance, when they:

- pass in front of a person without asking permission;
- drag their chairs instead of carrying them;
- slam the doors;
- throw paper on the floor instead of in the wastepaper basket;
- do not clear the table when they have finished their work.

The teacher should never let one of these actions go unnoticed. She must immediately say to the child, but in a way that only he can hear, "When you pass in front of a person, you should ask permission" or, "The chairs are carried in this way." These things are taught in collective lessons to small groups, particularly to the young children.

The teacher should intervene before, not after, the disorder has occurred. She should, therefore, reprimand those acts that are useless, even if they are not disordered, because these acts are the ones that lead to disorder. For example, two children are joking together. If the teacher does not intervene and turn their attention towards something interesting and intelligent, after a few minutes other children will join in, creating a great disorder. Or, instead of washing his hands, a child is playing with the water. If the teacher does not intervene, the child will start to splash water to the other children, who in turn will imitate him in this play, creating havoc in the classroom.

I have observed these things, one here, one there, on different occasions and with different people. These suggestions have always brought a great improvement in the classroom. With great wonder some teachers have told me that they would never have imagined that a thing so small could have had an effect so great. But as a matter of fact the small details change a mediocre piece of work into a masterpiece.

Maria Montessori

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