

# Montessori From the Start: The Child at Home from Birth to Age Three

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## Discussion Guide

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### Chapter 1 “The Completion of the Human Being”

“Instead of the specific instructions of instincts, we are given propensities to certain actions. Although we are born naked and defenseless without a means for shelter and with no instinctual knowledge of what is safe for us to eat, through these propensities we have more than survived; our behavioral tendencies account for the development of all the varied civilizations throughout the ages from prehistoric peoples to the modern era of telecommunications.” (p. 14)

Montessori named these propensities “The Human Tendencies” (Exploration, Orientation, Order, Abstraction, Imagination, Manipulation, Exactness, Repetition, Control of Error, Perfection, Communication). Do you see your baby or child exhibit any of these tendencies? Which ones do you see and how does he exhibit them?

“When they [the tendencies] are fully operative in our everyday activities, whatever our age, we experience joy and a sense of being fully alive. To the extent that they are missing from our daily lives, we feel listless and unenthusiastic.” (p. 17)

Do you notice these human tendencies in yourself? Are there any you find yourself more drawn to or that you think are missing in your life?

“Today, although some of us enjoy the greatest affluence the world has ever known, we find that developing a home environment that serves the human spirit, a home of beauty, order, and simplicity, remains a very challenging task.” (p. 18)

What work have you done in your own home environment to make it a restful and fulfilling place—for yourself and/or for your children? Why might this be challenging?

“From such independent accomplishments come the child’s sense of self-mastery and resulting self-confidence.” (p. 20).

Have you observed your baby or child accomplish something independently that you (or he!) did not know he could do? What was it? How did he react afterwards?

“It is the unique role of human beings as change agents in the universe that requires us to think before acting. If we are to help infants to healthy development of coordinated movement, we have to keep the goal of responsibility in action foremost in our minds. This means that we need

to prepare an environment for the infant that will encourage action with purpose and with the possibility of consequences.” (p. 21)

How do you understand the concepts of “action with purpose” and “the possibility of consequences”? Have you thought of these concepts in relation to children before? If so, how young? What do you think of integrating these ideas into a very young child’s environment?

“Indeed, without a disciplined will, a human being cannot truthfully be called human at all. It is our ability to choose our behaviors, as opposed to control predetermined by instinct, which finally separates us from the animal kingdom.” (p. 23)

In what ways has your child exhibited his will? If he is old enough, have you observed him choosing between behaviors? Have you seen signs of the development of the disciplined will?

“In the first weeks of life, the infant strives to maintain focus on a self-selected aspect of the environment. Eventually, sustained attention and repetition build neural structures within the brain that represent the knowledge gained. It is through this effort of concentration and control of attention that all learning takes place.” (p. 24)

Have you observed your baby or young child concentrating on a part of his environment? What is he doing or looking at when he exhibits this behavior? Have you done anything to support or encourage these moments?

“The child is a spiritual being who asks, why am I here? what is my task, my responsibility?” (p. 25)

How often are these questions you consider in your own life? How do you answer them? Has that changed over time?

## Chapter 2 “Welcoming the Newborn”

### *Newborn questions*

“The first weeks are a period of rapid and crucial development; we cannot wait while precious time passes. Our task is to give opportunities for concentration in the first weeks of life.” (p. 26)  
Have you ever before considered that a newborn baby is capable of concentration? Have you ever observed this in a newborn? If so, what does it look like?

“At first glance, such a room for the baby looks plain and simple, especially when we compare it to the brightly colored and decorated nurseries that we commonly see. But this plainer nursery has an atmosphere of calm that is missing in busier environments for babies. It is soothing and beautiful in its simplicity.” (p. 27)

Consider the nurseries you have seen from a baby’s point of view, rather than from the adult’s point of view. How do you think a baby would feel about and react to the elements you have observed? Why might a baby benefit from a different style bedroom from that which an adult might be inclined to design?

“Let us describe what the room prepared for their new baby looks like... The room is thus carefully, if minimally, furnished to address the four areas of necessity for the infant: an area for sleeping, for changing, for nursing, and for activity.” (p. 27-28, read the paragraphs in their entirety)

When you read the description of this room, how did it sound to you? Was it appealing? Did it sound like a desirable environment for a baby? Why or why not?

“The crib, our conventional solution for the baby’s bed, is not an inspiring place for an infant. What would be?... The infant’s bed is large and on the floor. A double-bed-size is best and the mattress must be only a few inches high.” (p. 30-31)

How does the floor bed sound do you? Have you ever seen one? What do you imagine the challenges would be? Can you imagine what the benefits would be like for a baby? Does it sound like there are more challenges or fewer challenges than a crib?

“Because the child is sleeping on a floor bed, the room must be designed for his safety.” (p. 32)

What do you need to consider to make the entirety of a bedroom safe for a baby? How might this change over time?

### *Questions for any parents:*

“When a child becomes deeply and constructively absorbed in a task, it is important to avoid drawing his attention to what the adults around him are thinking of what he is doing.” (p. 30)  
Have you ever seen your child interrupted by an adult while he is absorbed in a task? What usually happens when he is interrupted? Does he go back to the work? Have you ever resisted

the temptation to interrupt a concentrating baby or child? How did he end his “work” on his own?

“They [parents] must become observers of their child’s subjective experience as opposed to his objective experience. In other words, they need to observe how their child is feeling about what he is doing.” (p. 33)

How does your baby signify to you how he feels about what he is doing? What are the ways, both grand and subtle, that he can express his attitude about his environment and activities?

