

Learning to observe your child and follow her lead

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As parents we often feel the need to direct our children, but Montessori believed we should follow them instead. How much time do you spend watching your child? I don't mean watching half-heartedly while you are doing something else. I mean focusing your attention completely on your child for an extended period.

There is no better way to begin using Montessori's principles in your home than by sitting back and observing what your child is looking at, what he says, and what he does. Children have so much to teach us about their needs and interests if we will only take the time to pay attention.

How to observe

You may want to keep a bound notebook or journal in which you can make notes and keep a record of your observations. Regularly set aside some time to observe your child. Sit somewhere comfortable close to him so that you can easily see and hear him and any other children with whom he is playing. Make notes every so often about what you see. Over time, your notes will form an interesting record of your child's behavior at different ages, as well as helping you to notice if a pattern of behavior is emerging at a particular time. Try to interpret what your child's behavior means. When you notice that your child displays an interest in something new, try, without overwhelming him, to nurture it. Think about ways to introduce some new activities that will appeal to your child's activities and achievements.

What to observe

Remember, the only thing that you can count on day after day with children is that, as they grow, their preferences, interests, and abilities change in unpredictable ways. Every time you observe your child, try to forget about previous experiences or perceptions and focus on what is really happening right now. While your child is playing, notice which toys he selects. How does he use them? Does he tend to play alone, or with others? Do you notice any patterns over time?

Watch how your child moves about the house. Does he move from place to place quietly, moving gracefully, or does he race about? Is there a room in your home that your child prefers to be in? What seems to attract him to that room?

When eating, note what your child most enjoys. Can he drink without spilling and use a fork and spoon appropriately and with good eye-hand coordination? How does your child behave at mealtimes? Is this a time when he likes to talk about his day?

As you observe, think twice before you interfere with your child's activity. Your goal in this exercise is to learn from what he is doing, not to keep jumping up and correcting him.

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