

Montessori and Practical Life **Toddler, Preschool, and Kindergarten**

Dr Montessori tells us that

A child's work is to create the man he will become. An adult works to perfect the environment, but a child works to perfect himself.

Dr. Montessori continues by giving the illustration of a man and a boy by the sea on a hot day. The child clings to the shovel because only he can do the work he is doing. By constant repetition of the motions, he is strengthening his muscles, perfecting his coordination, and gaining confidence in a particular skill. No one tells the child that he has to shovel sand; he is guided by a direction deep within his own nature.

Dr. Montessori used this natural inclination of the child as a point of departure. She structured several classroom exercises (Practical Life) to help the child satisfy the need for meaningful activity. (Motive of activity)

Practical life exercises are those simple activities performed daily by adults in their environments to restore and maintain proper conditions. The adults' purpose for doing those daily tasks is purely conservative and utilitarian. The child carries out these same exercises because the child is attracted to them and they are constructive and developmental for the young child. Why are they constructive and developmental? The child, almost from the time of birth, enters this man-made and man-maintained environment and observes. She becomes extremely familiar with these activities. The child, at a very early age, shows a strong urge to associate herself with these activities. She shows great interest in the activities, tries to take part in them, and constantly offers to help.

So is the young child so strongly attracted to these exercises, especially since the adult performs these activities due to necessity rather than genuine interest? For the young child, these activities have a much more important and personal function. They are not only preservative and restorative; they are truly constructive. This is not in regard to the environment, but in the child himself. These simple daily activities are developmental and creative for the child. In this sense, we call them "exercises of practical life". When the child carries out these exercises, he is wholly emersed in the exercises. His mind is totally engaged.

Why does the child choose these practical life exercises? What is it that attracts a young child to these constructive and developmental exercises? There are many reasons. They are:

1. These practical life activities are easily understood from start to finish. They have a simple, clear, and concrete purpose.
2. They have visible movements. Even at an early age; the child is capable of performing them.
3. They give direction to the child's movements. The young child can intelligently understand the activity.
4. The exercises are an attractive invitation to the child's will. He is able to carry out the movements necessary to perform the activity according to his understanding of the "will purpose" of the exercise.
5. Because these movements are "willed" by the child, it helps the child toward greater skill and perfection.
6. This leads to a self-accepted discipline.
7. These exercises create a unity between the thought, the will, and the action of the child.

When we speak of the needs and tendency of man, we realize that these tendencies of man govern his development; therefore an education that is an "aide to life" must be related to the tendencies of man. These tendencies are order, exploration, orientation, manipulation, work, repetition, exactness, and perfection. These principles govern the formation of man. Practical life is the most satisfactory outlet for touching on all these necessary tendencies; therefore an environment must be prepared for the child to explore and develop coordinated movement, as well as self-control.

What are the purposes of the practical life exercises?

There are two main purposes of the practical life exercises. The first is the dignity of labor. This purpose is to combat the tendency to depart from manual labor present in society today. In the past, the child had an opportunity in the home to fold clothes, pour water, fetch, and sweep. As a result, children developed motor skills of grace and fluid movement at an early age. More importantly, children developed competent participation around the home and the rest of their environment. This brought the child, at an early age, the self-respect that comes from being a competent member of society. Today in our mechanized age, these opportunities are not present in the home. Children lack grace and motor control. Later, success in academic subjects is hindered due to poor neurological development including a lack of the ability to concentrate. The child is then labeled and sent for remedial help. Since it is clearly unrealistic to expect modern man to return to the village of the past, it is necessary to find some other means of providing basic motor training, and these are the exercises of practical life.

The second reason for the practical life exercises is to enable children to organize themselves as functional human beings. To do this we must begin by the time the child is two years old, primarily physical and primarily concerned with himself. We must help him to become master of himself and then he will be able to master other things.

We need to teach the child through physical needs, as he is not highly verbal at this age. Therefore we have exercises such as walking on the line, pouring water, and opening and closing a door, which increase the child's motor development and at the same time teaches him a basic skill. These exercises also free the child to be more independent.

