

Returning to Montessori Values After These Higher-Tech Years

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Forest Bluff School Blog

Adapting with Technology Was Empowering

We are more grateful than ever for the technology in our lives! During the pandemic, being physically separated from one another was painful, especially for our children who crave social interaction. Out of necessity, we learned inventive ways that computers, iPhones and iPads could connect us—to one another and to information about the world.

The worldwide Montessori community of educators found creative ways to use technology to reach students, which was an empowering example of how Montessori's educational approach is designed for adapting to any time, culture and place. We learned to "teach" through the screen with voice, facial expressions, and using cameras to film teachers' and students' hands working Montessori materials. Teachers made and delivered materials to families and wrote directions for how to make one's own versions. Many children and parents fashioned creative replicas and pivoted to continue their learning at home. It was a massive effort to translate Montessori education into new formats and to open access to more communities. Learning ways to adapt was liberating and the result is that many more people found Montessori as an option for schooling. Dr. Montessori would have cheered the adaptation, because she believed it to be perhaps the most important quality of childhood.

The Drawbacks of Increased Technology for Children

In these past two years, most children have become accustomed to using technology to communicate with friends, investigate information, use social platforms, and to text and chat. Their younger minds seem designed to intuitively navigate these forums much faster than adults. This is not an illusion. Have you noticed how quickly and nimbly your children learn to work around obstacles and outsmart even...you?

There are drawbacks, however, some of which you have probably observed. Many children become irritable, less patient, and lose their ability to focus or to calm themselves after spending an hour or more on screens such as iPads, cell phones, or other screen devices. Longer term effects can impact children's fine motor and gross motor development, social skills, and emotional regulation. Because being able to calm oneself, being able to focus and being patient with oneself and others are imperative skills, this trend is worrisome. For children who are developing, any technology use—simply because it does not integrate the five senses and movement the way that real life does—can be considered overuse.

When you as a parent decide whether or not to give your children time with screen devices, consider the developmental consequences that will affect them. This is important, because we cannot go back in time and reset our children's minds and bodies once they pass

through each developmental stage. Montessori reminds us—and science has proven—that the most influential times in a person’s life are in childhood:

- Years 1-6 are especially absorbent and malleable; trillions of neuronal pathways are being formed and pruned. These children need to explore their surroundings with their five senses, to use their fingers and hands to develop their abilities, develop gross motor skills for balance, core strength, and overall health. They need to be thinking, engaging with their surroundings, interacting, listening and speaking to communicate and developing their vocabulary, pronunciation, and interpersonal skills for cooperating, collaborating and expressing their thoughts and feelings in pro-social ways.
- Years 6-12 are crucial ones for learning how to relate with others, to collaborate and get along with peers—social skills that their success and happiness in adulthood will depend on. They also need to stay active physically for their physical strength, health and well-being. These children need to be interacting with others their ages as much as possible, to learn manners, ways of relating, build friendships, and to discover and expand their own personalities. They need to be moving and active, building physical structures, imagining and creating through play.
- Years 12-18 are powerful ones for learning how to regulate one’s emotions, develop empathy, self-awareness and self-esteem. Physical activity continues to be important. Joining adults in society is a process of valorization for their confidence. These children need to be welcomed into the adult fold and introduced to how adults function successfully. Adolescents need to be shown how we adults handle and manage our thoughts and emotions, more intricate situations, complexity, and more refined skills such as balancing a checking account, paying taxes, a mortgage or rental lease, as examples. Some technology becomes an integral part of how we function as adults, and older teens are ready to handle some of the challenges and benefits of technology that we adults deal with, too. Around 15 years old, adolescents have great elasticity in their thinking and can navigate technology more maturely, with more developed judgment to manage inherent challenges.
- Years 18-24 is when young adults learn to look outward and step into society to take part and effect positive change, if all the stages leading up to it have been satisfied. As young adults, they are independent in their technology use and ready to—if they were allowed to develop fully at each of the previous stages—be on their own, with parents and other adult mentors only needed as advisors or collaborators.

Each of these stages of development depend on the maturation of the one preceding it. This means that what we do as parents along the way really matters! To provide the optimal environment for our children's best development, we've got to think through our family's technology use for ourselves.

One exercise I suggest is to reflect on what one gives up (or "hands over") when they use a cell phone or text—they give up a lot of the necessary executive functioning skills that children have to exercise and practice in order to develop. In other words, by handing your child a screen device, you create a kind of vacuum where skill-building would have occurred. Suddenly, a child does not need to—and cannot have the opportunity to—form executive function skills that will guide their decisions and behaviors in adulthood. Think of a teenager who is disoriented and unsure what to do if their technology fails them or does not guide them on what to do or how to handle a situation. They are learning to substitute or replace their own intuitions, experiences, and judgment, when they are too young to even realize it. This is where a virtual upbringing can quickly replace family and community interaction.

