



## Montessori Matters

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## THE GIFT OF DETERMINATION

### Notes from Nikki

I received a note from a friend on Facebook last week: *Off to school next week. I'm nervous but so excited! Keep in touch. XO Heather.* Heather (not her real name) is getting ready for her first year at a large university about five hours from her home in Atlanta. What makes Heather unique is not that she is my former student or the fact that we are electronic buddies; what makes her special to me is that I was Heather's teacher for eight consecutive years. Her natural progression through the elementary and middle school programs just happened to coincide with my own career path as a teacher at those levels. In those year I watched her grow from a little girl to a teenager and now, through our electronic connection, a young adult heading off to college.

I first met Heather when I moved to Atlanta from Chicago to begin a Lower Elementary class at a nearby Montessori school. It was a new class, so the first group of students was made up mostly of six and seven year old children "moving up" from the Primary classrooms at the school. In August 1997 Heather entered my Lower Elementary class as a small redhead with no front teeth who cried every morning during the first week of school. A "late comer" to Montessori, Heather had only completed one year in the Primary program before entering my class. She wasn't a strong reader yet, struggled with a recent divorce in her family, and was still learning how to make friends with the other children. What Heather did possess, however, were two parents that loved her very much and a natural gift for hard work. No matter how unsure she felt, Heather had a dogged determination on her side.

*Continued on pg. 2*

*Any child who is self-sufficient, who can tie his shoes, dress or undress himself, reflects in his joy and sense of achievement the image of human dignity, which is derived from a sense of independence.*

*~ Maria Montessori*

That first year of elementary wasn't particularly easy for her. She struggled with things – with academics, with friends and with her own emotions. Sometimes she got frustrated and sometimes she even cried, but she never gave up. Over her time in the Lower Elementary class, things got easier for Heather. By the time she moved into the Upper Elementary class, Heather had a pretty good handle on things. Once in the Middle School, Heather's determination helped make her a successful learner and self-confident leader of the school.

I was reminded of Heather when reading the *New York Magazine* article entitled “How Not to Talk to Your Kids” (published Feb. 12, 2007). In it, journalist Po Bronson discusses how too often we praise our children for being smart and then find they give up immediately when faced with a challenge. Instead of encouraging them with our words of praise, we may instead be causing them to underachieve.

Bronson examines several studies on effort. In one study by psychologist Carol Dweck, two groups of children were told to complete a fairly easy puzzle; one group was praised for their *intelligence* (“you must be smart”) while the other group was praised for their *effort* (“you must have worked really hard”). When given a choice of a second puzzle to complete, those children praised for their intelligence chose a similarly easy puzzle; conversely, 90% of those praised for effort chose a harder puzzle.

To quote Dr. Dweck, “Emphasizing effort gives a child a variable they can control.” When we emphasize effort, children see themselves as being in control of their success. Children are more likely to “take a chance” and become friendly with failure; if they fail, they view the failure as a learning opportunity for future success. When we emphasize intelligence, we remove the child's control and thus stigmatize failure. Children begin to view tasks in two categories: things they can do, and things they cannot do. They are more likely to stick with what they know how to do easily or, to quote Bronson, “[take] the cop-out”.

So how do we let children know when they are on the right track? Here are a few tips:

1. Be specific – highlight the actual success (“you were able to carry the pitcher of juice without spilling a drop”) instead of a general or ambiguous praise (“good job”). By being specific, they will know what they did that made them successful, and thus what they need to do to repeat that result in the future.
2. Be sincere – our intention is to give words of encouragement to show our support, but insincere or abundant praise can backfire. Researchers state that by the time children enter elementary school they are able to distinguish a sincere compliment from lip service; by middle school children view insincere praise as a sign they lack ability.
3. Be judicious – observe your child and see what is a challenge for them. If cleaning up after playtime is a struggle or holding the new baby with care is a challenge, let her know when she is on the right track. Things that come easily don't need the same level of encouragement, as the act itself is a reward.

Each of us needs words of encouragement from time to time. For parents wanting to foster independence, the difference may not be “if” but “how”.

## *For Small Hands* Group Order

Parents often comment on the beautiful, durable and child-sized items used in the classroom. Many come from the **Montessori Services** catalog.

Montessori Services also has an at-home catalog, **For Small Hands**, as a resource for families. Here is an easy way to help support your child's classroom, incorporate Montessori principles in your life and home, and take care of some holiday shopping all at the same time!