“For guidance we can turn to the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Ph.D. Csikszentmihalyi characterizes these moments of intense absorption as ‘flow.’ ... On these occasions, we are deeply involved in the moment. We are clear and focused at the edge of our skill development. We do the activity for the rewards inherent within it (not for grades or salary, praise or recognition).” (p. 34-35)

When do you experience flow in your life? What are you doing, how do you characterize it, and how do you feel afterwards? Do you believe babies and young children can have this experience, too?

“Parents have to be both flexible and open-ended in their thinking and, at the same time, balance this environment of support with structure. Parents can protect their child’s concentration by maintaining a positive mood and spontaneous quality to family life, by not overly indulging their children or overly restricting them.” (p. 37-38)

When you reflect on your own nature, which comes more naturally to you: flexibility or structure? What do you do to balance the other side of yourself, the one that is not as strongly inherent in your personality? How does your spouse/partner fit into this balance?

### Chapter 3 “Discovering the World”

“[Children under the age of six] are not capable of reason, abstract thinking, or imagination, so they cannot make conscious choices for their attention, based on intelligence. However, they have a unique ability to absorb the qualities of their environment just by being exposed to them.” (p. 40)

Montessori called this ability the “Absorbent Mind.” When you consider this ability of the young child, how does it make you consider her environment, both physical and emotional? What are the advantages and vulnerabilities of having this kind of mind?

“Montessori called the child under six years old ‘a sensorial explorer’ and based her educational approach for the child’s early years upon the child’s learning through the senses.” (p. 41)

Consider the five senses (touch, smell, taste, hearing, and sight). What are the experiences the young baby has with these senses? What gives her varying experiences with each of the senses?

“Young children cannot use imagination or abstract thinking to learn about the world. Because they are not yet capable of abstract thought, they must know the concrete world first and thereby develop the tools that lead to abstract thought and the furthering of their own construction.” (p. 41)

What are abstract tools versus concrete tools? How do older children and adults use abstract tools to explore the world? Why are concrete tools so important for young children?

“[E]verything that adults give to the young child for sensorial exploration should represent the real world. Young children’s experiences with the real world become the basis for their imagination and creative thought in the elementary school years, when they no longer possess an absorbent mind but a reasoning mind. Sensations that give no knowledge of the world to young children are useless to him.” (p. 41)

What are ways in which adults are tempted to give fantasy to young children? Why is exposure to fantasy unhelpful to them?

“The richness of the child’s later imagination depends on the depth and extent of sensorial impressions in the earliest years... They need to experience what Earth is made of and what does not change.” (p. 42)

Can you imagine a catalogue of real life experiences in a child’s mind as she grows and develops? How would this information about the real world provide the basis for imagination later in childhood and life?

“There is a reason novelty occupies a baby, and all too often we ignore it and use novelty to keep babies busy so that they are not unhappy and bothering us. Babies seek novelty to learn

something previously not known by them about their world; as such it is a key characteristic and has a purpose.” (p. 45)

Have you ever considered the concept of novelty as a useful quality for development? What are ways that our culture has taken advantage of novelty and made it counterproductive for babies and children?

“While we are waiting for the infant to move on her own, we can collect baskets of common household objects that are safe for her exploration.” (p. 46)

What considerations would you need to make to ensure that a household object is safe for a baby or toddler to explore with all of her senses?

“When a familiar object is re-presented a few weeks later, the infant will look at it on a different level because her brain has progressed and she is ready to take in more information. In this way, the infant knows the objects more deeply each time they go away and come back. Repetition of the familiar is essential for developing focus and true knowledge at every stage of development.” (p. 46)

Have you ever considered the importance of encouraging repeated exploration for your baby? What are the benefits of this activity? What might a baby further grasp from repeated exploration of specific household objects (e.g., a whisk, measuring spoons, a toothbrush)?

“It is important now to take time to think about the organization of the home... Does it make sense? Is it ordered, simple, and functional? Is it beautiful? We want the baby to discover an orderly environment and thereby incorporate this order within her own mind.” (p. 47)

What are the areas of your own home where it is the most challenging to create order? Are there areas that are naturally organized? What are ways you have found that make it easier to have an orderly home?

## Chapter 4 “The Hand and the Brain”

“In the child, it is the actions of the hand guided by the intellect that create a feedback loop of information by carrying out the new direction: the hand reports to the brain, the brain guides the hand by this new information, the hand discovers more information by carrying out the new direction, and reports again to the brain. This process is a continuous action of learning and development.” (p. 48)

When can you remember learning a concept in a hands-on way? Did using your hands help you understand and retain the concept? Do you think you learned more because you could use your hands?

“[W]hen the skills of the hand and therefore information to the brain are not in a balanced relationship, the undeveloped hand holds the brain back.” (p. 50)

Have you ever engaged in an activity that you understood mentally, but were not physically prepared for? Can you relate to the concept of this disunity? If so, what did it feel like?

“If the child has not developed purposeful reaching out to, taking, and holding on to an object by age three to five months, he has to rely on someone else to put items in his hands... Similarly, if he has developed the ability to reach and grasp objects but is denied the opportunity to do so, he will be in an equally dependent state.” (p. 50-51)

Have you ever considered a baby’s ability to reach for and hold objects on his own and put them in his mouth to play a role in his independence? Can you imagine the importance of allowing him to develop this action? What might it feel like for a baby if his mind were ready to obtain this kind of information from the world but his body was not ready or his environment did not support it?

