



Polishing the Penny

By Matt Bronsil

Polishing is a fantastic example of a Montessori activity that I can personally relate to from a young child's perspective. When I was 5, there was a penny-polishing activity in my Montessori classroom that I chose every day. One morning, walking into the classroom, I went straight to the Practical Life shelf, only to find that there was a different activity where the penny-polishing work always sat. It was gone!

I asked my teacher where it was. She said she had put it away because she had no more pennies that needed to be shined. (I had shined them all!) I walked away, but she knew I needed that activity. Almost immediately, she said, "Wait a minute." She went to other faculty in the building and came back with pennies for me to shine.

I vividly remember that day. I put on an apron and sat down. I opened the lid and placed it carefully on the tray. I took a Q-tip, dipped it in the polish, and began polishing the penny. After I had scrubbed and covered the penny with polish, I set the Q-tip down and began wiping off the excess polish. The shine emerged. I had created that shine!

It would be incorrect to assume this ritual I performed was simply a way for me to polish pennies. It would also be incorrect to assume it was just a way for me to relax. It was both, but it also engendered a stronger, calmer frame of mind for the rest of the morning.

In Montessori environments, a child selects a material, takes it to a table or rug, works with it, and puts it away just as he found it, so it is ready for the next child. This is called a complete cycle of work. Throughout the long

work period, this process happens many times. I engage in a work cycle when I work with a Math material, or with the movable alphabet or sandpaper letters. I repeat a cycle of work again when I work with the puzzle maps. This happens in every curricular area, but the process becomes strongest in the Practical Life area, where the child works with activities that reflect common, everyday activities in his or her culture and have clear, specific steps.

Performing the ritual of polishing pennies (as with many other Practical Life activities) allows the child to relax, to focus on a process with a clear, concrete outcome, and to experience a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. Several years ago, I visited a classroom that had very few Practical Life activities. The teacher was trying her hardest to get the students interested in math and writing, but her exhortations did not help much. I suggested she refresh the Practical Life area. She did, and students chose work from this area almost immediately. After a few activities, they explored the rest of the room and quickly became genuinely interested in the Math and Language materials.

We all want our children to succeed in school. If you came to my school and asked me what children do in a Montessori classroom, the last thing you'd probably want to hear is, "I'm sure we can find some pennies for your son or daughter to polish." Let me assure you, though, that these activities are the key to a successful classroom. If your child seems uninterested in work in the Math and Language areas, at the next parent-teacher conference, maybe you should ask, "Are you sure he (or she) has been doing enough polishing?"

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