

The Montessori Messenger

Est. 2003

www.samontessori.org.za

January 2017

Montessori 101

Principle 3: Rewards and punishments are not used in a Montessori environment.

Dear Parents,

I am enjoying this opportunity to engage with you on this platform. Thank you for taking the time to learn more about the basic Montessori principles that the SAMA member school your child/ren attend follows.

This newsletter will focus on the third of six principles that all SAMA member schools are required to follow, which is that rewards and punishments are not used in a Montessori school.

Many of us have been raised in homes and educated in schools where rewards and punishment were used. This has formed part of our adult (teaching and parenting) blueprint and is often what we fall back on when disciplining children. In our home, (I know I am not alone) my daughter happily obliges to any reasonable request while my son appears to think that to comply to any request is to give up life itself.

In a Montessori classroom, this is no different. Some children comply easily and others don't. Some children easily engage with other children and generally get along well whilst others always seem to be the common denominator in altercations or misbehaviour.

All these children, with their different personalities have to assimilate a variety of skills in order to understand and manage the complexity of human social life.

How do we support these emerging social skills of children or help them adjust and respond to the multi-faceted social and cultural norms of our society if we don't manipulate their behaviour through external motivators?

Do the children in a Montessori school have no boundaries if rewards and punishments are not used? This is a question many parents wonder about because the system of manipulating children's behaviour is so deeply ingrained in our way of thinking about how to raise children. We have a "power over the child" mentality as opposed to a "power with the child" one.

In *The Secret of Childhood*, Montessori details an event where a child is isolated from the rest of the group as a form of punishment. She observed that "the child in the armchair looked indifferently at the (punishment) badge and then gazed calmly about the room, quite oblivious to any sense of shame"



As time passed Montessori observed that neither reward nor punishment were effective motivators for the children. Instead she found that purposeful, meaningful activity provided intrinsic motivation for the children, in other words, the children became inspired!

This was in stark contrast to what was happening in regular 'factory model' schools at the time. The focus was not on nurturing the spirit of the child but rather on scoring well on exams and memorizing data to repeat at a later time. During this time the popular psychology term 'behaviorism' also came into play in the educational sector.

Simplistically, behaviourism states that anyone can learn anything and the mind of the child is a blank slate. It also only focuses on one particular view of learning: a change in external behaviour is achieved through rote learning (reinforcement and repetition). Desired behaviour is rewarded, while the undesirable behaviour is punished – also referred to as operant conditioning.



The principles of operant conditioning are still used for teaching and learning techniques used in the regular schools today.

But you didn't choose a regular school for your child, you chose a Montessori school. Montessori schools are different because we see children in a way that is fundamentally different from the behaviourist outlook of old.

Montessori saw the flaws within the behaviourist view of teaching and learning. The first flaw she noted was that the "teacher" is the dominant person in the classroom and takes complete control. Evaluation of learning comes from the teacher who decides what is right or wrong. The child never

has an opportunity for evaluation or reflection within the learning process, they are simply told what is right or wrong.

Secondly, the focus is only on the external change in behaviour with no interest in the internal processes of learning that lead to the behaviour change and therefore has no consideration for the emotions involved the process.

“If we are to teach real peace in this world we shall have to begin with the children.”

Mahatma Gandhi

In her book 'From Childhood to Adolescence' Montessori challenges us by stating that 'education should not limit itself to seeking new methods for a mostly arid transmission of knowledge: its aim must be to give the necessary aid to human development.... If 'the formation of man' becomes the basis of education, then the coordination of all schools from infancy to maturity, from nursery to university, arises as a first necessity: for man is a unity, an individuality that passes through interdependent phases of development. Each preceding phase prepares for the one that follows, forms its base, nurtures the energies that urge towards the succeeding period of life.'

Indeed, rewards and punishments have no place in the Montessori classroom because it is important for children to work from their own inner inspiration or self-motivation. Montessori teachers believe that if children work in order to get a gold star, some other prize or to avoid the disapproval of an adult it is impossible for us to see where the child's true interests lie.

So, what do we actually do?

