Establishing Parameters for Environments of Freedom

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As Montessori educators, we understand that a central tenet of our practice is to offer children an environment of freedom. This is one of the key factors that sets our approach to education apart from others. Sometimes, however, it can be challenging to translate this important theoretical keystone into practice.

This article is being published at the beginning of the school year, a critical point in time to lay the foundation and set expectations for routines, practices, and community habits that will ensure that the year ahead goes smoothly and that we are able to offer a genuine environment of freedom.

What does freedom look like in a Montessori setting?

Typically, the child arrives in the morning, puts their belongings away, surveys the room, and decides what they would like to engage with first. They select an exercise that is of interest, bring it to a location of their own choosing, work on it uninterrupted for as long as desired, and then put it away in its designated spot. They proceed to choose their next activity, and the cycle continues throughout the day.

At some point, the child may decide to have snack, engage in conversation with a friend, observe a classmate who is engaged with something interesting, or wander outside to enjoy the outdoor environment. The Montessori school setting operates on a high level of self-regulating autonomy on the part of the child. “These children have freedom of choice all day. Life is based on choice, so they learn to make their own decisions.”[1]

Imagine a group of 20–30 children all able to proceed through the day in this way. What an enjoyable and gratifying experience for children and adults alike! But this does not happen overnight. Our work as the adults in Montessori environments is to lay the foundation early in the year, supporting children as they develop self-regulation and the ability to govern themselves within an environment of freedom.

Importance of the Three-Step Cycle of Work

One of the very first routines we introduce to a child who is new to Montessori is the three-step cycle of work:

Step 1 – Choose an exercise/activity

Step 2 – Do the work

Step 3 – Return the material to its designated place

It sounds simple. However, there is tremendous depth in this routine. I am convinced that it is this practice that makes our Montessori environments hum with purposeful activity and allows freedom to be offered.

Step 1 – Choose an exercise/activity

This implies that the child is offered the freedom to choose something that is of interest to them. By choosing something of personal interest, the child is more likely to focus their attention and energy on the activity and engage with concentration. However, there are also limits governing which materials are available for the child to choose from. The child may only choose an exercise that is available on the shelf; they may not take it from a classmate or sit down to engage with something unattended on a table or rug. This protects the work of everyone in the room and cultivates patience and impulse control in those who wish to work with a material already in use.

The child may also only choose something they know how to use, having received a presentation from the guide or perhaps from another child. Once an exercise is selected, the child brings it to a location of their choosing and sets up what they need to complete the exercise. Everything must be contained on the table or work rug of their choice.

Step 2 – Do the work

As long as the child is working with the material according to its purpose, they are free to engage with it for as long as they like. No adult or other child should force them to relinquish it. This promotes an attitude of respect for each other's work. The child is free to work at their own pace and may repeat an activity as many times as they wish. This safeguards their opportunity to practice, refine their ability, and work toward mastery. They may also explore variations that expand their understanding.

The limit here is that they are working with the material according to its purpose. If we notice that the child is no longer engaged with the material in an appropriate or purposeful way, we should step in to redirect.

Step 3 – Return the material to its designated place

In our environments, "there is a place for everything and everything in its place." This is reinforced with our newest children on their first days with us. Our youngest children may need support or reminders at first, but all children are counted on to abide by this expectation.

When materials are returned to the shelf, they must be replenished and made ready for the next person to use. Tables are cleared, chairs are pushed in, and rugs are rolled up and returned to their storage container. This practice instills stewardship for the environment and a sense of personal responsibility toward the group. It maintains order and ensures that everyone can independently find the material they are looking for when it is available.

Limits: The Guardians of Freedom

As this review of the three-step cycle makes clear, freedom is offered in tandem with limits. Offering an environment of freedom does not imply that we allow children to simply do whatever they want. Freedom does not allow random, uncontrolled behavior; this would result in an environment of chaos.

To coexist in an atmosphere of freedom, there must be boundaries that ensure all individuals can be present harmoniously. Limits actually serve as the guardians of freedom. Limits are necessary and establish the possibility of choice. When everyone understands and acts according to the parameters of acceptable conduct, there is no need to impose controlling restrictions, and freedom may be offered.

Setting limits is closely connected to guiding children in understanding what it means to live respectfully within a community. There are three governing principles to keep in mind when establishing limits. Every individual is expected to act in a way that demonstrates respect:

- for oneself;
- for others within the community; and
- for the environment and everything in it.

All limits that govern our daily lives at school are grounded in these three principles. We can communicate these principles directly to children; even at 3–6 years of age, they are capable of understanding the essence of what they mean.

