

# PRACTICAL LIFE FOR THE OLDER CHILDREN IN THE CASA

by Polli Soholt

*Polli Soholt writes about advanced practical life and demonstrates that adding more challenge and complexity for older children leads to more social cooperation. Activities such as washing dishes, polishing, sewing, and food preparation take the child beyond the need to refine basic skills. The older primary children find more reality in tasks such as bringing sewing from home and using math to double recipes for baking projects. This advanced work of the hands enhances the whole community.*

Maria Montessori showed the world how important the practical life activities were to the child between three and six years old. She observed the children partaking in these exercises and saw them develop traits that would serve them a lifetime as well as provide a foundation for their future learning, development, and integration of their personalities. While participating in the practical life activities, children of different cultures adapt to their unique time, place, and culture, allowing them to become an integrated participant in their daily lives. The children were attracted to these activities because they observed them daily as necessary to maintain and sustain life. The activities were purposeful, and this motivated the children to become involved in them. This involvement included developing the ability to execute specific movements, which became perfected through numerous spontaneous repetitions, allowing the children to become more independent. Maria Montessori understood that independence was important for the young child, and that the environment could offer many opportunities to aid in this development. She wrote,

All the efforts of growth are efforts to acquire independence. A matter of vital importance to an individuality is

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that it should be able to function by itself. In order to grow and to develop, the child needs to acquire independence. (*What You Should Know About Your Child* 11)

At the same time, the children became a part of the little community of the Casa, understanding the needs and strengths of the other children as well as observing the part that the physical environment played in the successes of their daily lives. This social development continued throughout the three year stay in the Casa, with the younger children relying on the older children for support and assistance. The older children, being more accomplished because of their greater experience, willingly assisted and supported the younger children. This became a kind of mentorship that transpired between the children of the community without much, if any, guidance from the adults.

When we think about the practical life area for the oldest children, we have to take into account their history in the Casa and their growing consciousness. When they first joined the community in the Casa, they were intent on participating in the practical life experiences provided. Through repetition, they became more coordinated and skilled, which meant that they came to a point where they could execute most or all of the movements necessary to be considered skilled at pouring, dusting, polishing, washing, sewing, sweeping, washing their hands, and any other activities that allowed them to take care of themselves and their environment. In addition, they had the benefit of the movement activities, and gained control of their equilibrium and with their participation in the Silence Game, the ability to willfully cease all movement. At the same time, they were introduced to the guidelines of social interaction through the grace and courtesy activities. Just because the older child has mastered all of these skills does not mean that she cannot continue to benefit from challenging practical life work. These opportunities will continue to help the older child develop precision of movement (leading to economy of movement) as well as the ability to understand and remember longer and longer sequences that are required for more involved practical life work. As these children move closer to the second plane of development, they become more conscious of the social environment. They become aware of their role as mentors to the younger children and become aware of the environment in a new way. The older children will notice when some supplies

are running low, they will notice when the flowers that decorate the room are wilting, and they will notice dusty surfaces that need attention. If the adults are aware of this change in the older children, they can offer ways that these children can participate in practical

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life that will support the children's new status as a mentor and true caretaker of the environment. Maria Montessori wrote,

Hence, there are two tendencies: one is the extension of consciousness by activities performed on the environment, the other is for perfecting and enrichment of those powers already formed. These show us that the period from three to six is one of "constructive perfecting" by means of activity. (*The Absorbent Mind* 175)

When the children are three, they are not concerned with the cleanliness of the table. They want to scrub it for the enjoyment of the movements and the process necessary to do the work. That is obvious by the frequency with which a child will scrub the same table a second or third time or dust the same shelf more than once. It is the process that calls to them, not the product of their work. The older children often begin their practical life work with an observation: there is debris on the floor, or there is dust on the shelves. When they engage in caring for the environment at an older age, they do the work to accomplish an end goal. This is what we need to keep in mind when offering them practical life at an older age. It is a waste of the older child's time to continue with the basic pouring, spooning, and cleaning activities that were mastered long ago. We need to provide opportunities for them to function at the developmental level they have achieved. These older children are approaching the time when they will move from the first plane to the second plane of development, marking a time when numerous changes will take place in the child. Maria Montessori observed this development. She wrote,

The child does not grow in a uniform way day by day, at the same rate. In growth there are crises, somewhat like the

metamorphosis of the insects. In the child the changes are not obvious but the process is similar. If in an educational approach one takes the child as a guide, it is obvious that the educator is led by the child instead of by preconceptions and prejudices. In fact, it is the child himself who will be the guide of education. (*The Four Planes of Education 1*)

If we examine the exercises that are introduced to the young child when she enters the Casa, we can find ways to extend or vary many of them to meet the needs of the older child, allowing her to continue on her developmental path as the first plane fades into the second plane.