Guides in a Montessori classroom provide opportunities encouraging independence, which are based on the observations of the sensitive periods (a block of time in the child's development where they show a heightened interest in one aspect of their environment over others). When these sensitive periods are satisfied, they offer the child stronger reinforcement than any rewards or praise could do.

“The essence of independence is to be able to do something for one’s self. Adults work to finish a task, but the child works in order to grow, and is working to create the adult, the person that is to be.”

Maria Montessori

This is not as easy as it sounds. As teachers, we grapple every day with whether we have made the right choice in our lesson plans for each child. The reality is that the lessons are the easy part. Our difficulty arises when we have to suppress our “blueprint” of dominance when a child declines our lesson or we have to help children resolve conflict between each other. Instead of saying “you must do this now!” we have to find a way to entice the child to join us willingly. An alternative to us dominating an argument between two children and forcing one to say sorry to the other we engage with the children and discuss their emotions and offer possible solutions in a way to aid independence.

If you want to change the way you see disciplining your child, please look up these resources to help you on your way.

Online Links:

<http://livingmontessorinow.com/a-montessori-approach-to-praise/>

<http://livingmontessorinow.com/a-montessori-approach-to-discipline/>

<http://www.chesapeakemontessorischool.com/montessori-approach-discipline/>

<http://montessoritraining.blogspot.co.za/2009/07/montessori-parenting-logical-and.html>

<https://www.montessorisa.co.za/reflections-rewards-punishments-lower-primary-class/>

<http://www.montessorianswers.com/myth-discipline.html>

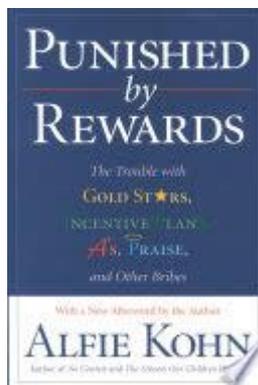
<http://mariamontessori.com/mm/?p=2521>

<http://www.montessoriservices.com/ideas-insights/praise-and-punishment>

<http://www.blog.montessoriforeveryone.com/are-kids-punished-by-rewards.html>

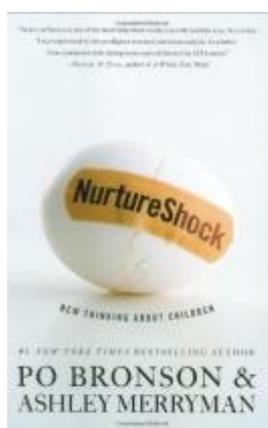
<http://montessorirocks.org/more-choices-less-discipline/>

Books:



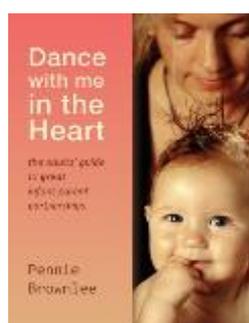
Alfie Kohn is an American author and lecturer in the areas of education, parenting, and human behaviour

Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes



NurtureShock: New Thinking About Children by Po Bronson, Ashley Merryman

New research in the book shows what Maria Montessori saw years ago – that we don't need to praise our children for everything they do. We don't need to continually reward our children or tell them how smart and talented they are.



Dance With Me in the Heart by Pennie Brownlee

ISBN 978-0-473-36146-4

First published in 2008, revised in 2014

Published in 2016 by Good Egg Books, Thames, New Zealand

Guidelines for parents and teachers in following their hearts. It is 'heart intelligence' that weaves warm, loving partnerships between adults and babies, and it is this first partnership that lays the blueprint for every other relationship to follow. We adults are the senior dance partner, and our babies are relying on us to get the steps of the Heart Dance right.

Please join our Facebook Group (www.facebook.com/groups/southafricanmontessori/) to be kept in the loop of what's happening in the greater Montessori Community of South Africa.

The South African Montessori Association welcomes parents to join the association as individual members. The more members SAMA has, the more work we can do to ensure our freedom to run authentic Montessori schools is not compromised.

Warm regards,

Kym

PS: I look forward to your feedback *and any questions you may have on the content of this newsletter.*
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