“We need to be constantly aware of the infant’s capacities at each age and to think through the purpose for each object that we give to him.” (p. 54)

Where is your own baby in the development of his hand? What fine motor activities interest him most? What are some challenges you could provide for him to allow him to fully develop the stage where he is now?

“It takes many months of receiving general knowledge of the environment through the five senses before the baby is ready for the precise and detailed information delivered by the fully developed hand... The necessity of building the infant’s background of general knowledge before we expect him to understand specific details is a theme that is emphasized over and over throughout Montessori education. It is only when we—whether as adults or as children—can relate new information to past knowledge that we are capable of making discoveries with that new information” (p. 54-55)

When have you had the experiences of learning isolated information versus learning within a context with which you are already familiar? What are the ways a baby may have experiences of this kind? What are some ways we can provide background context for future knowledge?

“Although parents sometimes find good commercially produced articles, the best source of developmental aids for your baby is very often your own ingenuity. Not only do items that you put together yourself have the advantage of being less expensive, they also require you to give thought and attention to the specific needs of your individual child and how a particular activity is going to match those needs.” (p. 56)

What are some activities you could put together in your own home that would meet different developmental needs of the hand and the brain (reflexive grasp, reaching and grasping intentionally, hand to hand transfer, purposeful release, pincer grip, hands together, wrist development)?

“[The fifteen-month-old] is in an upright position; his brain is ready; his hands are freed for work; his human tendencies are urging him to contribute to the life of his home and family. He wants nothing so much as to ‘work’ alongside a loving adult in the home, or other appropriate setting, throughout the day, doing what Montessori called ‘the practical work of life.’” (p. 58)

If you have a toddler, have you ever observed him imitating the work that is done in the home? What are some practical activities that a toddler can participate in around the home? How many steps do you think he is capable of in an activity?

“We miss this transition from the child’s learning to the child’s seeking to work. We see children using their hands and interpret this activity as more exploration. Yet, what are they really doing when they are opening cupboards and drawers, emptying them and putting things back, sliding drawers back and forth, putting clothes on and off, refilling the water glass over and over, putting sand in the pail and dumping it out—all very typical activities of the fifteen-month-old?” (p. 60)

When have you observed a child in an activity that looked like exploration? What was he doing? Can you imagine how it might be his attempt at purposeful work?

## Chapter 5 “Crawling to Coordination”

“Nature has not changed its plan for human childhood, which requires the constant presence, dedication, and, increasingly, wisdom of loving adults. Amidst so many choices of products that enable us not to be bothered by our children, parents need to think through very carefully which of them to bring into their lives, and why.” (p. 69—see list on p. 68 for examples)

When you consider the vast array of items our culture has made available to contain babies and toddlers so that we do not need to be “bothered by our children”, which items have you been most inclined to use? Why are they the most tempting for you, and when are you likely to use them? Can you think of other ways to occupy your children or restructure activities so as to reduce the time your baby or toddler has to spend with or in them?

“We are not often conscious of a third obstacle that we place in the way of the children’s progress in movement and self-formation... We are referring to the inhibiting of the child’s initiative for movement by adults’ responses to her. From the first weeks, we constantly prop up the infant. Very soon we are sitting her up... Next, we pull her up to stand... Eventually we ‘walk’ her by holding onto her tiny hands high above her head... Potentially, the most damaging of all to her developing sense of self, we continue to sweep her up according to our own needs and whims and carry her about in our arms long after she is walking stably on her own.” (p. 71)

Why might it be damaging to a baby’s development to direct her into a position or movement she is not capable of on her own? Similarly, how might it affect her when we frequently carry her once she is capable of walking on her own?

“Time to concentrate and focus without distractions is essential for the child’s self-formation in every area of development, and muscle coordination and strength is no exception. From the beginning, the child has a strong drive for coordinating and strengthening her large muscles. However, she is diverted from these efforts when her attention is consistently drawn to something else. The television set [or other tablet or screen] creates just such a compelling distraction.” (p. 72)

Have you ever observed your baby or toddler when she is in the vicinity of a screen? How does she react? Does her behavior or activity change—in degree or quality—when it is on?

“Our goal as we prepare the infant’s environment for movement is not to rush her development so that we can have a baby that develops faster than others. Our purpose has to do with psychological rather than physical reasons and reflects our attitude toward the child... It should reflect the view that this infant is an individual who is going to grow and change and separate; this is not someone who will remain a baby forever, to be carried about and cared for by others. Our purpose then is to foster the child’s self-formation into an independent being.” (p. 73)

How is your attitude about your baby’s development affected when you consider her growth not in comparison to other babies, but in relationship to her own growth towards independence? In

what ways does her activity take on new meaning when you consider that the goal of her development is to become a fully independent being?

“Parents need to be very careful here. After the initial period of adjustment, we often find ourselves enjoying the fact that this baby needs us. Without realizing what we are doing, we fall into habits that keep her dependent on us... We want to foster the baby’s self-concept from the beginning: ‘I am a capable person. I can do things for myself. I can affect my environment.’” (p. 74)

In what ways might we enjoy the way a baby needs us? How do you personally determine the line between appropriate and healthy needing and unnecessary and prohibitive needing? Is this line the same all the time for all children?

