



A Montessori Approach to Discipline

Consistency

Montessori children tend to be independent with a strong sense of order. It is important to keep this in mind in our approach to discipline.

Young children require consistency. This means that all adults in the home must have the same expectations and consequences. For example, when one parent says it is time to take a shower now but the other parent says the child can continue to play for another 5 minutes, the child becomes confused. If we let a negative behavior go once, it is confusing to the child when the same behavior is deemed inappropriate the next time.

Oftentimes children test limits simply as an exploration, not necessarily because they are invested in the negative behavior. For example, a child who is demanding to have five more minutes to play with their toys doesn't necessarily want to continue playing. Instead, he or she is trying to figure out what makes the adult tick; why sometimes they have to stop immediately and other times the adult gives in. This is why it is important to maintain the same limits every single time, even when it is inconvenient.

Avoid Power Struggles

Often times you can avoid a power struggle if you observe your child's triggers and take the steps to prevent any stressors.

Avoid negative behaviors by redirecting your child when you see that he/she is becoming triggered. For example, you may gently inform your child in advance "We are going to go outside soon. You may look at your book for 1 more minute then we will get ready".

You may offer your child a choice between 2 acceptable outcomes, this will make your child feel empowered. For example, if you know that getting ready for bed is a trigger, you might offer two choices first: "It's time for bed. You can choose. Would you like to pick out a book to read before bed or shall we sing a song tonight?" Be sure not give in to your child's demands, if your child asks you to sing them to sleep, they may not have the option of reading a book also. This gives your child the message that you do not respect their decision.

In the event that a child loses control, it is important to be consistent in your approach.

We recommend the following plan of attack for dealing with difficult behavior:

1) Do not overreact. No matter how you feel, speak in a calm and controlled voice. When a child is out of control, they need to see that the adult is **in control**.

2) State the behavior and the limit in a matter-of-fact tone: "I can see that you threw toys all over your room, and now your room is a mess. It is never ok to throw things."

3) Allow time for the child to calm down. Do not try to engage your child in conversation while he/she is irrational. It is easy to fall into the trap of giving a lot of attention for negative behaviors. When you do this, it reinforces that behavior. When we talk about ignoring a behavior, we do not mean ignoring the child. Rather, we might say, "I can see that your body is not calm. Would you like to sit in the kitchen or would you like me to hold your hand while you calm your body down?" If he/she is incapable of making a choice, you may have to choose for him/her: "Ok, I will hold your hand until you are calm enough to talk about this."

If he/she chooses to take a break or spend some time alone, make sure that he/she is the one to tell you when he/she is calm. Many people use time limits, which is an ineffective approach. Some children may be able to calm themselves in a matter of seconds while others may take much longer. Only your child will know when he/she has taken enough time to calm down.

4) Give a logical consequence. Taking away a favorite toy is ineffective, if it has nothing to do with the situation. The consequence must be unique to the situation, for example, "We can eat breakfast **after** you clean up this mess," "I can see that you are not ready to be with us in the kitchen; would you rather read a book in your room or stay in the living room while I prepare dinner?"

5) Follow through with whatever consequence you set. If you set the expectation that your child cleans up before breakfast, be prepared to stay firm even if it takes 45 minutes. If you don't have that kind of time, choose a consequence you are capable of following through with. Do not engage him/her with an argument; instead, repeat the expectation in simple terms over and over: "It's time to clean up. You may have breakfast when you have cleaned this mess" over and **over without any additional dialogue**.

When you make changes to the way that you discipline in your household, the first few days/weeks will be the toughest. Once your child learns that you have clear and consistent limits, he/she will feel less of a need to push the limits. Stick to it! It also helps to practice some calming skills (deep breaths, alone time) in a neutral moment.

Avoid Attention Seeking Behavior

Most attention-seeking behaviors can be avoided or minimized by providing extra positive attention. Montessori children love helping, so giving them special responsibilities every day is a wonderful way for them to have some independence at home. It also helps to really ramp up the positive attention. As a general rule, we also recommend that for each time you have to discipline your child, you should have told him/her at least 3 nice things. We give descriptive, meaningful praise (“When you washed the dishes, that was really helpful.” “You were so responsible when you walked to the car without running.” “I liked how gently you were playing with the dog.”) The goal is for your child to learn that he/she can get lots of attention for positive behaviors and not much attention for negative behavior.