

Amidst the unique preparations that this year's return to school has required, we have found ourselves grasping for the elements of Back-to-School September routines that feel familiar, comforting and joyful. As educators, this is in anticipating the faces of our students, as Montessorians this is in preparing our in-person and remote learning environments and as parents, it is in the labeling of school supplies and the chilly morning drop offs.

While we are traversing waters full of changes, unforeseen circumstances and questions from our children to which we don't quite have an answer, we have an opportunity to ground ourselves in meeting the developmental needs of children that we know for sure, those of which we are certain. One of these fundamental values we share as families who choose a Montessori education for our children, is independence. While finding ways to develop independence in our children may be one of the last things on our minds, edifying a child's sense of self, sense of purpose and security in their ability to handle what they see before them has never been more important than now, in a worldwide pandemic.

Strengthening a child's resilience is a child's own work. We, as their stewards, provide the exercises. Resilience is the buttery reward a child finds at the bottom of the jar filled with the cream of adversity, churned by the freedom of independence.

These beginning months of an incipient school year are for laying the groundwork for independence and you can help this adjustment at home. Beginning with charging your child to choose their own clothing, (the night before, ideally!) dressing in the morning, feeding themselves breakfast and saying goodbye at carline, they are well on their way to a confident school day. Once at their classroom, changing their shoes and preparing themselves for their first moments of work, is also their great responsibility.

The hallway is a sacred space in the morning as each child steadies themselves for the day. They carry with them your loving support from home, placing it in a space in their heart as they grow into who they are apart from their family. This happens while changing their shoes and washing their hands and choosing their first work of the morning. All of it is precious work.

Be assured, we do not leave the child alone, to their own devices. Rather, we stand guard of this time, observing them as they arrive. We can see how they are feeling, and we know what they had for breakfast by looking into their eyes and down at their shirts. We can also see that you let them put their shoes on the wrong feet and put on their own shirt, because we notice the tag in the front. This is a very good thing.

To continue to foster independence at home, try to stand back and observe your child at their task, instead of rushing to complete it for them. This is very hard for most of us on a busy morning or during our regimented school-nights but to find a place or a time or a chore that you can let go and just stand watch is a worthy goal for your child's benefit. Your presence is there for support and encouragement but what a gift it is to allow your child to show you and themselves that they are capable of much independence. With younger children, this is usually a self-care habit that they can manage on their own, even filling their water bottles or packing their snack, and older children can make their lunches or wash their laundry or certainly set the table for dinner or walk the dog.

We take away opportunities for independence with the best of intentions. We want to love on our children by doting on them and dressing them. We want them to not feel lonely, so we never leave their side. We want them to know we care, so we make their lunches and pack all their things and take care of all the chores while they sleep. We also live very busy lives and we have epidemic-sized concerns and some things may just need to be our job only. That is okay, too. However, for some things, it is just easier and takes less time to do the simple tasks than it does to ask our children to do them. These sentiments are all real and valid. We cannot, nor should we try to, change everything about our child's day or routine overnight. Slowly and steadily as you offer your child more opportunities

to practice independence, they will grow in confidence and in dignity. It is hard to think of anything more loving than giving a child their dignity and allowing them to be who they were made to be.

We all now know too well that we have less control than we even imagined over the world in which our children will grow. Our children absorb our emotions, senses the changes in our disposition and they can see when you have just read some bad news. When we don't know what to do, we should always go back to what we know for certain: follow the child. Watch where they resist your help. Observe times of day that they seem particularly invested in the home routine. Ask them if they see an unmet need at home and if they have an idea of how they can meet it. We can make small changes to our perspective that evolve into different routines and practices in our families, providing long-lasting growth when combined with their experiences at school. We all can grow in independence together as a Montessori community and be living examples to our children that learning is a lifelong work.

We recently spoke as a faculty about how we feel like we are sailing on a ship that no one thought they'd ever need to build, and we are finishing construction with our voyage already underway. It can feel like a very heavy weight of palpable uncertainty. However, if we seek independence for our children and follow their lead, they are likely standing at the bow, pointing to the horizon and squealing about the journey toward the sun. We can stand next to our children and sail these waters with the help of each person's individual contribution to the sails, the rigging, the ship's deck, the sleeping cabins and even the navigation. Each family member can take turns being the lookout, for every person's perspective on what they see coming into their view ahead of them can help the whole family make better choices and feel more secure about their future.

Welcome back!

Erin Mergil

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