“When the infant develops skills at the natural time for her own self-formation, she is not only happier but her cognitive development is also affected because her brain is ready for the new information that moving about in the environment gives her.” (p. 75)

In what ways does gross-motor development take on new importance when you consider its relationship to cognitive development? What are ways we obstruct gross motor development, and thus cognitive development?

“Trying to get to something on her own power represents an opportunity for her. Of course, we are not going to allow an infant to get overly frustrated. We will see to it that there is a balance between effort and success. However, a constant attentiveness and hovering over the baby by parents, family members, or other adults is not helpful. Such behavior negates her initiative and cripples her at the threshold of life.” (p. 77)

What are times when it is tempting to help your baby reach something she is trying to get to herself? Have you ever observed her struggling and then succeeding? How does she respond to her success? How do you observe her cues so you do not help her too early, but you step in before she becomes overly frustrated? How does your own baby let you know that she needs help?

“This is the time—well in advance of her rapid crawling and complete mobility—to ‘baby proof’ the entire house.” (p. 78)

What baby proofing have you done in your own home? How did you decide what to make safe and what to leave available for your baby to explore?

“When we know the baby is safe in another room of the house, we can allow her to have several minutes there out of our sight. As we go about our work, we can talk to our baby from the next room and reassure her of our presence if she calls for us. If we do this gradually—at first just a few minutes at a time—the baby learns that she can manage without us for brief periods. We lay

a foundation for an understanding, so important in a healthy adjustment to life, that physical presence is not essential to trust and a feeling of oneness with loved ones.” (p. 78)

How comfortable or uncomfortable are you with this idea? Would you or do you consciously give your baby experiences like this? Do you believe these kinds of experiences give children the sense that physical presence is not required for connection?

“Parenthood involves a series of adjustments to each new stage of the child’s self-formation and plane of development. This is why it is essential that parents familiarize themselves with the natural development of childhood and early adulthood, thus preparing themselves for each new stage before it arrives.” (p. 79)

When you reflect on your child’s development, can you identify times when she has had distinct and significant changes in needs? How prepared were you for those changes? What did you have to do to adjust to the new period of development?

“Sitting up should come to the child as a discovery of her own power. Further, the act of sitting up through the infant’s own efforts strengthens her back muscles and develops her balance. If others constantly prop her up, she has little incentive to put forth the strenuous effort on her own that such development requires.” (p. 80)

When have you been most tempted to hold your baby in a sitting position? How close was she to being able to sit on her own when you did this? How dependent on your help to sit did she become? What do you think of the idea of holding off on this support as much as possible?

“We want to help children realize that when they leave someone or something, the gain can more than offset the loss. In this way, we transform the child’s experience of attachment and separation into a process that enhances trust and security in life. For such a result, the parents have to perceive the value in separation and be ready for it in each stage of the child’s development. Most often, it is harder for the adult to separate from the child than for the child to separate from the adult. We tend to cling to the child, not quite trusting her abilities.” (p. 84)

Can you think of a time that it may have been harder for you to separate from your child rather than vice versa? What are the ways that you have tried to support your child’s natural development towards independence and away from you?

“This is the time [12-18 months] to begin the habit of a daily walk with your child. This walk should be a meandering one, one that follows the child’s mission, not the adult’s. The child stops to inspect everything. . . . In our accomplishment-oriented lives, we lose sight of the joy and beauty of living in the moment and of savoring the details of life.” (p. 85)

When have you had the experience of slowing your own life to your child’s pace? What did you notice about the world during these times? How did you feel? How did your child respond to this period of time that was adjusted to her own pace?

“A... reason [to hold the adult’s hand when walking in public] has to do with the child’s developing will. Asking the child to hold our hand for short periods in public places is an opportunity to help her accept necessary limits in her life.” (p. 87)

What times do you need to ask your child to accept necessary limits in public? How does she respond? How do you enforce them?

“Because she was not restricted in movement in the early months, as so many babies are, she is less frustrated. She has gotten to the experiences that her brain was ready for and on her own power. There is no way that we could continually have guessed for her what, of all the stimuli in her environment, she wanted to master at each given moment. She had to have the ability and the freedom to move within her own space at will.” (p. 88)

What are the ways, general and specific, you support freedom of movement for your baby or toddler? How is her mood different when she has the opportunity to move at will?

## Chapter 6 “Practical Life”

“Montessori advised one mother who was seeking to learn about her daughter: ‘Leave the child alone and watch what she does. Do not abandon her but watch from a distance; you can go to her if she needs help.’ This little girl proceeded to leave her many toys and began carrying a very heavy footstool all about the house.” (p. 91)

What “work” have you observed your toddler or other toddlers doing when left to their own devices? Was it surprising to you? How would you characterize this kind of work? Is it strenuous, complicated, or organized? When you reflect on it now, can you see some element of his body in the world that he is trying to master?

“The child needs items that are real and relate directly to the adult’s everyday activities. Montessori called these items the practical-life materials... Therefore, parents select from among their occupations the ones that ‘they have to do anyway in their everyday life,’ and by doing so, parents avoid the feeling of pressure to do even more for their child than they have hitherto been doing.” (pp. 93-94)

What are some activities you already do around the house that you could imagine including your child in? How might you modify the work to accommodate him?

