



COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN

ENCOURAGING APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR

The goal of a Montessori education is to develop children who have internal discipline. Children should learn how to make the right choices themselves, free from external control. Although it is much more difficult, teaching children to consistently use appropriate behaviors will have long-term benefits for both the child and the family. Therefore, we constantly model appropriate behavior and allow children the freedom to learn from their mistakes. Consequences should never be a punishment; rather, each moment should be seen as a learning opportunity for the child. Children best learn appropriate behavior through natural and logical consequences. Following are some guidelines for encouraging appropriate behavior:

When to Intervene:

It is seldom necessary to intervene. If you see a misbehavior, do the following BEFORE intervening:

1. Make sure that the child is not engaged in purposeful activity—this should NEVER be interrupted
2. Observe for a few moments to get a clear picture of what is happening—never jump to any conclusions about a child or a situation (a child who is climbing on the kitchen counter may be trying to get a glass of water)
3. Think about how you are going to address the situation before intervening
4. Decide if the behavior needs to be addressed right away or can be handled with a later grace and courtesy lesson
5. Never enter into a power struggle
6. Always intervene if a child is harming another person or exhibiting destructive behavior

How to Intervene:

1. Observe and think about how you will address the situation
2. Quietly approach the child(ren)—never yell
3. Most of the time, you can redirect a child without having to address the misbehavior. This can then be addressed in a neutral moment
4. Children need the freedom to resolve conflicts on their own time—if you force a child to deal with an issue when he/she is not ready, it will result in a power struggle
5. Resolve any issues as quickly and with as little adult intervention as possible

Following Through:

1. If you choose to intervene, you MUST follow-through
2. Without your follow-through, you have abandoned the children in a tense situation
3. Remember that each interaction with a child is a learning opportunity for that child
4. Never tell a child that you expect something of him/her unless you are willing to follow through and make sure that this happens
5. Following through does not necessarily mean you are staying with the child—sometimes it is best to give the child the freedom to make the right choice on his/her own schedule and observe from a distance

EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE TO USE WITH CHILDREN

Utilize Enforceable Statements

Use language to help children avoid getting stuck in the moment.

- “We can eat breakfast *after* you put on your socks.”
- “I can’t wait for you to clean up this puzzle! Come find me when you are done and we can read a book.”

Frame Expectations Using Positive Language

Negative language such as “no” or “don’t” invites a power struggle; instead, use language to describe what you want the child to do.

- “Please be gentle with our plants” instead of “Don’t pull off those leaves.”
- “You may...” instead of “you have to...”
- “Stop” instead of “No”

Explain the Expectation

It is easy to mistake a child's lack of cooperation for misbehavior when it can often be a simple misunderstanding of the expectation.

- “It is important to brush your teeth every day to keep them healthy and strong. Bacteria that stays in the mouth can cause cavities.”

Be Willing to Compromise

Model graciousness by being willing to listen to your child, compromise, and collaborate to reach a common goal.

- “I would be happy to help you put away your train. How about I put away the tracks while you put away the cars?”
- “I understand that you want to wear that summery dress to school. How about you put a sweater on top since it is chilly today?”

State the Expectation as a Matter of Fact

Stating rules as a general fact of life can help you to avoid a power struggle.

- “Glasses are not for throwing—balls are!”
- “Crayons are for coloring on paper, not the walls.”

Use “I” Instead of “You” Statements

Giving direct orders can set the stage for a power struggle. Instead, use I statements to define your parental role.

- “I can’t let you hit your brother, take off your seatbelt, eat 10 donuts, etc.”

Offer a Choice

Giving children a choice between two acceptable outcomes gives them sense of power.

- “Would you like to brush your teeth or take a bath first tonight?”

Redirect the Behavior to an Acceptable Outlet

Observe your child to determine the purpose for his misbehavior can help you redirect him to a more appropriate activity.

- “I can see that you want to dump out water. Why don't you help me water the plants!”

Describe Your Own Feelings

Help children recognize that their behaviors can affect others by describing your own needs and feelings.