When limits are consistently connected to these principles, children begin to understand that boundaries are not simply rules imposed by adults, but a means of protecting the dignity, well-being, and rights of everyone within the community. No one

may hurt or mistreat another person, the materials or items of the environment, or even their own person. Neither can an individual behave in a way that disrupts another's right to concentrated work. Everyone has the right to feel physically and psychologically safe, valued, and to work purposefully.

Communicating Limits

When communicating limits to children ages 3–6, the Montessori adult uses clear, calm, and respectful language that children can understand. Limits should be stated simply and positively, focusing on what the child can do rather than exclaiming what they cannot do. For example, we might tell the group, "In this space we always walk carefully and quietly," rather than, "No running in the classroom!" Always convey the limit in terms of what is expected.

Consistency is also important, as children need to know that limits are predictable and dependable. We cannot impose a limit one day and disregard it the next. For example, perhaps we establish the expectation that anyone who wants to get the attention of someone across the room must walk over to speak with them; it would be counterproductive to ignore a child who shouts across the room on subsequent days.

Consistency also means that the limit applies to everyone, including the adults. If children are expected to refrain from calling loudly across the room, adults must do the same.

Adults must always model the expected behavior. Perhaps children have the freedom to help themselves to water whenever they are thirsty, but there is a designated place in the classroom where they can drink so that cups are not carried around and left on tables or shelves. In that case, adults must also refrain from carrying their coffee or water around the environment and should take their drinks in the designated area.

Grace and Courtesy Lessons Convey Social Behavior Limits

Grace and Courtesy lessons are a very effective means of conveying limits and expectations for social behavior. They are effective because:

- they offer children specific language to use in a given situation;
- we show children what to do with their bodies in that situation;
- they provide an opportunity to practice during a neutral time rather than in the heat of the moment;
- they are typically presented to a small group of 3–5 children so everyone gets a turn; and
- they can be designed to meet the specific needs of the group or environment.

It is not uncommon to hear Montessori educators refer to offering “grace and courtesy” to children during full group or circle time. However, this generally implies that the adult lectures or talks about specific social behaviors while the children passively listen. **This is not a Grace and Courtesy lesson.** I encourage all trained adults to revisit their albums to refresh their memories on the very active nature of small-group Grace and Courtesy lessons.

These lessons begin with an introduction to the situation, such as, “Have you ever noticed…” or “Sometimes in our classroom…” We then tell the children that we will show them what they can do and say in that situation. We act it out, sometimes with the assistance of an experienced child, and then give each child in the small group a turn to participate in the role play. This gives children some muscle memory to fall back on if they find themselves in the situation during an ordinary day.

The Role of Natural Consequences and Control of Error

Control of Error and natural consequences are important elements in creating an environment of freedom within the Montessori classroom. The Control of Error built into many Montessori materials allows children to recognize and correct their own mistakes without depending on the adult to judge their work. This provides children with the freedom to experiment, make mistakes, and try again while developing independence through self-correction.

Similarly, allowing for **natural consequences** gives children opportunities to experience the results of their choices in a safe and supportive environment. When a child spills water, for example, the natural consequence is that they must clean it up. The floor can be a harsh enforcer of controlled movement: the child learns to handle things carefully or they may break upon contact with the floor. A child who steps on a classmate’s work learns that they must walk carefully around the materials of their peers. A bucket carried carelessly across the room may result in a large mess and a long cleanup.

Every day, the natural consequences of their actions influence the child’s development of self-control and self-discipline. The adult does not need to impose an artificial punishment. Instead, the child is guided to recognize what happened and take responsibility for resolving the situation.

In this way, freedom is balanced with responsibility. Children are free to make choices, but they also learn that their choices have consequences and that they have the capability to correct mistakes and care for themselves, others, and the environment.

An Environment of Freedom Ultimately Leads to Inner Discipline

Dr. Montessori considered freedom and discipline to be closely linked. The level of discipline realized among children depends on the atmosphere of freedom, while the atmosphere of freedom supports the development of discipline. Without one, the other is impossible.

Montessori tells us: "Freedom and discipline come together. This was our discovery, as they are generally thought to be opposite things. Instead, we found that there was no discipline without freedom, freedom and discipline being a harmonious combination, strictly connected."[2]

We think of a disciplined individual as one who has self-control. They choose to act according to what is best for their own development while considering the impact they have on the people around them. When a child is free to choose an activity independently, they are more likely to focus on purposeful activity with concentration. As they do this, they refine their control over their physical and mental bodies and develop personal discipline. Consequently, they are able to have a more harmonious presence within the group.

"I was often asked, 'But how do you make these tinies behave so well? How do you teach them such discipline?' It was not I. It was the environment we had prepared so carefully and the freedom they found in it."[3]

Quotes

1. Maria Montessori, The 1946 London Lectures, p. 236
2. Maria Montessori, The 1946 London Lectures, p. 234
3. Maria Montessori, The Absorbent Mind, p. 204



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