“The reason for following Montessori ideas and practices, then, is not to be a better mother or father or to have a better child, or even because as a parent you love your child so much. It is because you respect your child and what he represents in the continuum of human life.” (p. 95)

How does this shift in motivation affect how you think about your approach to your child and his capabilities at home? What is the essence of this distinction?

“[A mother from our parent child course] asked us, ‘What do I do if he doesn’t use the little sponge on the table for wiping up a spill?... I don’t know how much I am supposed to teach him.’... In answer to this mother’s question we emphasized that the parent, in becoming a teacher instead of a servant, still remains a parent. She might best be described as a ‘mother-teacher’ with an emphasis on mother, rather than a ‘teacher-mother’ with the teacher role dominating the relationship. There are two reasons why this distinction is important. First, the intensity of the parent-child relationship tends to lead both parent and child to overreact in their responses to each other... Second, home is a harbor for both parent and child and it is important that there is a softening of expectations there.” (p. 96)

In your own experience with your child, have you ever felt you’ve allowed your role as “teacher” to dominate your role as a mother? Or vice versa? What were the signs that this was happening? Do you have any examples of times that you’ve had to maintain a balance between the two? Can you relate to the concept that parents and children tend to overreact in their responses to each other? What has this looked like for you? Why is it important that the home remain a harbor with

softened expectations? How do you find the line between “softened” and “abandoned” expectations?

“[W]hen parents are uncertain about how to respond to their child involved in a practical-life activity, they need to remember that collaboration is the basis of all healthy human relationships... Nowhere is this reality more apparent than between parent and child. The practical-life exercises are the predominant means for developing the skills of collaboration in both parent and child.” (p. 96)

How can you apply the solution of “collaboration” to challenges or situations that may arise with your toddler while doing practical-life activities?

“To prepare any [practical-life] activity for the child, it is necessary for the parent to think through every detail ahead of time. For example, is the cracker stiff enough to spread the peanut butter on or does it crumble with the pressure of spreading? For a fifteen-month-old child to slice apple wedges into smaller bite-size pieces, the wedges have to be laid on their sides so that the skin is easier to split, and so forth... Such practice gives us an appreciation of just how complicated our simplest everyday actions are.” (p. 97)

Consider a practical-life activity that you might introduce to your child in your own home. What are some of the details you will have to think through for this particular activity? What materials would you need to provide all in one place for this activity? (Examples: Scrubbing potatoes, peeling carrots, scooping melon, washing dishes, dusting)

“Montessori referred to such specific responses of the adult as ‘points of interest.’ It is points of interest that draw children deeper into an activity once engaged, or back to it after they have lost their concentration: the last drop of water from the pitcher while pouring, the tiny piece of cheese left on the chopper, the spot of flour on the rolling pin, or the flower stem that just reaches the water in the vase. Points of interest, then, help the child to clarify the challenge in an activity.” (p. 99)

What are some points of interest in the activity you chose for the previous question? Or, generally, can you think of points of interest in any example of a practical-life activity?

“Adults are often surprised to hear that even praise represents an interruption to the young child engaged in work... You can share his pleasure in [his] achievement with a warm smile. Such a low-key response indicates that you are happy for your child because you know he is happy. You are not happy because your child is a ‘super baby.’ At any age, developing an inflated idea of self leads eventually to isolation and loneliness. Our goal is to help children appreciate that they are unique human beings and special to us. However, we want them to realize that other human beings are unique, too.” (pp. 100-101)

How can excessive praise lead to an inflated idea of self? How do we determine the line between this excessive praise and a sharing of his pleasure? What are some examples of actions or words

that would indicate one or the other? What are the ways to help children learn that they are special to us, and that other human beings are special, too? Why is this important?

“[A]dults must be very patient as they work with children in their long process to perfection. Children have all the time in the world for their self-formation; they cannot be rushed. When we fall into the trap of trying to be the perfect parent of the perfect child, we inevitably become overly controlling, trying to push him for accomplishment. The eventual result is a tense child and a ‘put upon’ parent. We can learn instead to give children the aid they need and then allow them to work for perfection on their own timetable.” (p. 101)

What tends to happen in your own home when you rush your child (or anyone else, for that matter!)? How does it make you feel afterwards, and how does the other person respond? What are ways to avoid rushing, both practical and emotional? What do you think the author means by “perfection” in this situation?

“Very young children cannot tell us directly that they are tired or bored or can no longer concentrate. They do so by getting silly or disintegrating into fantasy or becoming destructive. We need to be alert to these messages and help the child by responding promptly and firmly.” (p. 103)

How does your child tell you that he is tired or bored or can no longer concentrate?

A description of how to arrange your young child’s kitchen dishes and utensils, as well as guide them towards helping set and clear their own place (pp. 103-106).

What are some challenges you see inherent in your own home situation, or with your child’s unique personality?

A description of setting up a practical-life activity for your child and then showing them how to do it (pp. 106-110).

Have you done any practical-life activities with your child before? What challenges have you had? What successes have you witnessed?

“It is our collaborative approach to the practical-life exercises that enables children to let their human tendencies and desire to imitate us guide their energies. We are to be leaders rather than ‘pushers.’ We might say, ‘Oh, look, crumbs, I’m going to clean them up.’ Or ‘There is water on the floor here, let’s get a mop.’ Or to the fifteen-month-old who is bothering an older sibling: ‘This is Kristin’s work. You can push in your chair.’” (p. 113)

How are the above phrases examples of “leading” rather than “pushing”? Can you imagine a similar situation with your child where you could rephrase your language to be a collaborative leader rather than a pusher?

