

The Development of Independence

“ Never help a child with a task at which he feels he can succeed.” ~ Maria Montessori

I am often asked questions regarding children's independence. Questions such as, “When does the child need to begin to do things by himself?” Maria Montessori states that this process starts at the very beginning of life, from the moment he is capable of doing things. So often at home and in the classroom we see a child showing his natural urge to be independent sometimes by saying, “I can do it by myself.” This is the greatest gift you can give. We do this by creating and providing him with things which may HELP him do it by himself. Independence is a matter of extreme importance to the child and all efforts of growth are put forth to acquire this. In order to grow and develop, the child must be able to function by himself. This will set a pattern for good work habits, a sense of responsibility and will help children learn, think and discover for themselves.

How do we define and support the effort of independence? We as teachers and parents can support the effort of independence by giving children practical life skills, so as to further a child's independence and never forget that doing more for the child than they need can hinder their growth towards independence. We all need each other but it is also in the child's human nature to be independent. Montessori called this a “divine urge,” that stimulates the child to self-activity to perform actions that promote growth, which will indefinitely lead to further development and independence. Independence is not given, it is developed. We know it is a capacity achieved by an individual. Independence is built on specific abilities and every new ability makes new levels of independence possible. Once a child masters something it leads to something else, this goes on and on forever. Montessori realized that the appropriate adult intervention is needed at certain times but should decrease steadily as children learn how to do things for themselves. How does independence develop? Independence develops when the child has the liberty and freedom to act and learn within a structured and prepared environment. This prepared environment has Montessori materials, opportunities, and occasions for children to interact with the materials in an educative way. The psychical environment itself models independence, everything is available and child size.

We as guides also help independence develop by modeling this behavior and supporting the other children to model this as well. We model independence by giving the children space to figure things out on their own. We allow them to move and interact freely within the classroom and give them the freedom to select work that captures their own interest, rather than participating in teacher selected projects. If we do decide to intervene and give a lesson or presentation to an individual child that presentation comes with the confidence of, “now you can

do it.” We can’t give independence, we give the liberty to act and acquire the skills to become independent. Each child is treated as a unique and individual learner and we provide the tools to develop these skills. These skills are necessary for true freedom.

To some this may seem like a bit of a paradox, even though the child seems like he is at his weakest and most vulnerable stage of life this is when it is the most important time to help foster independence. We want to create a relationship based on love and respect –not dependence. We can and will become an obstacle if we don’t stop interfering. We may not even be realizing that we are doing this at times because we love our children and we want to take care of them. As the caretaker our success means that this child is independent and does not need us. This is a fine tuned balancing act between taking care and releasing at the same time. We provide only the assistance that is necessary, just enough at the right time.

Our first commitment is, “I am going to meet your needs until you can meet them yourself.” From a practical standpoint, say a child is having a hard time choosing his work for that day. I will help him meet this need and make suggestions for that day. I will continue to do this only until he can do this himself. The second part of this commitment will be to help the child develop the skills that they need to “meet his needs himself.” You should always be asking yourself, “How can I help that child develop skills to choose his own work.” We can give suggestions and have our own strategies as to how we do this. For example, going to each activity or object on the shelves and touching them—we support how to help. The third part is to keep the children safe while they develop these skills. If we know it won’t work we “re-direct.” We devote ourselves to keeping the children developmentally safe, psychologically safe and psychically safe.

The fourth part is we will assist in the development of an individual who does not need us. For example, if a student asks for help in wood polishing and we know they can do it alone we simply reply, “you can do polishing without me.” It is a choice, the children will always need us but we must prepare this environment and create a relationship that is tempered by love, compassion and respect. This is constantly changing and once something is mastered we must adapt and respond to this. We must always be aware of our adult energies. We can either support or thwart the child’s independence.

Success in our classrooms is tied to the degree in which children believe that they are capable and independent human beings. We do not abandon the child, that is not liberty. We must remember that our belief is that we are all born to work, it is our natural drive. We are constantly looking for the window, for the interest the child will surely show us and always have the intention– “I am going to help you WANT to do it.” The goal of independence and true freedom is to help the child fall in love with the process of focusing his complete attention on something and solving that activity regardless of the level of difficulty with enthusiasm and joy.

Independence leads to empowerment on all emotional and social levels as well as creating confidence in the child's ability for anything in life.

<http://meadmontessorischool.com/development-independence/>

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