

Talking Respectfully to Your Children

By Jane M. Jacobs, MA

If you have observed a Montessori class, you may have wondered: *How does the teacher manage 20 or more children when I have trouble with just one or two? If only I had her skills and patience!*

Having taught for several years before I had children, I was astonished to discover that my Montessori classroom experience did not prepare me for parenthood. Though Maria Montessori believed in extensive training of the teacher, few parents receive useful preparation. Fortunately, I found a book that helped me translate Montessori theory into more effective parenting: *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk*, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish.

The following ideas from this valuable book might be helpful as part of your parenting tool kit. The bonus is that these tools will work for you in any setting—and with everyone, not just children.

Learn to look and listen

Montessori stresses the importance of carefully observing a child as he goes about his work. This is one of the ways we can show respect for the child, another major premise of the Montessori philosophy. We often jump to conclusions and step in without taking into account what our child might be doing, thinking, or feeling. Put down the phone, turn off the television, watch, and look into your child's eyes when you speak.

- Practice observing and staying quiet first.
- Listen to yourself as well as your child—if your immediate inclination is dismay or anger, write down what you would like to say, but don't say it.
- Try not to fix anything or problem-solve—just be with your child.

Name the feelings

It's easy to be anxious when your child is upset. As a result, we may minimize children's feelings or attempt to protect them from disappointment. In the long run, it is more productive to help children identify and learn from their emotions. Just as Montessori materials help children learn concepts and nomenclature, thoughts and feelings can be defined for our children. Adapt the style or phrasing to suit your child's age.

- Listen to your child as he or she talks, offering feedback such as: "Oh..."; "Mmm..."; "I see."
- Recognize and name your child's feelings: "You seem upset (or angry, or happy)..."
- Resist asking and then answering questions that are rhetorical or accusatory: "What were you thinking?" "Who drank the milk?" "How many times have I told you...?"
- Try to understand from your child's perspective and describe,

perhaps with fantasy: "Sounds like you wish you could eat cookies for every meal."

- Show respect for your child's struggle: "I see that it's hard for you to..."
- Describe the dilemma your child is facing: "Even though you know..." "The problem is..."

Engage cooperation

Keeping the family on schedule—and making certain everyone is fed, clothed, bathed, etc.—is no easy task, especially as children often have timetables, needs, and desires different from adults (and often from each other). Montessori believed that children, when given tasks appropriate to their abilities, delight in their accomplishments. Organize your home so children needn't rely on adults for everything, and give them the time and the direction they need so they can become independent and successful in contributing to the family. You may find you don't have to resort to demands or reprimands.

- Acknowledge feelings first: "You're cozy in your bed this morning."
- Offer a choice: "Do you want to wear the red shirt or the green shirt?"
- Be playful: "If you were a magician, you would already be dressed!"
- Rather than reminding, describe what you see: "This table needs to be set."
- Say it with information: Use a word or short description, rather than a nagging, repetitive demand: "Shoes, backpack..."
- Write a note: "I'm hungry" on the dog's collar or "Hang me up!" on the jacket.
- Take action without insulting: "Let's clean up, put the paints away, and go outside."

Be patient as you learn these new skills; it takes time and practice—and will pay off. As Faber and Mazlish state: "We want to demonstrate the kind of respectful communication that we hope our children will use with us—now, during their adolescent years, and ultimately as our adult friends" (1982, p. 88).

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Reference

Faber, A. & Mazlish, E. (1982.) *How to talk so kids will listen and listen so kids will talk*. New York, NY: Avon Books.