

Freedom and Responsibility

The liberty of the child should have as its limit the collective interest; as its form, what we universally consider we universally consider good breeding. We must, therefore, check in the child whatever offends or annoys others, or whatever tends toward rough and ill- bred acts.

But all the rest, - every manifestation having a useful scope, - whatever it be, and under what ever form it expresses itself, must not only be permitted , but must be observed by the teacher. Here lies the essential point: from her scientific preparation, the teacher must bring not only the capacity, but the desire, to observe natural phenomena. In our system, she must become a passive, much more than an active influence, and her passivity shall be composed of anxious scientific curiosity, and of absolute respect for the phenomenon which she wishes to observe. The teacher must understand and feel her position of observer: the activity must lie in the phenomenon.

Maria Montessori, The Montessori Method, Chapter V

Looking at the first section of the quote, Montessori says that the limit to liberty is what is good for the group as a whole, and the form of that liberty is universal values. She seems to be saying that there is a limit on the liberty we give children in our classroom. Freedom always comes with the responsibility to consider others and treat them with respect.

When the child develops inner discipline, he will choose on his own to do what is best for himself and the group as a whole, but how does he learn what is best? How do we help children understand the value of respecting and looking out for the collective? Montessori says we must check what ever offend or annoys... By check, I believe she

means more than notice it. In another quote she clearly and emphatically states that we should "stop firmly and immediately and misuse of the environment and any actions which endangers the child, his development, or that of others." (Montessori Decalogue) This is pretty clear. We must protect the safety of every child and guide the children to understand what respectful behavior is.

We must not give children the freedom to be rude, destructive, hurtful, unkind, and disruptive. To give this kind of freedom does more harm than good. Montessori says, "To let a child do as he likes, when he has not yet developed any powers of control, is to betray the idea of freedom!" Children need to feel safe and secure in their environment in order to be free. When the limits are unclear, children will either constantly test those limits, causing chaos within themselves and the environment; or they will withdraw and not accept any challenge. Both limit the child's freedom to develop to his or her greatest potential.

On the other hand, if one imposes too many rules and is harsh and rigid in the enforcement of these limits, this too will stifle the development of the child... So what do we do?

The secret is to find the right balance! The best Montessori classrooms are a perfect balance of freedom and limits.

The limits come in the form of clear ground rules that teach children to be caring and responsible members of their community. Our ground rules need to provide awareness and guidance in understanding what is in the best interest of the collective good and what are the universal values and how do we live by them.

Now if we look at the second part of the quote, Montessori clarifies the way we must provide freedom for the child. She says:

But all the rest, - every manifestation having a useful scope, - whatever it be, and under what ever form it expresses itself, must not only be permitted , but must be observed by the teacher.

Here Montessori instructs us to allow the child to explore... every other useful manifestation must be allowed. If the child's activity is not **dangerous, destructive,** or **disruptive,** then leave it alone and observe. (Keep in mind that rude and unkind behavior falls in the category of dangerous. Sometimes we allow much too much emotionally damaging behavior to take place.)

Montessori adds that not only do we allow this freedom of activity; we study it, as a scientist, learning from the mysteries that unfold before us. And then what? What do we do with this new knowledge we gain from observation? Montessori gives a clue in the quote below:

The teacher must not limit her actions to observation, bust must proceed to experiment.

Maria Montessori, The Montessori Method, Chapter VI

What is this experimenting that the observations must call us to? This is the changes we make in the environment, the creation of new lessons based on observed interests and needs, the offering of new lessons and new challenges.

Observation informs our action. Whether it is informing a physical change in the environment to meet a need, or the presentation of a grace and courtesy lesson to

help the children better understand kindness and respect, all our actions and experiments should be informed by what we have witnessed and assessed through observation. In this way we will better be able to provide the right balance of guidance and structure so that the children have healthy parameters that will enable them to be free.

The key is the balance of Freedom and Structure!

Montessori at its best is a delicate balance of freedom and structure, freedom within limits. Structure and organization contribute greatly to the Parameters of Freedom. The following two quotes from Montessori speak to this:

The children in our schools are free, but that does not mean there is no organization. Organization, in fact is necessary, and if children are to be free to work, it must be even more thorough than in the ordinary schools.

Once we have created an environment in which all the objects are attuned to children's developmental needs, we have done all that is needed to produce this phenomenon.

Maria Montessori, The Absorbent Mind, Chapter 24

The phenomenon she was speaking of is her observation of children in Montessori environments fused into a social group more perfect than that of adults. All they need, according for Montessori to become a cohesive social community is a well prepared environment with activities that meet the children's developmental needs. This speaks volumes about the power of meaningful activity and the essential element of preparing the environment.

Montessori notes that organization is even more important in an environment set up for freedom than in traditional schools. It is not that we must simply put the right activities in the environment, but we must give ample attention to organizing it for the child's success.

- A well prepared Montessori environment is designed for the child's independence and leads to the child's success, which leads to freedom.
- Orderly well prepared environments give the child a sense of security. When they feel secure they take ownership and become more active participants.
- The more orderly the environment the clearer the child will understand his limits and the easier it is for the him to freely explore

In visiting many Montessori classrooms as a consultant and teacher educator, I have found a direct correlation between attractive well prepared classrooms and highly functioning, calm... and shall we say 'normalized' children.

And the opposite has consistently held true as well. Classrooms that were disorderly, with broken and incomplete materials, were often more chaotic, with far less focused work taking place.

One of the important ways we provide structure and limits is in the physical organization and preparation of the environment. But physical structure alone is not enough to provide the perfect balance of freedom and discipline.

It is important for teaching partners to work together to define clear guidelines for behavior that is kind and respectful. When the adults have a clear vision of the kind of community they want they will be able to teach it to the students through Grace and Courtesy lessons and provide consistent follow-through to make sure the children understand the limits. Montessori explains the need for children to understand these limits:

The power to make progress comes in large measure from having freedom and an assured path along which to go; but to this must also be added some way of knowing if, and when, we have left the path.

Maria Montessori, The Montessori Method, Chapter V

As a Montessori guide we hold the lantern that lights the path, showing the way of kindness, respect, and responsibility. Montessori says they need a way of knowing when they are off course. This way of knowing is provided by the work we do to organize and structure the classroom and activities, the grace and courtesy lessons we present and model, the redirection we provide when needed, the guidance from other children who have already internalized the way, and the child's own self-correction.

Yes, freedom is essential for healthy development but **with every freedom comes a responsibility!** Our role is to create the environment for exploration, with clear limits that encourage children to find within themselves that perfect balance of freedom and responsibility.

This is one of the most challenging aspects of our role as Montessori guide. It requires constant self-examination. Do I under manage or over manage my classroom? Am I under managing or over managing this particular child? Now some

may take exception with the word manage... guide and lead are probably more appropriate, but the point is that we need to reflect on ability to walk the razor sharp edge of balancing freedom and limits. Every group of children will be different and need different levels of freedom and limits. Each individual child will have different needs for guidance. Circumstances will change from day to day, even minute to minute, and in different circumstances different levels of guidance will be necessary. Sometimes we will miss the mark, but we will never hit the target if we don't know what it is. Once we know what we are aiming for we can work on developing the skills and inner strength needed to achieve our goal. We can only give to children what we have first gained ourselves. We will need to first hold the lantern on our own path; working on our own inner peace and the delicate balance needed to guide children.