“Most importantly, by making the child’s life meaningful to him as a member of his family in this challenging period from fifteen months to three years old, we have helped him to integrate his personality and develop a positive attitude toward himself.” (p. 114).

How does helping your child engage in practical-life activities develop his positive attitude toward himself? What is the alternative during this time period? Why might this matter?

## Chapter 7 “Personal Care”

“For children to develop confidence in their own abilities, they have to be helped to care for themselves independently just as soon as they are able. The parents’ role is to begin working for this goal within the first few weeks of their child’s life.” (p. 117)

Do you believe that the ability to take care of oneself is related to confidence? Why or why not? Have you ever imagined that this might start when a baby is a few weeks old?

“To help the child under three years old to become successfully involved in her self-care, we have to recognize the complexity of each task and break it into steps—much as we did in the practical life exercises.” (p. 120)

Think of an activity involving self-care (e.g., brushing hair, tying shoes, putting on pants). Can you break it down into the individual steps a child would need to master in order to be able to do this activity on their own? What are some ‘points of interest’ for these activities?

“We always have to wait for the child’s response in any procedure of personal care. We tend to rush the child because again, as in the practical-life activities, *our* goal is to get the action done... In every act of personal care, keep thinking, ‘Is there a step that I am taking away from my child that she could do for herself?’” (pp. 120-121)

What do you notice about these kinds of moments with your child? How do you discipline yourself to pause and give your child the time and/or instruction to do a step of the activity herself? Why might this matter so much?

“From the beginning, the parents’ goal is to teach their child how to put herself to sleep and to sleep by herself as a preparation for sleeping well for life.” (p. 123)

What are routines or habits that you have (or had) with your baby or child to encourage her ability to sleep by herself? Are there any patterns that have ever developed which interfered with this independence? How did you resolve them?

“Routines give information to children about their world that they are not ready to receive through words. Hence they learn what will reliably happen next, by experiencing it, rather than by being told.” (p. 127)

Why are routines important for sleep independence? How do they affect it? What experiences have you had with successful routines, or, perhaps, the negative effects of a disrupted routine?

“Just as in helping infants to sleep well, our goal in teaching babies to feed themselves involves helping them to develop the right attitudes as well as competence... For the human species, eating is not limited to a biological experience; it has the possibility of expanding the joys of life in many ways.”

What are the ways eating is a positive aspect of our culture? How can we transmit these joyful experiences to our child?

“If the mother nurses [or bottle-feeds] the baby in private or, on occasion, in the presence of the father only, her knowledge of her baby and his or her comfort in her presence is extended and deepened. If the mother is distracted with company, phone calls, or other activity during a nursing [or bottle-feeding] session, she cannot devote her full attention to her baby. The significance of what she is accomplishing for her baby may elude her, and she is more likely to feel that she is merely the baby’s ‘milk factory.’ On the other hand, if she takes the baby, along with a nourishing drink of her own, to a private place in the house so that she has only the baby and herself to consider, the nursing session becomes a peaceful, relaxing time for them both.” (p 134)

How does this approach affect a baby’s experience with feeding? Along with those mentioned here, what are some specific ways that feeding can be a restful, respectful time for mother and baby?

“[W]e need to find a suitable piece of furniture for the baby’s new experience of sitting to eat solid food and to drink fluids from a glass. Montessori designed the weaning table and chair... for this purpose. Both table and chair are sturdy and heavy with the seat of the chair low and wide, with legs spaced far apart for stabilization. The chair has arms so that the child is held securely within it.” (p. 138)

Have you ever seen a baby being fed in a weaning chair? What are potential challenges and benefits that you can imagine from using a weaning chair and table? Can you envision how it encourages a child’s independence?

“Parents not only need to focus on how to help their children learn to dress themselves and be responsible for their own clothes, but must also help them become aware of the appropriateness of their clothes to a specific situation.” (p. 146)

How does learning about appropriate clothes contribute to a child’s independence? Why does this matter in life? What are the ways you might teach your child about what clothing is appropriate? How might you enforce this, even when your child resists?

“When we dress young children we want to choose clothing that allows them to move comfortably, that is appropriate to the occasion, and that allows them to dress themselves just as soon as they are able.” (p. 147)

What qualities in clothing would make it easier for a child to dress herself? What qualities in clothing create extra challenges for a child to dress herself?

“The idea of giving choice to children in many areas of their lives has become widely accepted in recent years. Unfortunately, the necessity of limiting choices to a manageable level for young

children is not so well understood. Young children can handle two options; three is too many... Choice is an important element in the child's developing will... However, too much choice in too many areas is overwhelming and confusing for the young child." (p. 149-150)

What role has choice played in your child's life? How do you manage the choices available to her? Have you ever observed a time or period of time when she has had too many choices? How could you tell and how did you respond?

"The child's Sensitive Period of interest in toileting occurs between twelve and eighteen months of age. Your child may indicate this interest in obvious or in more subtle ways. It is important to keep in mind that like all Sensitive Periods this interest is a temporary phenomenon. If it is missed, learning to use the toilet becomes a remedial endeavor. Unfortunately, as in other areas of the child's developing capacities, the child is often ready for the adult's help in toileting before the adult is prepared to give it." (p. 153)

Why do you think adults are reluctant to begin toileting at twelve to eighteen months? Why is it important, from a practical as well as from the perspective of a child's dignity, to take advantage of this time frame? What are ways a parent can find support in tackling this endeavor at an earlier stage than has become the cultural norm?

