

Your Attention, Please: Bring Home Lessons in Concentration from Montessori Classrooms

March 2, 2017 By Forest Bluff School

Submitted by Paula Lillard Preschlack

Your Attention, Please!

Do you have more trouble concentrating after dealing with emails, texts, to-do lists, and other necessities that fragment your day? I certainly do. We are not alone, as any bestseller bookstand or news headline will tell you. Information is coming in faster than ever and with more urgency. Some days, we can feel as if we're caught in reaction-mode, catching balls that are flying at us from all directions. Breathe? Hahaha!

So what about the children living in our midst? We know that they get uninterrupted time in their Montessori classrooms, where they can concentrate in peace. But what happens before we drop them off in the mornings and after we pick them up in the afternoons? Do they watch us trying to function in a frenzy—irritated, distracted, and sometimes exhausted manner?

Concentration is Key Inside and Out of Montessori Classrooms

The ability to concentrate is the foundation for learning and for success in life. We see it in the recent research and anecdotally, in the quality of people's work, relationships, and wellbeing. Educators and psychologists are pointing out the realization that we must support children to learn how to focus. (Google Daniel Goleman's article, "Want Kids to Succeed? Teach Them Focus.")

I am so grateful that Maria Montessori designed her approach to actively cultivate this skill as a base for our children. We do not need to change our Montessori classrooms to incorporate this new eureka. We already have all the training, tips, and techniques for helping our students develop their wells of concentration every day in our school. It is in the way the teacher moves slowly and gracefully and makes eye contact directly with each child while speaking. It is in the three-hour, uninterrupted work cycle that is a daily practice every morning. It is in the simple, clear, beautiful classrooms with wooden floors and matching furniture and large, floor-to-ceiling windows. It is in the beautifully handcrafted wooden learning materials. Everywhere you look, there is simplicity, calm activity and pleasant opportunities for focused attention.

Instead of teaching the children by lecturing to them, our Montessori teachers actively “link” the children to our learning environments and encourage them into that deep state of flow. They use interest, choice, peer learning, and hands-on opportunities to facilitate our children’s enjoyment of getting deeply involved in working.

As parents, what can we do to model a life well-lived outside of that special school setting of Montessori classrooms? Here are some tips that we can incorporate for a Montessori approach with our families:

- **Compartmentalize Your Time**

Compartmentalize your time so you can attend to the task at hand: In the morning, have a goal of focusing on the basics and stick with those. We have to dress, get a nutritious breakfast, and do some tasks before walking out the door. If starting your work day involves checking emails or another distraction from what is right in front of you, try to hold off until the children are in school. Demonstrate for them that the priorities are breakfast, dressing, and working together. Show that priorities—by definition—demand our full attention.

- **Turn Off the Distractors**

Before you pick your children up, put your Iphone into airplane mode and pay attention to what you are doing and whom you are with. Children need to interact with you, whether conversing or just sitting together quietly. Demonstrate that your relationships matter most.

- **Prepare Your Spaces**

Think of your home as a sanctuary from the hectic world, and make it so. Work on it as a prepared environment for yourself and your family: reduce clutter, put meaningful objects in it, and create spaces for reflection, reading and creativity. I know this is very challenging when we have several children in the house, especially when they are young ones. But your continued efforts to make your home a refuge by making conscientious choices and guarding it from unwanted messages will pay off. It is a constant work in progress.

- **Set the Routine**

Design the day to involve downtime. When your children are napping or playing quietly, use that time to rest, read, or do something likewise. Protect that downtime fervently! This is when imagination, creative thoughts, problem solving, reflection, integration of freshly learned information, and innovation takes root. It is true for adults as well as children; our “attention muscles”

atrophy if we do not dedicate time each day to working them. We need to read a book, for example, without constantly checking our iPhones or jumping up for interruptions. In a hectic world, we can actually get so fragmented that our own minds start to interrupt themselves mid-thought. So, as our children need the time to develop their own abilities, we need to set aside times to retrain ourselves each day, too.

- Your Own Oxygen Mask First

Your actions, habits, and moods unconsciously affect your children. This is why it is not selfish to care for yourself first! Take a date night, schedule a massage, a yoga class, meditation, a walk, a run, time to write in a journal, to draw, to dance, or whatever fills you up with new life. If you want to raise happy children, be a happy person; they will follow your example. Our children can only learn what it takes to be happy if they see adults consistently (and sincerely) demonstrating it.

Supporting Our Children's Great Task

Montessori reminded us that we are in charge of the environments and routines. We have this responsibility to create and maintain them thoughtfully, and we are the role models for our children. So, with this in mind, I am going to turn off my iPhone, shut down my computer, and sit down on the couch on front of my two teenagers to read *The Marshmallow Test; Why Self-Control is the Engine of Success*, in hopes of refreshing my own ability to concentrate. Dr. Montessori told us in *The Absorbent Mind*, "The first essential for the child's development is concentration. It lays the whole basis for his character and social behavior. He must find out how to concentrate, and for this he needs things to concentrate upon. This shows the importance of his surroundings, for no one acting on the outside can cause him to concentrate. Only he can organize his psychic life. None of us can do it for him. Indeed, it is just here that the importance of our schools really lies. They are places in which the child can find the kind of work that permits him to do this."

I am grateful for the peacefulness of our Montessori classrooms. Let's also live lives that support our children's important task to develop their ability to concentrate, from which their successes and happiness will flourish.