One common example of where executive function skills lose out is when we hand our children a cell phone and instruct them, "Call me when you want me to pick you up." With this convenience, we avoid the opportunities for our children to practice planning ahead. They don't get to learn how to stick with a plan of when and where they will be or experience how long it takes to bike or walk to a certain location, or how to manage their time. They lose out on all this practice and the development of important life skills. They also miss out on the chance to feel more independent. This may be convenient for the adults, but it's unfortunate for the children. None of us really wants to thwart our children's development, but this is the simple trade off.

There are some very good books and articles advising parents on screen time and its effects on children. When I look at these, I investigate by looking in the back of the book to find who conducted the research. Was the research published in a peer-reviewed science journal where studies have control groups? Who was the control group (children who interact with screen *several* hours a day, as opposed to those who interact with them nine or more hours? Or was the study group compared to children who interact with no screens at all—which would be a more clear picture of how even a small amount of screen time affects child development?) Finally, who funded the research? I am wary of tech company-sponsored research, which is driven to find positive results linked to screen use. One "flag" that I have noticed over the years is that researchers who study early child development and those who look at the intersections of socio-emotional levels and cognition and movement (both fine and gross motor), are alarmed at how children are slipping rapidly on basic skills and development. Pediatricians who have been practicing for twenty years or more certainly have witnessed this trend. But doctors whose only patients spend time with screens every day are not getting enough of a comparison to show them what children are capable of *and what normal human development would be* without the screen time.

Parents must use their common sense to make decisions about how to best guide their children. Most people know intuitively that being outside in nature, interacting with other human beings, moving our bodies, using our minds and reflecting to think deeply, are the healthiest activities for our families and especially for our children.

Montessori reminds us, “Children develop their brains as well as their bodies through movement, and in the process of concentration, self-discipline, and perseverance with an active interest, the foundations of character are laid” (*Montessori Speaks*).

Back to Our Values!

Although we have benefitted—and surely will again—by having technology that can connect us from afar, we also know that communicating through a screen is not the same as doing so in person. We adults— and especially children—lose quite a bit when screens replace three dimensional experiences and real interactions. Now that the daily necessity for screens has passed, it’s time to wean our children from using them out of habit. It is time to return to our fundamental Montessori values and to prioritize real interaction with the environment and between individuals.

If you are afraid that taking away your child’s devices and screen time will make them “the only one” at soccer practice, the gym meet, or any event without a phone, you may be right, at least initially. Your child may be looking around while their surrounding friends turn their faces down towards their screens. But the tradeoff is immense; your child will be thinking, observing the world around them, trying to talk to people or doing something interesting. In short, he or she will be building themselves as people. And the more parents catch on that the heavy use of technology is unhealthy for children, the more children will join yours. **One increasingly popular idea is to talk to other families about starting a lower-tech community to give children a friend group with similar values and habits.**

When making a change away from allowing your children to use screen devices in your family, the best strategy is to share your reasoning openly with your children and explain the long-term benefits of avoiding screen distractions in childhood. Tell them what you want for them, and why. Trust that your children are smart enough to understand your reasoning. Don’t underestimate their strength to be individuals in a sea of learned behaviors that do not benefit us as human beings. Quite simply, our communities and our future depend on individuals who can *think* and *do*! We do not need to join those who follow a crowd blindly. Just because “everyone else is doing it” doesn’t mean it’s the best choice. Montessori parents know this, and Montessori children do, too.

“Just do it!”

When you know that living a less “screened-in” life is the best thing to do, you can set an example for your children of being strong enough to make a change by *doing* it. Giving in to external pressures or giving up when nagged only sets a weak example for younger generations. We adults have got to be sure of ourselves and show our children how such

things are done. You can be secure enough to donate iPhones and iPads to adults who may need them, and move on to healthier activities and a more peaceful, enjoyable home life as a family.

Additionally, when we make time and space to pursue our curiosities and talents in the physical world, rather than the virtual world, we open up great possibilities for our growth. Montessori wrote, "There is a vital force in every human being which leads them to make ever greater efforts for the realization of individual potentialities. Our tendency is to realize them. Joy and interest will come when we can realize the potentialities that are within us" (*London Lectures*).

We can step back, observe, think for ourselves and put technology back where it belongs, in adult hands. Children need to step out of our homes and into the world, to play, imagine, interact and create. Parents can enable their children to do just that. As one Montessori-trained teacher recently reminded me, "Children need to be part of the world in order to learn to love it. They need to be in contact with the soil, the leaves, the wind. They need to be part of a community of real people. Children need this contact in order to develop love for these elements of a good life. We cannot make these things happen for our children if something isolates them from these experiences."

What A Joy the Real World Brings!

We are fortunate that we can turn off the devices, put them away, and even give devices away. These devices helped us and our children get through the pandemic. But now, it is a joy to be in person again, to feel the grass under our feet, to travel, and to share a meal with extended family or friends. It is time for our children to get outside, or play a board game, read a book, imagine and use their minds, talk and laugh with each other, and be creative. We do not need the technology the way we did, and we hopefully will not need it so intensively again for quite a while. In the meantime, *carpe diem!*