



April/May 2010

Newsletter for Parents of SAMA Member Schools

Dear Parents

This month, I would like to share part of an excellent article that I found online with regard to Montessori's approach to discipline. Over time, Montessori teachers have found that the parents who have taken the time to understand the philosophy regarding discipline in our environments, and who try to incorporate similar methods at home have greater success in this area. Children who have a discipline system at home that is compatible with that at school are more secure and display signs of self-discipline earlier. The Montessori concept of true discipline coming from within is explained really well in this article and I encourage you to read the entire article at:

<http://www.montessori.org/story.php?id=230>.

Our annual conference is upon us! I look forward to sharing some of the experience with you in the next newsletter.

Heidi van Staden
SAMA President

The Montessori Approach to Discipline

By: Mary Conroy and Kitty Williams Bravo

This article was first published in Tomorrow's Child magazine Upon visiting a Montessori classroom for the first time, one might wonder what magic spell has been cast upon these young children making them so calm and self directed. Another person might look at that same class and be confused by the children's independence, wondering where's the discipline, these children just do as they please.

Visitors commonly issue such comments as, "I've heard Montessori is too free and chaotic" or "I've heard Montessori is too structured." It does not seem possible that these two extreme opposites can both be true. Montessori is, however, all in the eyes of the beholder. This method or philosophy of education varies in interpretation from school to school, teacher to teacher, and parent to parent. There are certainly some Montessori classrooms that are very rigid and adult controlled, and there are also classrooms that are disorderly and anything goes. Montessori when done well, however, is a beautiful blend and perfect balance of freedom and structure. The best Montessori teachers or facilitators understand that maintaining the delicate balance is one of the most challenging and rewarding aspects of their job. It is on that foundation of freedom and structure that the child builds discipline. Freedom is not a word that is traditionally associated with discipline.

Parents are often concerned that the Montessori child's freedom to choose activities presupposes that discipline is something alien to our classrooms. Does freedom mean license to act as he or she chooses or does freedom of choice carry with it certain responsibilities in the classroom community? Are we, as some would claim, a place where children can do what they like or, as a young Montessori student once told a visitor, a place where children like what they do? To have any meaningful discussion of these questions, it would seem that our first priority should be to define this thing called discipline. Montessori herself held that discipline is "not ...a fact but a way."

True discipline comes more from within than without and is the result of steadily developing inner growth. Just as the very young child must first learn to stand before she can walk, she must develop an inward order through work before she is able to choose and carry out her own acts. Surprisingly enough, Montessori found that it was through the very liberty inherent in her classrooms that the children were given the means to reveal their inner or self-discipline. Independence did not diminish respect for authority but rather deepened it. One of the things that aroused her greatest interest was that order and discipline seemed to be so closely united that they resulted in freedom.

But, many people assume that discipline is something that is imposed from without by an authority figure who should be obeyed without question. Discipline in the Montessori environment is not something that is done to the child; nor is it a technique for controlling behaviour. Our concern is with the development of the internal locus of control, which enables an individual to choose the right behaviour because it is right for him or herself and right for the community. If discipline comes from within, then what is the job of the teacher?

Inner discipline is something, which evolves. It is not something that is automatically present within the child and it cannot be taught. The role of the teacher, then, is to be a model and a guide while supporting the child as he develops to the point where he is able to choose to accept and to follow the "rules" of the classroom community. This

level of obedience is the point where true inner discipline has been reached. One knows this level of discipline has been reached when children are able to make appropriate behavioural choices even when we are not present.

Discipline presupposes a certain degree of obedience. Before the age of three a child is truly unable to obey unless what is asked of her happens to correspond with one of her vital urges. At this stage, her personality hasn't formed to the level where she is capable of making a choice to obey. It is this level which Montessori termed the first level of obedience. A toddler can obey, but not always. The second level of obedience is reached when the child is capable of understanding another person's wishes and can express them in her own behaviour. When this second level of obedience is reached, most parents and teachers would think they had reached their goal. Most adults ask only that children obey. The goals of Montessori reach beyond this, however, to the third level which Montessori called "joyful obedience". At this stage the child has internalised obedience, or we might say, had developed self-discipline where he sees clearly the value of what is being offered to him by authority and rushes to obey. This is not blind obedience at all, but is a fully informed choice by a personality which has grown in freedom and developed to its fullest potential. This is what we want for our children.

With this level of obedience or self-discipline comes a degree of self-respect in which a child cannot help but respect the rights and needs of others alongside her own. She is then able to learn and grow freely in the security of a community of respectful individuals. This of course, is a wonderful philosophy, but can Montessori truly deliver these results? Montessori can only benefit children when it moves beyond philosophy and takes a practical application.