These basic motor skills can be expanded into a multitude of complex and intricate exercises, including arts and crafts. More importantly, when the child is later taught a skill or an academic accomplishment, it becomes a part of him. He can then use this to relate to the world.

The child entering the classroom, his school environment in which he is to explore, should find activities that are familiar to him, such as those he sees around his home. In the prepared environment, the child of 18 months to 3 years and the child from 3 to 6 years old needs these activities that help him to adapt to his environment.

Therefore we have four distinct groups of exercises of practical life. They are:

1. care of the environment
2. care of self
3. movement
4. development of social relations

Care of the Environment

Materials involved in the practical life exercises are as attractive as possible. If the materials are most attractive, more detailed, and more defined, then these exercises can lead the child to an interest into other areas. For example, a brass lamp from India used for polishing, can lead to a lesson in geography. It is a starting point for culture and leads the child to further study.

The children are taught to respect the materials, to take good care of them, and to use them correctly.

Care of Self

The very young child has one main purpose, to construct himself. To build himself, the child has to learn how to take care of his person and then reach out into the environment. The task of the adult is to help the child develop independence. We can do this by seeing if he is able to dress himself, brush his teeth, etc.

Movement

A very important part of practical life is the movement exercises, which are subdivided into two categories; elementary movement and advanced movement.

Elementary movements come first, movements such as walking, standing, sitting, carrying, putting down, and picking up; all of these form part of the child's daily movements. These exercises are especially attractive to the child because he moves more in these exercises than in any other task. Montessori materials lead to greater motor analysis and a control of movement.

Advanced movement exercises are walking on the line and the silence game. Walking on the line should be performed daily. At first the children walk normally. Then, they are taught to keep a measurable distance from each other. Next, they walk tandem style, heel to toe, and later with an object in one hand and then with an object in each hand. The last exercise of walking in the line is carrying an object in each hand and then one on the head. This leads to a great degree of control for the child.

The silence game should also be performed daily, once introduced to the child. This is not an exercise for the beginning of the school year. It should be gradually introduced as the children gain greater control of themselves and their bodies

Social Relations

Greeting, offering, accepting, apologizing, thanking, etc. are all examples of social relations. Social behavior should be incorporated into the daily living exercises. Teaching grace and courtesy is a cornerstone of the practical life environment.

The Adult in the Environment

What is the adults' responsibility in the area of practical life exercises? For the children to function in practical life three things are necessary. These are:

1. **The attitude of the teacher.** The teacher must believe in what she is doing and her movements must manifest precision and care.
2. **The environment.** It should reflect the laws of nature, meaning everything is purposeful and should offer sufficient scope for the activities. The child should be used as the guide.
3. **The selection of practical life exercises** must follow a logical progression of degree of difficulty.

If the teacher follows these points, then we begin, through the practical life exercises, to do the following: aid the developmental growth of the child, help the child fulfill his biological needs, and aid in the harmonious development of mind and body.

During the presentation of these exercises by the teacher, the child makes contact with the material so he can use it to develop himself. Adults need to keep in mind three principles.

1. Analysis of detail
2. Isolation of difficulty
3. Economy of movement

To teach a child a very fine skill, we need to analyze the details of the action. To do this, we must first isolate the difficulties. The analysis of movement is closely connected to the economy of movement (to perform no movement unnecessary to the purpose). This is the highest degree of perfection.

The Importance of Practical Life

There is an age when movement poses a fascinating interest. The age of infancy and childhood is when the muscles and nervous apparatus respond to exercise. Dr. Montessori believes that because the practical life exercises are the very foundation of the class, these exercises should occupy the 18 month old to 3-year old child for the duration of the toddler class. In the preschool and kindergarten class, the young child entering the class spends 3 to 5 months of the year engaging primarily in practical life exercises.

The teachers construct these practical life exercises as part of the prepared environment. After the presentation of the exercise, the adult should give the child the necessary freedom of choice and repetition of exercises. It is the repetition of the work that leads to greater concentration and helps in building the character. To make repetition possible, the exercises have to be very attractive. They should call the child to work. The practical life exercises need to be rotated several times during the school year to encourage the children to repeat their work. Change the color of a tray or the items for pouring reengage the child in the work.

