

The Child, the Adult and the Prepared Environment

By P. Donohue Shortridge

The task of each human is to fully develop himself. To begin to actualize this lifelong endeavor, the child first seeks grounding in his body, in the environment and in reality. Additionally, the child seeks out respectful, sensitive adults who will accompany him through his formative years. These sensitive adults offer the world to the child in small, manageable chunks that balance the child's need for emotional and physical safety with his impulse to explore. Hopefully, these foundations are present in the family setting.

Ideally then, the Montessori prepared environment is another place where the child will find conditions ideally suited to his cognitive, physical, emotional and spiritual development. It is here that the child will come to know himself and others in an environment expressly designed for his life. In other words, the purpose of the Montessori prepared environment is to offer an ideal setting where the child's life can flourish.

Children are born equipped to follow their unique developmental path. Their natural impulse to know the world drives them to learn, each developmental milestone mastered in its own time. The child feels safe in the Montessori prepared environment because his needs are met respectfully and faithfully. From this safe

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base, the child becomes confident in himself enough to explore ever more widely. The adult's respectful approach of positive guidance or discipline fosters in the child an internal locus of control. The child learns that he is capable, that he can contribute in a meaningful way and that he can influence what happens to him.

If it is the child's job to construct the adult he is to uniquely become, then it is incumbent upon the adult to facilitate that growth rather than to impose her own will on him. The Montessori adult willingly relinquishes her own agenda for the child and instead learns from him what he needs next from the adult and from the environment and faithfully provides it. Fundamentally,

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the adult removes external obstacles to the child's learning which are ironically often precipitated by the adults themselves.

The adult models grace, self love and a sense of wonder about the world. She guides the child in his quest to make sense out of everyday experiences. She breathes life into the words she speaks, she moves slowly and gracefully at a pace that puts the child at ease. She is confident that the child will reveal his true nature given the appropriate mix of a carefully prepared developmentally appropriate environment and an insightful adult, keenly aware of herself and of the young person she guides.

My experience has shown me that the extent to which the adults do this, is the extent to which children thrive.

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fostering the authentic life of children and their families in the American culture