

For: Reflections on Homeschooling

We'll Drive Each Other Crazy! How to Stay in a House.

While our two children were growing up, I took them to live in a cabin in Ontario on a small island for one or two months every summer. It was "Canada time." My husband would come on some weekends, sometimes we visited family staying nearby, and sometimes a young girl came to babysit for a few hours. But, most of the time, I was alone with the two children, from their infancies through age 12, and a dog. Very alone, and very isolated. No TV, no computers, no radio, no phone, no neighbors.

People thought I was crazy to do this! And the first week or two, I could see why. The children whined. They cried. They screamed. They hit each other and had to be sent to their rooms. I whined. I cried. I screamed. I didn't hit anybody, but I did send myself to my room! The beginnings can be tough when you are building a new routine for your family and you are in close quarters without the usual entertainment, changes of pace, other people, and movement that fills most of our normal days in modern life.

But as you settle into your home with your children right now, have faith, and stick with your vision of what it can become. Insist on a routine, even though your family - adults and children alike - may protest. Carve out quiet work time for everyone. Give everyone jobs to do in order to clean the house, to provide meals, and to make it function. This transition does not typically happen overnight, and it will take determination to get through the discomfort of adjusting.

Here are some suggestions for what to establish:

Meals

Stick to general meal times and locations for eating. Eat together for all meals if your children are young, and for at least one a day if your children are older. A light mid-morning snack and an afternoon "tea time" can be helpful for little ones. Ask each child to help prepare a meal, and to make certain meals themselves, if capable. Establish that food is only eaten in certain locations and when sitting down, no matter the ages. Setting the table and being formal about meals make them more enjoyable. You can light candles and share some things you are grateful for a few special evenings.

Work Time

Children may try to interrupt working parents or pull their attention away, but they will learn not to through your consistency. Deliberately set up the scene: put on whatever outfit signals that you are now "working," get your cup of coffee, set up your work station in the same place every day, and put out some visible signal, like an object or a written sign, so that others know you are not to be disturbed for this time.

Your children also need an area for working. Their "work" might be drawing, crafts, building with Legos, or reading. It might be practical life activities like pouring water between different sized cups and pitchers on a tray, doing a puzzle, writing a story, or writing out math problems.

Three hours of relaxed quiet time, where children can make their own choices of work, get themselves a light snack, stretch their legs, and change activities, is your goal. Maintaining the routine that they have at school will help your children keep a sense of rhythm and develop their abilities to concentrate and direct themselves independently. This is your “home school.”

You may need an afternoon work time as well, to maintain your own schedule. Your children might listen to an audiobook while building with blocks during that time, play in a basement play area, or have a quiet hour alone in their bedrooms to nap and read and play quietly. Do not apologize to your children when you need to work; having a job is a blessing we want them to respect and support in your family! If you have a positive attitude about your work, your children are more likely to embrace theirs as well. You are a model they will imitate, and this is a memorable time to work together as a family unit!

Cleaning

In our cabin, I made a colorful chart with drawings to show that Monday, we did laundry; Tuesday, we baked and cooked meals to freeze; Wednesday, we cleaned the bathrooms; Thursday, we cleaned our bedrooms; Friday, we swept and dusted throughout the cabin; and Saturday, we cleaned the kitchen. When you break it down this way, and everyone stops to dedicate 45 minutes to the cleaning at the same time, it is manageable. (You can even put some music on, woohoo!) I got this idea from housekeeping books from the old, old days, and it really makes sense to spread it out. (Of course they had a day for ironing, but forget that!)

Movement

Getting out in the fresh air, one, two, or even three times a day, is important for all of us, and especially for growing children. No matter what the weather, aim for a walk and a play time outside. Walks are appealing because there’s a route and a destination, even if it is just a loop. Passing the same scenery each time gives young children repetition that soothes their need for order and orientation. Try longer walks than you may normally. For all ages, this is a healthy form of exercise, and you may be surprised how far a one- or two-year-old can walk! Try leaving the stroller behind. Make this a daily event, and, though children may wander and be tired after just ten minutes, this is a wonderful way to connect with nature. You may find that the walks become longer as the days progress.

Rituals

We highly recommend reading aloud to each child daily, and perhaps adding a silent reading time after lunch for everyone. You also might read aloud at the end of every day to the whole family. Last night, I forced my two teens to listen to the first chapter of *Old Yeller*. They thought this was silly, so they writhed and resisted for a while. But by the end, our daughter was drifting peacefully off to sleep and our son was listening thoughtfully. You’re never too old for read-aloud time! Another ritual you might consider is an evening fire in the fireplace, if you have one, and playing a game. You might light candles by your reading area at the end of the day. You might have a prayer time, or start an afternoon tea time. Rituals bring people together and create positive predictability.

Entertainment

It is going to be very, very, very tempting to try that forbidden daytime “screen time” that so many of your neighbors are raving about! When you feel this pull, just think about the long-term goal of raising resilient children who can think for themselves, solve problems, and use their developed imaginations. You can also think of the short-term goal: Endure the discomfort while it lasts, and watch as your children rise to the occasion.

Think of my story of spending each summer in Canada and having to start over each time. When I endured the boredom, the monotony, and the frustration, beautiful things started to happen: the children became self-entertainers, and they became more creative and started to concentrate on activities for long periods of time. They made up activities, like collecting little stones and lining them up, looking for insects, imagining stories with dolls and animal figures, looking at books, and building things with clay. They even washed their little eating table and scrubbed the kitchen floor. It was amazing! Our children felt more at peace and noticed their surroundings more. It always happened after that first week of challenge. They found that inner equilibrium that Montessori children develop in their classrooms day after day.

Final Thoughts

The beginning of every school year is tough for Montessori teachers. They have to push through the days with the new class just as you are having to now. It can be a big adjustment for children to learn to entertain themselves, to think reflectively, to slow down, to attune to grace and courtesy, and to follow new demands. But it is worth every day of working through it. Sticking to that vision of calm cooperation is the only way to make it happen - in a classroom, and in a home!

For the first few days of “home stay” in our own house, our 15-year-old daughter and 18-year-old son slept in until noon, went missing when it was time to clean up, stared at their computer screens while claiming to do schoolwork, and stayed in their pajamas. My husband and I wandered around, worrying about bigger things, distracted and trying to sort out our own responsibilities. But Jim and I pulled things together with a family meeting to say, it’s “Canada time”! I know that from growing up as Montessori children, our teenagers have all the stamina they need inside them - it’s just a matter of finding that base again. That’s a base you’re building in your own homes, right now.