The beauty of the practical life exercises lies in the fact that they can be very easy or more complicated; they can be short or long. The long exercises are really successive exercises, such as washing and ironing. The lengthy process can be broken down into manageable steps.

Eating snack is part of practical life. Serving yourself and cleaning your place to make it ready for another are integral to the care of self and the environment.

The children use the skills they have learned in the practical life area around the classroom. Plants are watered, doorknobs polished, etc. Practical life activities are not separate from the classroom. They are incorporated into the life of the child. Practical life exercises can also be incorporated into the home. Practical life in the home was detailed in the handout on Montessori and the Home.

In the practical life area, an apron is put on for most activities and it is a point of interest. Children love to dress up. The aprons are put on before an activity. The moment the child puts on the apron, the activity begins. When she takes off the apron, the activity ends. Putting on an apron signifies doing something well.

At home, parents can understand that the child is trying to acquire the skills to become independent. Children should be given the chance to help. The adult should slow down to the tempo of the child. When the child has done the job, if it is done to the best of her ability, do not criticize her. Instead, catch her when she begins this activity again and reintroduce it to her using this as an opportunity to teach your child what your expectations are and how you want the job done. At home, children need help from the parents in tidying their things.

Childhood constructs with what it finds, if the material is poor the construction is also poor. In order to build himself, the child has taken by chance whatever he finds in the environment.

--Dr. Maria Montessori

Dr. Montessori discovered the importance of the practical life exercises as follows:

1. **To enrich the child emotionally.** The child grows to love these activities and loves the adult who provides them because they offer, for the child, relaxation, repetition, concentration, and perfection.
2. **To endow the child with affirming experiences.** The child experiences a social revolution where he develops a positive attitude because of his love for the activities.
3. **To encourage responsibility.** Practical life exercises provide practical consequences to the child in being able to care for himself and the environment and in social relations. In addition, the child develops responsibility.
4. **To engage the child physically.** The child experiences physical development because the practical life experiences involve a lot of movement. The child becomes involved physically, mentally, and emotionally.
5. **To enliven the child constructively.** The child develops the habit of conscious, constructive work by having a taste of constructive work and enjoying it.
6. **To enrapture the child with learning.** The child is able to judge his work independently and be satisfied with work well done.
7. **To enable the child to appreciate independence.** The child develops his will. He is able to make intelligent choices, make decisions, and persevere.

As the child begins to gain independence, integration and consolidation of the personality through coordination of movement also occurs. The child's intellect begins to work in harmony with his body through conscious effort using this new, purposeful intelligence.

Practical Life Exercises

The materials used in the exercises of practical life are characterized by:

1. **Physical proportions** - they must be the right size for the child to handle.
2. **Psychically proportionate** - their function must be clear to the child.
3. **Attractive** - materials must be beautiful and attract the child.
4. **Clean and well maintained** - the materials must be kept intact.
5. **One of each exercise** - no multiple sets of materials so that the children learn patience.
6. **Adaptable** - must be able to change from culture to culture and be comprised of the same objects the children would find in their home.
7. **Separation** - materials must be kept separate from other objects found in the environment.

The presentations for exercises of practical life can be collective or individual depending on the child's needs and the nature of the activity. Direct presentations are when we introduce an activity to the child. Analysis of movement is necessary when giving a presentation to help the child understand the movements necessary and the sequence of movements. This is done by separating each movement with a pause.

The indirect presentations are defined as when a child is watching the teacher make a presentation and paying attention to the lesson without the teacher being aware of it. This can be more important than the direct presentation, for the teacher is the biggest piece of Montessori material.

The aim of the practical life exercises is to fulfill an inner need to develop an interest in and love for constructing work. To repeat an activity will lead to concentration and integration of the personality. This will form a bond between the adult in the environment and the child. He trusts the adult to give him constructive, purposeful work. The child learns to judge his work objectively without the need for praise. He develops coordination of movement and the mind masters the body. The physical body is developed with the integration of the mind. It is not purely physical exercise. The child develops his will to construct his work and make choices. He also finds love for the daily activities. The practical life exercises are very important for the child's order. It's through them that he learns to concentrate which is the foundation of intelligence.

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