"With most personal grooming activities you need to alternate turns with your child. After your child makes her attempt, say, 'Now it is my turn,' without mentioning that her turn did not quite do the job. At times you will need to put your hand on your child's hand to guide the action to be taken." (p. 158)

Why is this approach a respectful one for a child? How does it stand in contrast to more adult-led grooming and care? How does it encourage independence? How else might you collaborate during activities of self-care?

"Success in children's mission of independence in their personal care depends upon the extent of collaboration that parents establish with them. Enjoying collaboration with children involves taking an interest in them as human beings in the process of development." (p. 161)

How is this concept of collaboration a distinctive element in the Montessori approach to children? How is it a shift from cultural norms for babies and toddlers? How does collaboration validate children as human beings?

## Chapter 8 “Language and Intelligence”

“It is in this first communication with another that the infant begins the long journey toward discovery of self as an entity separate from the rest of existence. Through communication of body and sound the child both initiates and receives the actions of his parents throughout his preverbal life. Thus he experiences influence over another.” (p. 163)

What are the ways a newborn baby communicates with his body and voice? How does a six-week old baby communicate? Twelve-week? Six-month? (Consider the control they have over their eyes, heads, mouths, hands, etc. at the different stages) Furthermore, how, conceptually, do these methods of communication help him to establish himself as a separate being?

“Interestingly, the amount and quality of the infant’s babbling correlates with the amount of attention that parents give to him. If parents respond by listening and imitating, the baby babbles more. Equally, a lack of parental response leads to less babbling. Dialogue then is clearly essential from the beginning. As parents, we need to talk and wait for our babies to respond, whether we are bathing, nursing, or dressing them.” (p. 165)

Have you ever held a “conversation” with a baby? How often have you considered pausing to wait for his response? Do you notice how the quality of his engagement increases when you allow for a dialogue?

“Usually, however, by the ninth or tenth month the baby... discovers that meaning can be conveyed by sound... Gradually, the baby makes connections between every kind of sound and object and action. He understands more than he can convey, and so he becomes frustrated often—pointing and trying out his sounds, hoping his efforts will result in the desired parental response. We see his frustration as a negative experience, and so we hasten to give him what he wishes as soon as we can guess at his meaning. Yet, frustration is what drives him to go beyond the making of sound for its own sake.” (p. 166)

How is frustration a positive learning experience in this situation for a baby? How can we as parents and caregivers establish that balance of guessing what your baby means and satisfying him, while also encouraging him to keep trying until he is able to find the language to convey his meaning? How might using baby sign language affect this time, positively or negatively?

“Because language development influences the baby’s understanding of what is happening around him and his ability to tell others of his needs—thus initiating their responses—it has a major effect on his intellect, as well as his social being. Indeed the quality of the language to which an infant is exposed permanently alters both his brain structure and its function. By the age of three, each child’s approach to language, and therefore level of achievement in many areas of self-formation is already largely determined. It is essential, then, to give specific linguistic aid to the baby from birth and, equally important, to remove all obstacles.” (p. 168)

When you consider that the foundation for your child’s language and intellect has already been laid by age three, how does this affect what you value in his environment as a baby? What are the elements of his environment that you would like to enhance? What might you want to remove or discourage? What greater efforts might you make when you consider these stakes? (See pages 169-170 for ideas)

“In addition to the books freely accessible to your child, keep a supply of books of good literature and beautiful illustrations. . . . These are books for you to read out loud to your child each evening before bed or at a special time during the day.” (p. 173)

When do you read to your child? What do you do to make sure this happens regularly? What are the challenges you have with this activity? How might having multiple children make this more challenging? What are some solutions you have found to overcome these challenges?

“Just as essential as reading to your child, he must see you reading for your own pleasure. Children tend to value whatever their parents value. If they never see you reading, they will know that books are not really important in your life, no matter what you may say to them.” (p. 174)

What are ways that you can read to yourself in front of your child at his various ages? How does having multiple children make this more complicated, and what are some solutions for these complications? How often do you think you would be able to read to yourself in front of your child?

“Just as in music, we want to introduce the infant to the best of our cultural heritage, so in helping the child develop this appreciation, it is important not to bombard the baby with too many artistic images, even as we limit the number of books available to him and do not keep music constantly playing in the background.” (p. 181)

Why does this matter for a baby? What are some of the options we might resist when we think about making only the finest art and music available for the young child? What are ways we can offer these experiences to our children in our homes?

“The development of character involves self-discipline and often sacrifice of one’s own desires for the good of self and others. . . . However, parents today are more likely to say their primary wish for their children is that they be happy. In pursuit of this goal they indulge their children, often unconsciously, to a degree that is startling to previous generations [often by buying excess toys]. All parents need to remember that true happiness comes through having character and discipline, and living a life of meaningful contribution—not by having and doing whatever you wish.” (p. 187)

Does having what you want when you want it create happiness? Is it an enduring happiness? What do you think creates true happiness? How does considering the concept of happiness in this light affect some of the day to day decisions you make for your child? When you reflect on this

concept of happiness, how might it alter your answer to the question, “What is my primary wish for my children?”?

