

Will and Obedience

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Will and obedience are two concepts that we generally think of as being oppositional. We seem to believe that the act of obeying someone else, a child is not exercising his own will. If the child is coerced into compliance, then it is true that he is not exercising his will, as his opportunity to choose has been taken away. The ability and willingness to comply with the request of another person freely, however is vastly different. The will to obey another's request or command is a direct function of the child's will. "Will and obedience then go hand in hand, inasmuch as the will is a prior foundation in the order of development, and obedience is a later stage resting on this foundation" (Montessori, 1995, p. 256).

That being said, we must explore the foundation, the development of the will, before we explore that of obedience. In the very young child, the force that drives him to move, explore, and interact with his environment is that of the *horme*. The *horme* is an unconscious power, of which Dr. Montessori refers to as "the force of life itself in the process of evolution" (1995, p. 252). The will must be developed by the child, and is a conscious power that the child must learn to control or manage as he grows.

The development of the will relies on the interplay of two forces of life; impulse and inhibition. At first the child functions under the power of the *horme*, which is a vital impulse that the child cannot resist. It draws him to explore the world. The development of the will comes when the child is met with the necessity to inhibit his impulses:

The will's development is a slow process that evolves through a continuous activity in relationship with the environment. The child chooses a task and must then inhibit his impulses toward extraneous movements. An inner formation of the will is gradually developed through this adaptation of the limits of a chose task. Decision and action then are the basis for the will's development (Lillard, 1972, p. 40).

What then, is the process of construction of this powerful will within the child? Choice! The child's freedom to choose is the key to the development of the will. This is why Dr. Montessori states that "free choice is the highest of all the mental processes. Only the child deeply aware of his need for practice and for the development of his spiritual life, can really be said to choose freely" (1995, p. 271). The first step to developing the will is the freedom to choose. In the Children's House the children exercise their freedoms to choose their work, the space within which to do it, and are able to engage in as much repetition of the work as they desire. This repetition brings the child's mind and body into alignment, and creates within the child a sense of power and achievement, where he "act's consciously and voluntarily, and with this comes an awakening of his spirit" (Montessori, 1995, 253). The silence game is one way that the children exercise their wills in the Children's House. The ability to manage their bodies, by sitting still and quiet, is an exercise in the will's ability to inhibit the impulses that the children are driven by. To actively inhibit these impulses builds the will of the child. It is important to remember that the child is an active being, and therefore needs to be active in order to develop. The cultivation of the will must happen through the channels of activity, born of choice.

Now the child is in a position where he "begins to spontaneously choose self-discipline as a way of life. He makes this choice for his own liberation as a person" (Lillard, 1972, p. 41). One very important thing to remember here is the will of the child can be broken. As adults, we must not impose our will over that of the child. Dr. Montessori points out that "Conscious will is a power which develops with use and

activity. We must aim at cultivating the will, not breaking it. The will can be broken in a moment. its development is a slow process that evolves through a continuous activity in relationship with the environment” (1995, p. 254). Continuous activity is the key to developing the will.

Here, the education of the child relies on the alignment of the mind and body, which begins right away in the Children’s House through the activities of Practical Life. The mind consists of the intelligence and the will. The will has been discussed in detail already. The intelligence comes from the presentations given to the child by the guide. The child is given the knowledge of how to complete a task, and, through the analysis of movement, the child learns how to handle the materials. The body consists primarily of the coordination of movement. Movement takes place through the purposeful work that the children do on a daily basis. The materials are designed to draw the child’s interest, thereby engaging the child and creating the opportunity for repetition of activity. Repetition of work builds perseverance, which helps the child to create his inner order, while bringing the mind and body into alignment. This leads to the normalization of the child.

Now the child is ready to self-educate. The child has the ability to select materials to work with, and with the development of the will, is ready to engage more intellectually challenging materials. This is done by creating within each of the materials a control of error. If the work has not been done correctly, it should be obvious to the child that an error has been made. For example, if a child is reinserting the cylinders into their blocks, and end up with a cylinder that does not fit into the remaining hole, then

clearly an error has been made. Now the child must analyze his work, and make the necessary corrections. The comparisons and judgements that are made during this process build the child up, and prepare him for a life of decisions yet to be made.

So, what then is obedience? Obedience in the Montessori context refers to the ability to act in accordance with the will of another person as a choice, free of coercion. Coerced obedience is the imposition of the adult's will over that of the child. We are seeking the development of the will to a point of such refinement, that the child willingly complies to the requests of another person. Dr. Montessori states it thusly:

When people have fully developed their own powers of volition and then freely chosen to follow another person's orders, we have something very different. This kind of obedience is a form of homage, a recognition of superiority, and the teacher who receives it from her children may well feel complimented (1995, p. 256).

