“For all the money that we spend on tuition, why does my child spend his day washing tables?”

THE LESSON In PRACTICAL LIFE SKILLS

by Tim Seldin, President of The Montessori Foundation

There is this wonderful photograph from the early years of this last century that captured a small child in a Montessori school carefully ladling soup into bowls for his fellow students' lunch. I'm sure that his parents wondered the same thing: “What has this got to do with helping children learn to read and write?”

The exercises in Practical Life are the very heart of the Montessori approach with young children. As they wash tables, pour liquids, polish silver, sweep and dust, they are developing an inner sense of order, concentration, coordination, and independence. It is through the process of caring for their environment, meeting their own needs and helping others, this process that we call the area of Practical Life, that Montessori children begin to learn how to learn.

The following excerpt from a description of a child's day in Montessori exemplifies what I mean.
The real object of Montessori education is not to teach children basic skills and knowledge; it is to create the foundation on which the child will construct the men and women they will become. Our goal is to lead children to self-discovery, self-mastery, and to nurture the fragile flame of their curiosity, creativity, and imagination. Ultimately, this helps them master the very process of learning, which is based on patience, observation, and the willingness to accept their own intelligence. This is an education of the heart and mind, as much as of the intellect.

The Montessori class for children between the ages of three and six is a community of children; a 'children's house' or casa. What Maria Montessori established was more than an elaborate kindergarten in which children learn to read and write. Montessori offers a social and emotional environment where children are respected and empowered as individual human beings. It is an extended family, a community in which children truly belong and take care of one another.

Within this safe and empowering community, young children learn to believe in themselves and their abilities. In an atmosphere of independence within community and personal empowerment, they never lose their sense of curiosity and innate ability to learn and discover. Confident in themselves, they find that mistakes are not something to be feared but rather the opportunity to learn from experience.

As a child, I attended the Barrie School, the school founded by my mother in 1932. Later I returned to teach and eventually served as Barrie's Headmaster for 22 years. As a young child, I remember going to school so early on frosty mornings that it was still dark outside, stopping first by the school kitchen to pick up some toast and fruit as a morning snack. The school always kept food and drink on hand. We helped ourselves with a little assistance from the big kids, even when we were very small. As we grew bigger, so did our contribution to the life of the school. For example, in those days, Barrie had several hundred children to feed from age two through eighteen and no paper plates and cups to make the job easier. The food was prepared in our kitchen the old-fashioned way, and older kids actually volunteered to work in the kitchen. I remember hundreds of mornings before school began spent with maintenance crew, secretaries, school nurse, and stable hands, just as we did with our teachers. They were part of our family, and we learned countless lessons from each one. Those men and women will always be with me. And to this day, I actually take pleasure in doing the dishes.

The Montessori classroom for three-, four-, and five-year-olds is designed to be a 'children's house.' The children are encouraged and delighted to participate fully in the actual life of the little community. They help to prepare snacks and meals, clean the environment, and maintain things. In this way, they develop not only muscular control and simple competency
The essence of independence is to be able to do something for one's self.

—Maria Montessori

LEARNING THE SKILLS OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN AN ATMOSPHERE OF KINDNESS, COMMUNITY, AND RESPECT

Success in school is directly tied to the degree to which children believe that they are capable and independent human beings. If they knew the words, even very young children would ask: “Help me learn to do it myself!”

As we allow students to develop a meaningful degree of independence and self-discipline, we also set a pattern for a lifetime of good work habits and a sense of responsibility. In Montessori, students are taught to take pride in their work.

Independence does not come automatically as we grow older; it must be learned. In Montessori, even very small children learn to tie their own shoes and pour their own milk. To experience this kind of success so young leads children to grow up with an uncanny sense of self-confidence.

As they get older, Montessori students learn all sorts of everyday living skills, such as using computers on their own, household cleaning skills, cooking, sewing, first aid, and balancing a checkbook. They plan parties, learn how to decorate a room, arrange flowers, garden, and do simple household repairs. Montessori builds many opportunities into the curriculum for students to gain hands-on experience.

In a very real sense, Montessori children are responsible for the care of this child-sized environment, which is why Dr. Montessori called it a ‘Children's House/or Community.’ They sweep, dust, and wash mirrors and windows.

When the children are hungry, they prepare their own snack. They pour themselves a drink from a little pitcher that is just right for their small hands. They set tables, polish silver, and steadily grow in their self-confidence and independence. When finished, they clean up and wash their dishes. When something spills, they help each other carefully clean things up. In Montessori classrooms, you’ll find small children cutting raw fruit and vegetables.

Young children work with the Dressing Frames to master the dressing skills that classically challenge them as they begin to take their first steps toward independence: buttoning their clothes, working a zipper, tying their shoe laces, and so on.

To wash a table or chair, the student methodically gathers the bucket, little pitcher, sponge, scrub brush, towel and soap needed and proceeds to slowly and methodically scrub down a small table. When he is finished, he will return everything to its storage place.

The lessons in Practical Life skills do much more than help children learn to wash tables. The process helps them develop an inner sense of order, a greater sense of independence, and a higher ability to concentrate and follow a complex sequence of steps.

The ability to control one’s body, and to move carefully and gracefully around the room, often carrying things that must not be dropped, is an important aspect of the practical life lessons. The children walk along a line on the floor, heel to toe, carefully balancing while carrying small flags. They will do the same task while carrying things on trays or cups on saucers.

Learning how to work and play together with others in a peaceful and caring community is perhaps the most critical life skill that Montessori teaches. Montessori schools are intended to be close-knit communities of people living and learning together in an atmosphere of warmth, safety, kindness, and mutual respect. Teachers become mentors and friends. Students learn to value the different backgrounds and interests of their classmates.

Everyday kindness and courtesy are vital practical-life skills. Montessori students come to understand and accept that we all have responsibilities to other people. They learn how to handle the new situations that they will face as they become increasingly independent. Montessori students develop a clear sense of values and social conscience. Montessori consciously teaches students everyday ethics and interpersonal skills from the beginning. Even the youngest child is treated with dignity and respect.