



A Montessori Approach to Discipline

Montessori children tend to be incredibly independent with a strong sense of order. It is important to keep this in mind in our approach to discipline. In general, young children require consistency. This means that all adults in the home must have the same expectations and consequences. This also means that if we let a behavior go once, it is confusing to the child when the same behavior is deemed inappropriate. Oftentimes children test limits simply as an exploration, not necessarily because they are invested in the negative behavior. For example, a child who is demanding to have five more minutes to play with their toys doesn't necessarily want or need to continue playing. Instead, he or she is trying to figure out what makes the adult tick; why sometimes they have to stop immediately and other times the adult gives in. This is why it is so important to maintain the same limits every single time, even when it is inconvenient.

In general, it is best to try to avoid negative behaviors by recognizing your child's signs that he/she is about to lose control and attempting to redirect them. Some children require warnings in advance of transitions ("We are going to go outside soon. Why don't you finish looking at that book for a minute and then we will be ready"). Other children can be redirected by offering an alternate activity or two choices before they get upset (for example, if you know that getting ready for bed is a trigger, you might offer two fun choices first: "It's time for bed. Would you like to pick out a book to read before bed or would you rather sing a lullaby tonight?"). Many times you can circumvent a power struggle if you observe your child's triggers and take the steps to prevent any stressors.

In the event that a child loses control, it is important to be consistent in your approach. We recommend the following plan of attack for dealing with difficult behavior:

- 1) Do not overreact. No matter how you feel, speak in a calm and controlled voice. When a child is out of control, they need to see that the adult is **in control**.
- 2) State the behavior and the limit in a matter-of-fact tone: "I can see that you threw toys all over your room, and now your room is a mess. It is never ok to throw things."
- 3) Allow time for the child to calm down. Do not try to engage your child in conversation while he/she is irrational. This is not the time to have a conversation about his/her behavior or even the consequence. We talk about children's bodies not being calm a lot at school. It is easy to fall into the trap of giving a lot of attention for negative behaviors. When you do this, it reinforces that behavior. When we talk about ignoring a behavior, we do not mean ignoring the child. Rather, we might say, "I can see that your body is not calm. Would you like to sit in the kitchen or would you like me to hold your hand while you calm your body down?" If he/she is incapable of making a choice, you may have to choose for him/her: "Ok, I will hold your hand until you are calm enough to talk about this." If he/she chooses to take a break or spend some time alone, make sure that he/she is the one to tell you when he/she is calm. Many

people use time limits, which is an ineffective approach. Some children may be able to calm themselves in a matter of seconds while others may take much longer. Only your child will know when he/she has taken enough time to calm down.

- 4) Give a logical consequence. Using a generic consequence such as taking away a favorite toy is ineffective, as it is meaningless to the child. The consequence must be unique to the situation (e.g. "We can eat breakfast **after** you clean up this mess," "I can see that you are not ready to be with us in the kitchen; would you rather read a book in your room or stay in the living room while I prepare dinner?").
- 5) Follow through with whatever consequence you set. If you set the expectation that your child cleans up before breakfast, be prepared to stay firm even if it takes 45 minutes. If you don't have that kind of time, choose a consequence you are capable of following through with. Do not engage him/her with an argument; instead, repeat the expectation in simple terms over and over: "It's time to clean up. You may have breakfast when you have cleaned this mess" over and over **without any additional dialogue**.

When you make changes to the way that you discipline in your household, the first few days/weeks will be the toughest. Once your child learns that you have clear and consistent limits, he/she will feel less of a need to push the limits. Stick to it! It also helps to practice some calming skills (deep breaths, alone time) in a neutral moment.

Most attention-seeking behaviors can be avoided or minimized by providing extra positive attention. Montessori children love helping, so giving them special responsibilities every day is a wonderful way for them to have some independence at home. It also helps to really ramp up the positive attention. As a general rule, we also recommend that for each time you have to discipline your child, you should have told him/her at least 3 nice things. We give descriptive, meaningful praise ("When you washed the dishes, that was really helpful." "You were so responsible when you walked to the car without running." "I liked how gently you were playing with the dog.") The goal is for your child to learn that he/she can get lots of attention for positive behaviors and not much attention for negative behavior.