### DUSTING

By the time the children have practiced and mastered the initial dusting exercises, they are often ready to join the extended day class. After some guidance, this group of mostly older children is capable of dusting most of the shelves in the classroom. Once a week, the guide can get out a large supply of dust cloths and a spray bottle of water that can be used on the classroom shelves. The children can be shown how to dampen their clothes with the spray bottle and then select a shelf unit to dust, top shelf to bottom shelf. It is important to demonstrate again how each piece of equipment must be removed from the shelf being dusted, placed on a rug, and finally dusted before it is placed back on the clean shelf. The difference between this activity and the early dusting the children did is that a whole shelf unit or two will be dusted each day, instead of one single shelf. In addition, the other older children will also be working at the same time on other shelves, so the community spirit of caring for the environment is enhanced. With most groups of children, there is no issue with each child's participation; they seem to be proud of the fact that they are capable of caring for the whole environment with their classmates. The goal is to dust all the shelves in the room once a week. It is important that the guide dust along with the children, as this adds to the community spirit of the work. In the beginning, it will take some time to dust the classroom as a group. As the children become more experienced, it will take around thirty minutes to complete the job. The children will become more and more efficient as the months go by, and they will begin to notice other things in the environment

that need maintenance. One child may show an interest in washing the leaves of all the plants, another child might show interest in dusting the back of the piano, another child may show interest in sweeping under the shelves. The initial activity of dusting all the shelves brings their attention to other aspects of the environment that may need attention. Since these children have developed the necessary skills to handle these tasks, they are more than willing to attend to the details that make the environment beautiful and ready for all of the children.

### WASHING DISHES

Most environments have a dish washing exercise so that the children are able to clean or rinse their dishes after snack and/or lunch. For the oldest children, this exercise offers many opportunities for work beyond the initial presentation. For example, the older children can be shown how to take a dishpan around the environment and collect a few items made of metal from the shelves to wash. Naturally, they already know how to do the sequence of washing, and that remains the same for the things they collect from the environment. The difference is that once the items are washed, they need to be dried thoroughly and replaced on the shelves where they belong so that they are available to the rest of the children. (In some environments, the dishes remain in the dish rack after washing.) The guide can begin by inviting an older child to select metal, glass, or ceramic items to wash, dry, and replace on the shelves. Once the child has successfully done this activity a few times, he can be shown how to clean some of the Montessori materials and return them to the shelves. For example, the child can be invited to bring the color tablets to the dish washing area. They can be removed from the box and placed in the dishpan for washing. It is best to show the child to put the box on a counter or shelf at a distance, as it is important for the box to remain completely dry. Once the child has gone through the sequence of washing, drying, and returning the color tablets to the box, the work can be returned to the shelf. There are several Montessori materials that can safely be washed in this manner; however finding them requires guidance from the adult.

## POLISHING

The new children entering a class will be shown how to polish mirrors, metal, and wood. These exercises can be used by the older children to polish almost any item made of these materials in the environment. For example, the older children can be invited to polish the door handles in addition to the many metal items in the classroom. If the environment has a full length mirror, the children will relish the challenge of polishing all of it. Many of the boxes and containers that hold the Montessori materials are made of wood, and these can be taken one by one to polish. Naturally, the older children who do this work must be skilled and developed enough to carefully finish the item chosen and return it to the shelf, ready for use. Once again, the adult's knowledge of the child's development will help to guide the child to polishing activities that will serve the community and demonstrate to the child that he is an active participant in the care of the environment.

## SEWING

Once the children have learned how to sew on a button, make the hem stitch (or running stitch), and embroider, they are ready for more complicated sewing activities. One way to encourage sewing is to invite them to bring in clothes from home that need new buttons or simple seam repairs. This allows them to make the ever-important link between the outside world and what they have learned in the prepared environment.