“What kind of toys can parents select for their young child that are going to serve as an aid, rather than an obstacle, to his best development? We want any object that we give to the child under the age of three for independent play to enhance our ultimate goal: connection with others and an understanding of his world. We want, then, to avoid toys that represent the fantasy of an adult’s mind, instead of building the creative capacities of the child’s mind.” (p. 188)

What are some examples of toys that represent the fantasy of an adult’s mind? What are the best toys for building creativity in a child’s mind? Does a child need colorful, plastic, exciting toys to encourage their creativity? Why or why not?

“Look for toys for the child under three years old that help him distinguish the real from the unreal, look for order in the world, and understand categories and process.” (p. 189)

What are some examples of these kinds of toys? What kinds of toys do not accomplish these goals?

## Chapter 9: “The Developing Will”

“Civilized societies have always relied upon the discipline of their citizens. Discipline, obedience, and self-control all begin in childhood. Children must develop obedience to legitimate authority as a foundation for adult understanding and acceptance of the expectations of the civilization in which they are born.” (p. 197)

Have you ever considered a child’s will and development of discipline in this perspective? How does considering the requirements of civilization affect how you see your child’s will now?

“The first assistance we can give to the child is to serve as a model for self-control and order within our own lives. If we are leading an orderly life such actions are natural to us. However, if our lives are chaotic and we habitually feel frazzled and out of control, we need to slow down and take stock of our lives and ourselves... When we are orderly in our daily actions, children experience the disciplined thought that is in our minds. Because our mental order is visible to them, they can incorporate this order for their own use.” (p. 202)

How orderly or disorderly do you feel in the various areas of your life? To what extent can you imagine that this affects your child’s developing will?

“Next, let us consider the prepared environment. We know that the child is nourished and made secure by the order of things. Therefore, we need to prepare an environment for the child that demonstrates order and structure in action. Experiences of order in human life create expectations in the infant that, in turn, she can use to build order within her mind and to assist her in developing her will... ‘What, when, and where’ provide the opportunities for these expectations.” (p. 203)

How does your child’s environment demonstrate order and structure in action? How do you create your child’s routine and how do you keep to it? What are the challenges in keeping up a routine? What are some other examples of ways you establish order in her environment?

“This is a long process of self-formation for the child. Parents need to take care not to delay it unwittingly by a lack of conviction and firmness. ‘No’ must mean no every time... Children who encounter conviction and firmness in their parents’ setting of limits become people of character who understand life’s limitations and responsibilities. In the words of a Montessori trainer of teachers, the adult’s role is to ‘teach the children limits with love or the world will teach them without it.’” (p. 205)

How comfortable are you with saying no to your child? Is this something you struggle with? How does your child protest when you establish limits? When are you most likely to end up giving in? What do you think about the idea that you need to establish limits with love or the world will establish them without love?

“If the child [after 18 months] can no longer be distracted by new sensorial exploration, and yet is not ready to reason, is there any other new brain formation that we can use to help us? There is. The major new self-formation of the child in this period is the development of language. We can add language to the object or situation that we are using to redirect the child’s focus and guide her to think about something else. There are at least two ways that we can use language for this purpose. We can give the child a choice of activities or objects, and we can use description to focus the child on what is in front of her.” (p. 211)

What are some examples of how you might use this approach to redirect a child of this age? How can you use language to create two acceptable choices? How can you use language to draw the child into the one acceptable choice? (Examples from p. 211-212: “Would you like to use the pink potty or the blue potty?” and—while distracting child from his departing parent— “Look at the fish. Those are his black fins.”)

“Another point to remember when using language to help redirect children is not to expect immediacy in compliance. We have to wait a few moments for a response, perhaps even repeating our words. We know that the child’s brain has half the neural speed of the adult’s until approximately age twelve years. It may be necessary to repeat our words two or three times very patiently and with no threat in our voice.” (p. 213)

How many times do you repeat directives to your child? Does it frustrate you? How does it affect your feeling about it to know that their brains are simply operating slower than ours?

“[T]he essential point is to allow no combativeness in tone during such an encounter [instructing a young child to do something they need to do]. If we add a challenging note to our voices, an emotional response is touched off in the child and overwhelms whatever willpower she has managed to develop.” (p. 213)

What do you notice about how your child reacts when you tell them to do something calmly, versus with emotion? When is it harder for you to keep emotion out of your instructions? Do you have any techniques for keeping your “combative tone” in check when emotions are rising?

“[W]e can think of obedience as coming in three stages. From twelve to eighteen months old, the child understands but cannot carry through without a good deal of adult help. From eighteen months to three years old, she can understand the adult’s request and can sometimes obey without help. At about three years old, the child reaches the level of development where she can consistently obey, but may still choose not to.” (p. 214)

How does knowing about the stages of obedience affect what you would expect from a child at these ages? What are some examples of how your expectations, engagement, and responses might be different at the different stages?

“For much of the time, however, because the child is unformed, the parent must substitute his own energy and will for those of the child. For this role, the adult must have the confidence

necessary for good leadership. The parent can use a gentle voice when saying ‘I will help you’ to the child. However, everything in the adult’s manner and tone must leave no doubt as to the outcome of each situation. The adult’s words and actions, as a part of the structure of the child’s environment, are as real as its physical elements; they must reflect authority.” (p. 218)

How do you feel about acting as a leader? Do you think you have authority with your child? If not, or in the times you do not, why are you not comfortable using authority?