As stated earlier, obedience rests upon the foundation of the will.

Dr. Montessori recognized three levels of the development of obedience. The first level begins at the child's birth. The child is instinctual in nature at this stage, relying on the uninhibited impulses of the hormone to drive him. As the child's development unfolds, toward the age of 3, he may obey at times, and then not obey at others. This is due to the fact that the child has not yet completed the construction of his will. The ability to obey at this stage only occurs if the request given falls parallel to the natural urges and impulses that govern the child's actions. The only obedience that the child is able to undertake in this stage is the obedience to these unconscious forces of the hormone. The first stage of obedience then, Dr. Montessori says, is "a period in which obedience and disobedience seem to be combined" (1995, p. 260).

The second level of obedience “is when the child can always obey, or rather, when there are no longer any obstacles deriving from his lack of control. His powers are now consolidated and can be directed not only by his own will, but by the will of another” (Montessori, 1995, p. 260). At this stage, the intellect and movements of the body are unified, and under control of the child’s conscious will. Obstacles have been removed from his path, and he is now able to comply with any request, through the power of his will.

The third stage of obedience, then is when a child anticipates requests, and responds generously and joyfully. Dr. Montessori makes an analogy here to that of the obedient dog and his master. She writes:

On another plane, it resembles, perhaps, the instinct of the dog who loves his master, and gives effect to his will by obedience. He gazes intently at the ball his master shows him, and when this is thrown to a distance, runs for it and brings it back triumphantly. Then he waits for the next order. He longs to be given orders, and runs joyfully to obey them, wagging his tail. The child’s third level of obedience is not unlike this. Certain it is that he obeys with astonishing readiness, and seems anxious to do so (1995, pp. 260-261).

Here, active fetching games, such as that of the oral noun game, will take place with great joy. The anticipation of the child is strong that phrases must be worded in a careful order. If the child hears “put things away” followed by “before you go home,” the anticipation is so strong that the clean up has begun before the second part of the phrase is even assimilated. It is important to understand the unfolding of this development of

obedience, as it must come after the establishment of the conscious will. Ignorance of its processes will lead to frustration towards children that are non-compliant, even though it is likely that they lack the ability to comply. If they do lack the ability, how can their scolding be justified? Such a scolding will only act as a barrier, and create the opposite effect of the one that is desired.

Children that are new to the prepared environment may demonstrate deviations. They are generally one of three types. The first that is that of the overly compliant child, who is quiet and only does what is asked of him. He is easy to manage, and does not disrupt...seemingly well behaved and compliant. However, he is compliant because he is unable to choose freely, as he has not yet learned how, due to the fact that his will has yet to be developed. Without the conscious will, the child will not be able to function “normally” in the prepared environment. Another deviation is that of the disorderly and disruptive child. This is where the child’s will has been broken, as a result of its being imposed upon by that of the adults in his world. Dr. Montessori states that “the real facts of the situation are that the will does not lead to disorder and violence. These are signs of emotional disturbance and suffering. Under proper conditions, the will is a force which impels activities beneficial to life” (1995, p. 253). The third type of deviation is that of the inhibited child. The inhibited child is fearful, timid, uneasy, and unhappy. The resolution for these deviations is that of purposeful work. The key is to find the materials that will create interest in the child, and lead to spontaneous repetition. This will lead the child down the path of the development of his will, development of obedience, and

toward normalization. Dr. Montessori notes the characteristics that will be present once the child has completed this path to obedience:

- Note if the child responds to the summons when he is called.
- Note if and when the child begins to take part in the work of others with an intelligent effort.
- Note when obedience to a summons becomes regular.
- Note when obedience to orders becomes established.
- Note when the child obeys eagerly and joyously.
- Note the relation of the various phenomena of obedience in their degrees.
 - To the development of work;
 - To the changes of conduct (Lillard, 1972, p. 82).

With regard to will, obedience, and the community, obedience is what makes community possible. Obedience becomes a problem when it is “blind.” Blind obedience leads to men to follow foolish ideas and corrupt notions. In order for obedience to function clearly and correctly, it must be accompanied by knowledge. This ties together will, obedience, freedom and discipline, and needs and tendencies, into something that might resemble a woven blanket called normalization, keeping warm the society that embraces it. What an excellent working parallel to the democracy that we strive for in this country. Educated obedience within the community, built upon the alignment of the intellect and the body, directed by the development of the will.

What this all boils down to, then, is a brief description of what a good environment manager must be. Dr. Montessori states that a “good manager does not have to be assertive in manner, but he must have a deep sense of responsibility” (1995, p. 262). Responsibility to the purpose of the construction of the children, a will in balance, managing impulse and inhibition effectively.

References

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