Administrative Assistant and MIT parent Claire Eden is heading up our annual **For Small Hands Catalog group order** again this year. You will receive a catalog and a group order form in your Friday Folder. The catalog contains many of the items our children are using every day in the classroom and are a wonderful way to create a Montessori environment at home. It's also a great opportunity to cross off those nieces and nephews off your shopping lists and to stock up on birthday gifts. Many items on the classroom wish lists are available as well.

If you'd like to participate in the **group order**, please return your order form and check to school **on or before Wednesday, October 21<sup>st</sup>**. You'll get **FREE SHIPPING** and the school **earns 15% of your order in credit**. Items are shipped to the school and Claire will distribute them once they arrive. In stock items are guaranteed to arrive in time for the holidays, most likely before Thanksgiving.

## Upcoming Events:

**Oct. 1 – 27: Parent Observations\***

**Oct.7: Montessori 101 8:45–10:00 am**  
*Poncey Highland - All Parents Invited*

**Oct. 8: Montessori 101 6:30 – 8:00pm**  
*Glen Castle – All Parents Invited*

**Oct.17: Poncey Highland Outdoor Work Day 9:00 am – 1:00 pm**

**Oct. 24: Glen Castle Outdoor Work Day 9:00 am – 1:00 pm**

**Oct. 28: International Celebration 12:00 noon – Early Dismissal**  
***Parent Conferences begin\*\****

**Oct. 29-30: Parent Conferences\*\***  
*No school for children*

*\*Please schedule a Parent Observation prior to your conference via email: [office-mit@mindspring.com](mailto:office-mit@mindspring.com)*

*\*\* Your classroom teacher will be in touch with you regarding Parent Conferences and how to sign up.*

If you choose not to participate in the group order, when you place an **individual order** mention MIT and provide the customer number listed on the order form. MIT will receive **10% of your subtotal** in credit.

Please contact Claire if you have any questions: [office-mit@mindspring.com](mailto:office-mit@mindspring.com)

Thanks for supporting Montessori in the home while supporting Montessori In Town!

## Independence in Action: A tale of two children

*After attending our Parent Evenings earlier this week on the topic of Independence I was reminded of this anecdote. A colleague passed it along after a parent at his school shared the story of a trip to a farm with her two Primary-aged children. I hope you enjoy it as well!*

“Anna” (5 1/2) and “William” (3 1/2) spent a week on my mom's farm and towards the end they were getting quite comfortable there. They asked if they could ride their bikes down to the barn and I said sure. “You mean we can go by ourselves?” Anna asked, surprised. I thought about it for a minute and about the importance of independence and it felt like the right time to let them go off on their own. They were thrilled and looked over their shoulders at me as they rode away and waved. Of course not much time passed before I snuck through the woods to make sure they were safe. The scene when I arrived made me smile. I assumed that the kids, when left to their own devices, would have been fooling around, but it was quite the contrary.

Anna was scaling the fence with a shovel, and William was right behind her. She lowered herself into one of the horse stalls and began to shovel manure. Since she didn't know how to open the gate, she carefully scaled the fence with each load and placed it in the wheelbarrow. What was especially surprising to me about this is that we had never once discussed cleaning the barn with them. It was something my mom usually did while we were just hanging around. Then I was reminded of Montessori and the powers of observation and their teacher's reminder to me that the children's work never stops. For them,

there is no division for them between the classroom and the world. This was the beauty of Montessori unfolding before me.

By the time I went to fetch my mother to take in this scene, the stalls were cleaned and they were both busily sweeping the barn floor. Neither of us dared disturb their work and kept out of sight. When they were finished, there wasn't one straw of hay to be seen. We could have held a banquet there. That barn floor has never been so clean! We scurried back to the house to greet them when they arrived. Not surprisingly, they didn't even mention what they had done. For them, the satisfaction had been in the work itself. They didn't return seeking any reward or praise, for they had already earned it from themselves back at the barn.

### MABEL'S LABELS – LABELS FOR THE STUFF KIDS LOSE!

Between October 1 and December 31, Montessori In Town will participate in a “paperless” (online) fundraiser with MABEL'S LABELS. MABEL'S LABELS sells a variety of iron and stick-on labels, bags tags and child id/allergy bracelets to keep your child and their belongings organized. 15 to 20% of your purchase benefits Montessori In Town. A flyer will go home in next week's Friday Folder. You may access the order page on MIT's homepage ([www.montessoriintown.com](http://www.montessoriintown.com)) or go directly to the MIT page at the MABEL'S LABELS site:

[www.montessoriintown.mabel.ca](http://www.montessoriintown.mabel.ca)