



Realistically Applying Montessori in the Home: One Parent's Story

By Jocelyn Tatum

I am high-energy and generally not patient. But my son and I share a passion for cooking, and while it takes longer for him to help and makes a huge mess, I engage him, because it makes him feel important and proud.

In my profession as a journalist, I was taught never to assume anything. Also, fellow parents told me parenting would come naturally and to be wary of all the parenting books out there, since they tend to contradict each other. But I wrongly assumed that, before the age of 4, children were just tiny beings who merely needed love and attention. I had no idea their capabilities and intellect started at such a young age.

Then a 24-year-old part-time nanny named Lindsay walked into our lives, when our son, Jet, was 6 months old. She taught in a Montessori environment while completing her college degree in Child Development. While my husband and I had heard of Montessori, we didn't know much about it. We would come home from work and find Jet's room rearranged. Soon small baskets arrived with realistic (not cartoony) animals, bugs, and tactile items, followed by small containers for him to open and spools with thread. At 7 months, Jet had learned to unscrew water bottles. Lindsay also read to him habitually, which I believe laid the foundation of his passion for reading.

We were amazed by her ambition but not sure if it would make a difference. At 11 months old, Jet began walking, and soon she had him carrying his dirty laundry to a small basket we bought for him. At that point, I became a firm believer in Montessori.

When Jet turned 18 months old, we enrolled him in Montessori Children's House, in Fort Worth, TX, for 5 hours a week. He thrived as he helped his teacher in the garden, studied butterflies, took scraps out to the composter, and learned about life cycles. I was further convinced of the benefits of Montessori.

But there was one problem: consistency. Lindsay was only with us a few hours a week (I worked part-

time). Each time she left, the shelves and baskets quickly fell into chaos. We were always busy during the week and bad about keeping it up on weekends, especially because we knew Lindsay would return on Monday to restore order.

After 2½ years, our Mary Poppins left for good, and I was a mess. I cried for 3 weeks. I missed her and realized just how much I had relied on her for advice on raising my child the Montessori way. Though she sent me articles on how to apply Montessori in the home to match the child's level of development, I learn better when shown. This spurred me to do my own research. I attended seminars at Jet's school on toileting and productive communication. I read books: *Montessori from the Start: The Child at Home, from Birth to Age Three*, by Paula Polk Lillard and Lynn Lillard Jessen, and *The Absorbent Mind*, by Maria Montessori. I practiced organizing Jet's art studio into categories and worked hard to let him exercise his independence while I patiently drank my wine. From Delores J. Erby (*A Montessori Manual for Parents of Preschoolers*, p. 16), I learned that "a small child works slowly, deliberately, joyfully. He must have time enough to complete his projects, so the adult has to learn patience and respect this lack of hurry."

I am high-energy and generally not patient. But my son and I share a passion for cooking, and while it takes longer for him to help and makes a huge mess, I engage him, because it makes him feel important and proud. Jet has his own step stool and moves it around, to each "station" in the kitchen. In the morning, he helps make smoothies with fruit, oatmeal, almond butter, and kale, or he scrambles eggs and makes toast. He measures out

my coffee beans (two tiny fistfuls) and grinds them for me. There are often coffee beans all over the floor, but I (an avowed neat freak) am trying to learn to relax. If I had never been introduced to Montessori, I would have kept him out of the kitchen while I cooked, just as my mother and grandmother did with me. My husband and I have also given him tasks, like feeding his own fish, taking out the trash, washing his own dishes, and walking and feeding his dog. You should see the smile on his face.

“Respect your child’s individuality,” Erby writes in her manual (p. 14). There is a fine line between breaking a child’s will and redirecting him. I want my child to have a strong will; I believe it fosters independent thinking. Giving Jet choices within reason while not telling him what to do all of the time is a difficult balance to achieve, but we try our best. For example, he doesn’t have to sit at the dinner table, but if he chooses not to, he may sit at a small table next to us so we can all engage in conversation. He can choose his favorite green as a side for dinner; it’s not okay to eat just bread and cheese. Having a choice brings him so much joy (and gets the greens down). Now, at age 3, he eats smoked salmon, sashimi, and raw kale. His favorite drink is kale, spinach, and apple juice. Patience pays off.

“Arrange the child’s room neatly and simply... too much stimulation can be as undesirable as environmental deprivation,” Erby says (p. 17). I’ve been to houses where children have way too many toys in incoherent piles all over the house. They don’t know what to do with the piles and ultimately lobby for yet another trip to the toy store, which they usually get. Our house would be the same way had Lindsay not helped us to understand Montessori. She kept out a limited selection of toys and would switch them weekly to keep him interested. Because of this, Jet always thought he was getting something new when, really, much was recycled.

Jet’s toys—puzzles, plastic bugs, pretend grocery store items, blocks, art supplies, Legos, and train sets—are in his room, stored in separate bins within his reach. He knows where everything is and knows that he must put one bin’s contents back before he starts a new project.

Do I stick to this rule daily? No. This morning we were rushing out the door to school because we couldn’t find his “lovey” for naptime. I didn’t have the patience to watch him pick up his race cars and remind him to focus, so I did it for him and out we went. The morning before was the same. I am sure he is confused by this inconsistency, but I also know that life isn’t a textbook.

“Sit down at the child’s side and make sure you have his undivided attention” (Erby, p. 17). This is

so difficult to do in today’s world, which is filled with many distractions—work, email, social media, television, laundry, dishes, and smartphones. I will be honest: Sometimes playing race cars for an hour kills my knees and bores me to tears, so I pick up my phone and check Facebook and email. (I prefer Legos myself, but race cars are often my son’s choice.) Over time, I have watched Jet’s behavior change when he had my undivided attention. He does not act out when I listen to him and look him in the eye. One afternoon, just a few months after he had been potty-trained, I was stuck on a work call longer than I had intended. Jet purposefully urinated on our hardwood floors to tell me: “Mom, I need you to get off the phone now and play with me.” He is usually right. There is a time for work and a time to spend with my child. That was not a time for me to be working.

Erby also suggests inviting the child to imitate what the parent does, whether in the kitchen or folding laundry. She advises staying close at first to offer assistance and then letting the child act alone. Since I am a control freak, this is a challenge, but I have a boy who is careless and fearless. I think if I let him finish cutting that carrot his finger will be gone. On snow skis, just weeks after turning 3, all he wanted was to tuck and beeline down the bunny slope, no matter how many times he crashed. So, I find a balance that works for both of us. I let him peel the carrot on his own and help guide his hand over the knife, scooting his little fingers out of harm’s way. I also wait for him at the bottom of the bunny slopes to slow the crash.

“Parents must develop the power to observe, to enjoy, and to accept their child” (Erby, p. 12). Annie Dillard once wrote that how we spend our days is how we spend our lives. We are so caught up in being productive that we forget to be present (2013). We forget to stop and enjoy the world around us, including our children, and may one day realize we have floated through a life largely un-lived and unexperienced. Montessori makes parenting fun and has challenged me to slow down and experience my child with joy. It has allowed us as a family to enjoy our child, and, in turn, for him to enjoy us. Though finding the discipline to stay consistent is hard, and we’re not always perfect, practicing Montessori in our home has helped our family to flourish, not merely float.

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References

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