



The Development of Cooperation: Realistic Expectations for Young Children

As parents and caregivers, we often find ourselves guiding children through behaviors that seem to challenge expectations or "rules." A common scenario might involve repeatedly asking a child to do—or stop doing—something, only to find them back at it moments later. For instance, you may ask a child to stop climbing on furniture, only for them to climb again, or you might repeatedly remind them to put on their shoes, only to see them get distracted and wander off. How should we interpret these actions?

In the Montessori philosophy, we take a different approach to understanding what might traditionally be seen as "disobedience." Dr. Maria Montessori observed that children's ability to understand and follow instructions develops in stages. She believed that young children are not capable of behaving in the way we typically expect of older children or adults when it comes to rules and instructions.

The Three Stages of Developing Cooperation

- 1. The First Stage: Under Three Years** In the earliest stage of development, particularly for children under three, actions are often driven by the child's internal developmental needs. These needs, such as the urge to climb, explore, or manipulate objects, often override the ability to follow external instructions. For example, a toddler who is learning to climb may be so focused on developing this new skill that they cannot stop themselves, even when asked. At this stage, the child's brain is still developing the ability to regulate impulses and make decisions.

Additionally, children in this age range may understand instructions in one context (e.g., "This is a cup for drinking") but may struggle to apply that knowledge in a new situation (e.g., at a restaurant, they might be confused about what the cup is for). This inconsistency is completely normal and reflects the child's developing cognitive abilities.

- 2. The Second Stage: Ages Three to Six** Between the ages of three and six, children begin to gain more experience with the world and can understand instructions more clearly. However, their internal developmental drives often still take precedence over their ability to consistently follow rules. For instance, they may understand that drawing on the wall or cutting their hair with scissors is not allowed, but they can become so engrossed in an activity that they forget or ignore the rules.

Montessori referred to this stage as one of developing "willpower," where the child is learning to balance their internal drives with external expectations. A child might be able to repeat rules or instructions, but in the heat of the moment, they may not yet have the capacity to apply them consistently. This process of developing impulse control continues until around age six or seven, when children enter what is known as the "age of reason."

3. **The Third Stage: Ages Six and Beyond** Once children reach the "age of reason" (around age six or seven), they begin to internalize social norms and expectations. At this stage, children are much more capable of choosing to cooperate, even when faced with distractions or challenges. However, just like adults, children can still struggle to maintain consistent self-control, especially when they are tired, stressed, or overwhelmed by strong emotions.

While they are now better able to follow instructions and manage impulses, occasional lapses in cooperation may still occur, particularly during moments of emotional intensity. At this stage, children are continuing to learn how to balance their emotions and impulses with the needs of the social environment around them.

How to Support Cooperation in a Developmentally Appropriate Way

Understanding these stages allows us to respond to children's behavior in a way that aligns with their developmental needs and supports their growth. Here are some practical strategies to guide young children:

1. **Prepare the Environment** One of the best ways to reduce instances where you need to give instructions is to create an environment that supports exploration and independence. In Montessori, we often talk about creating a "Yes Room"—a space where your child can engage in activities safely and independently, without constant reminders to stop. By allowing your child to explore freely within a safe environment, they are less likely to engage in behaviors that require redirection.
2. **Use Simple, Clear Instructions** When you do give directions, keep them clear, simple, and manageable. For example, instead of asking a toddler to carry several items to the dishwasher, ask them to carry just one item, like their spoon. Say, "Please carry your spoon to the dishwasher," and stay nearby to offer guidance if necessary. If they get distracted, you can gently refocus them with a simple reminder: "Let's finish putting the spoon in the dishwasher."

3. **Start Small and Follow Through** Begin with small, manageable tasks, and stay close to your child to offer guidance and support. If you ask your child to put away one toy, ensure they follow through before moving on to another task. If needed, offer help, but aim to allow your child to do as much as possible on their own. Follow through is key—this helps children practice completing tasks and builds their confidence in their abilities.
4. **Model and Reinforce Desired Behaviors** Children learn by observing the behaviors of the adults around them. Whenever possible, model the behaviors you want to see. For instance, if you'd like your child to help with household tasks, demonstrate how to do them calmly and with focus. Consistently showing the desired behavior and reinforcing it with positive feedback will help your child internalize these actions over time.
5. **Be Patient and Flexible** It's essential to remember that learning to cooperate is a gradual developmental process. If your child struggles with following instructions, it's okay to step back and try again later. If you're feeling frustrated, take a break and return to the task when you're feeling calmer. Children are sensitive to the emotional tone of the adults around them, so remaining calm and patient helps them feel secure and more able to learn.

Conclusion: The Role of Warmth and Patience

Ultimately, the key to guiding children through the process of learning to cooperate is a warm, patient, and understanding relationship. By respecting the child's developmental needs and offering support in ways that align with their current abilities, we help them build the internal structures they need to navigate the world independently. With time, practice, and a nurturing environment, children will gradually develop the capacity to internalize social norms and make responsible choices.

Your child is learning, growing, and developing at their own pace. Trust the process, celebrate their progress, and remember that they are doing their very best to make sense of the world around them!