- “I feel disappointed that we didn't get to go on a walk after dinner tonight. Tomorrow I hope we can clean up more quickly so we have time!”

Define the Positive Behavior

It is more effective to highlight a child's positive behavior than it is to attempt to correct negative behavior.

- “I noticed how carefully you were playing with your sister.”
- “You put away your dishes without me asking you! That is what I call being responsible.”
- “I can see that your body is calm! Now I am ready to read you a story.”

Remember the Power of Nonverbal Communication

It can be more effective to gently rest a hand on someone's arm when they are hitting than to say anything. Similarly, a smile of approval or serious look can hold a lot of weight.

Help Children Make Amends Instead of Simply Apologizing

Forcing a child to apologize sends the unintentional message that they can right a behavior by simply saying “sorry”. There are many opportunities for making amends that involve a more genuine show of concern: getting someone an ice pack, telling them you won't do that again, giving someone space, giving someone a hug. It is also appropriate to model an apology.

- “I am so sorry that you got pushed—I bet that really hurts!”
- “Ouch! It hurt Alicia when you bit her. Alicia, is there anything that you need to make you feel better?”

Take Ownership of Your Own Mistakes

Children learn best by watching us! When you are willing to take ownership for losing your temper, not listening, interrupting, etc. your child learns that it is normal to make mistakes.

- “I am sorry that I used such a big voice! I was frustrated that we were running late. Next time I will try to remember to give you a little more notice so that you have time to put on your coat by yourself.”

Choose Your Battles

Some battles just aren't worth it. Remember that there are very few things you can force a child to do, and be willing to let things go. Often natural consequences are more meaningful than something enforced by an adult (a hungry child who threw his food on the floor, wet pants from a child who didn't want to sit on the toilet). Don't set a limit unless you are willing to follow through.

BEHAVIOR AS A NORMAL PART OF DEVELOPMENT

The foremost thing to remember when dealing with young children is that the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for impulse control and rational thinking, is the last to develop (and is not fully formed until early adulthood). This means that young children often don't yet have the capacity for self-control that society so often unfairly expects of them.

During these first six years of life children are hardwired to test limits as part of their normal and natural development. What we often label as tantrums, power struggles, attention-seeking behaviors, etc. are nothing more than a normal and appropriate function of a child's developing brain. Children try on many different roles through the process of self-construction, trying out any number of negative words and actions with both their peer group and adults. It is through the experience of natural and logical consequences (when I scratched my friend he stopped playing with me, when I refused to clean up my toys we didn't have time to read books) that the child learns two valuable lessons: how the world reacts to his behavior and how he can begin self-regulating those strong waves of emotion.

Have Reasonable Expectations

It is important to consider the child's unique capabilities and temperament before setting an expectation. For example, an active toddler might be unable to sit at a restaurant for an hour and a half. Instead of feeling frustrated at the behavior we can check our own expectations and find a way for the child to be more successful in a difficult situation (going on a walk in the middle of dinner, bringing some special toys to engage the child, involving the child in the dinner conversations, etc.). Children too often are set up to hear the word "no" when we should instead be focused on providing outlets for their natural curiosity and developing independence.

Change Your Own Perspective

When we recognize that children are not manipulating us with their tantrums and challenging behaviors, but rather that these behaviors are a necessary and normal part of development, we can begin to shift our own perspective. Instead of seeing these situations as something to avoid or stop, we learn to value each moment as a learning opportunity.

Self-Regulation vs. External Control

Parents often see their children as a reflection of themselves, and as such can be frustrated or embarrassed by their negative behaviors. This can lead to the desire to control behaviors instead of welcoming the opportunity to model and teach self-regulation. External measures controlled by the adult such as sticker charts, bribes, rewards or punitive measures work in the short term but do not give the child the opportunity to build any skills for handling similar situations in the future. Although it can be initially more difficult, when we invest the time to communicate with our children we will reap the rewards many times over.

Reactions

We must recognize that we cannot control a child's words or actions; we can only control our own reactions. Instead of seeking to control or manipulate the situation, we strive to observe, empathize and understand. In doing so we can begin the process of helping the child learn to take ownership of his own actions and reactions.