The older children can also be shown how to make lining for the weavings they have made by cutting a rectangle out of fabric (the guide often needs to do this step) and hemming it with the running stitch. Then the guide can show the child how to pin the lining on the back of the weaving, and using the overcasting stitch, the child can sew the lining to the weaving. This makes a finished mat or doll house rug and takes some time to complete. The older children seem to relish these accomplishments because of the time and effort involved. The supplies for this type of project can be kept in a small sewing kit that is only available to the older children and is kept in the closed art cabinet.

Another way the sewing kit for the older children can be used is to make an apron. After the child chooses his fabric, the guide can assist him in cutting a rectangle for the skirt of the apron and a long, narrow strip for the waistband and tie. The adult can then guide the child through the sewing process, making sure that the stitches are small enough to hold and that the knots are secure. Since this takes some time to finish, it is important to have a place where the child can keep it throughout the process. There can be a basket in the environment to keep these kinds of work in progress, or the child can keep it folded neatly in his locker or cubby. Once the child has made one apron, it is likely that he will be able to make a second one (if he chooses) with little or no guidance.

The children who enjoy embroidery can work on a group project that will become a part of the environment when finished. The children enjoy making a tablecloth for the snack table or the vanity. The adult can provide a prepared cloth with sewing guidelines or the children can hem the fabric and make their own design and transfer it to muslin, linen, or cotton. Embroidery floss and embroidery hoops can be added to the sewing kit described above. This type of project takes a long time to complete, as there is usually a lot of stitching required, and only one child can work on it at a time. When it is not in use, it can be stored in the basket for unfinished sewing. When it is completed, the older children enjoy seeing it in use and beautifying their environment.

#### FOOD PREPARATION

When the new children enter the prepared environment, they are introduced to food preparation through preparing their own snacks and vegetable preparation exercises. Most of these children have had little or no experience preparing food, so these activities are important for their development of independence as well as learning the skills associated with food preparation. If the adults plan the snack sequence carefully, the children can be lead through a series of necessary food preparation skills while making their own snacks. For example, the individual snack can begin very simply by offering them the opportunity to serve themselves from snack foods prepared. While this sounds simple enough, many of the

new children will not have had experience using tongs or scoops or spoons to serve themselves. After a few weeks of this initial snack preparation, the snack can be changed so that the children have the opportunity to learn to spread. They can spread cream cheese on crackers or soy butter on apple slices. After several weeks of this type of preparation, they can be introduced to mixing by offering yogurt and grains for making a dip for fruit or vegetables. Next they can use their cutting skills to prepare an individual fruit salad. Once these basic skills are covered, many variables can be added including orange juice squeezing and making simple baked snacks in a toaster oven.

By the time the children reach the stage where they are the oldest children in the class, they have developed many food preparation skills, and they are usually reading and have some math skills. These older children can be shown how to follow simple baking recipes that can be prepared in class and later served to the children as snack. These baking projects work well if two children work together, and one good way to form that team is to have one of the oldest children work with one of the younger children. That way, the older child can guide the younger one by reading the recipe and showing the younger child how to measure and mix the recipe. In the environments that provide these kinds of experiences, the guide is present when it is time to put the pans in the oven and the children wear oven mitts that extend well beyond their elbows. By teaming an older child with a younger one, the older child becomes the mentor and the younger child gets the experience of participating in the baking that will result in part of the snack for the whole group. If the prepared environment has a full kitchen, the older children will have many other kinds of food preparation activities that will add to their cooking skills as well as allow them to feel their importance to the community as a whole.

These suggestions for the older children are meant to trigger other thoughts as to how we can enhance the practical life experiences for the children who have mastered the basic skills. It is obvious that they will have a continuing interest in caring for themselves and their environment, and it is up to the adults to find ways to meet this need. If they are working on advanced practical life exercises, they will be intellectually engaged, which will serve to increase



their interest and continue to develop the practical life benefits as planned by the direct aims of the exercises. In addition, these older children are developing socially, which makes them aware of the needs of the environment as a whole and the role they can play in maintaining and sustaining the environment. Watching them at these tasks makes it clear that they are not as interested in the *process* of the exercise (as they once were), but interested in the final product. This product may be a baked snack, clean shelves, or a shiny mirror. So, as we ponder practical life exercises for the children, let us remember the oldest children and their needs as they make their way to the second plane of development.

#### REFERENCES

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