

NURTURING THE RESPECTFUL COMMUNITY THROUGH PRACTICAL LIFE

by Joen Bettmann

Joen Bettmann's depiction of practical life exercises as character-building reveals how caring, careful, and independent work leads to higher self-esteem, more concern for others, better understanding for academic learning, and a self-nurturing, respectful classroom community. Particular aspects of movement and silence exercises bring out what Joen calls the child's "quiet soul," the contemplative and reflective side of life that brings peacefulness and a state of grace.

Who do we want our children to be when they are adults? If we ask ourselves to make a list of the attributes, values, and qualities, we have some glorious characteristics.

Do we hope that they are *compassionate* and *caring* individuals?

Are we hopeful that they will be *cooperative* and *generous*?

Would we wish for them to be *open*, *receptive*, and *nonjudgmental*?

Are we aware of how much easier life will be if they are *flexible*, *resourceful*, and *creative* (two aspects of intelligence), and have a *sense of humor*?

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Might we want them to have *courage* and *strength* in the face of difficulties?

Would we want them to be *reflective* and *conscious of their cosmic tasks*?

Do we pray that their bodies are healthy and strong, able to follow the speed and demands of the mind to act or refrain from acting, with great *dexterity* and *agility*?

Look at the challenges present in our society today. We see people who are hurting each other, dangerous, vicious, nasty, rude, hostile, cruel, apathetic, indifferent, irresponsible, sloppy, careless, alienated, isolated, infuriated, etc.

Perhaps the early years, the formative years in a nurturing Montessori environment, result in human beings that will contribute in a different way

- because they care about themselves and others;
- because they have already experienced community;
- because attention to detail has allowed them to respect and appreciate that which is fine and delicate;
- because they are familiar with the idea that time is not for killing or wasting, that immediate gratification is different than the ecstatic delight reached when one has worked long and hard towards an end.

Our children have the right to experience the *Casa* as a sanctuary where being in the present moment is the perfect blissful state, without the pressures, anxieties, or distractions of tomorrow. Process rather than product allows the child to work for the sake of the intrinsic joy that one has when one's focus is on the movement and order of the activity, rather than the end result.

Let us look at a definition of practical life. *Practical* means useful, functional, helping one to adapt and belong, logical. *Life* means forever, from birth to death.



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A quote from E. M. Standing may be worth reflecting upon:

The first thing to realize about these exercises of practical life is that their aim is not a practical one. Emphasis should be laid not on the word “practical” but the word life. Their aim ... is to assist development.

The discerning visitor who observes the children at work on these activities cannot fail to be impressed, as much by the way they are doing them, as by what they are doing. Their profound concentration, the serious joy with which they carry out their work, the expenditure of energy out of all proportion to the external end in view as revealed in their unreasoning repetition ... all these suggest that the children are riveted to this sort of activity by some strange, one might say occult, fascination. This in fact is truly the case. There is more than a conscious interest; their whole demeanor reveals the fact that they are fulfilling a biological need; and that it is the interest of life—Horme—which is working in and through them as they carry out these occupations. ...

It is characteristic of all children at this stage of development that they derive immense satisfaction from any use of their voluntary muscles, that is of “the flesh.” Here, as always, Montessori’s aim is to help the child to do, in a

more perfect and orderly manner, what he strives to do in any case by his own natural impulses, but not so perfectly. Our help consists of placing within the prepared environment “motives of activity” designed specially to answer the needs of this “sensitive period” through which he is passing. The child not only has an intense interest in these “synthetic movements” but is endowed with a special capacity for fixing them, i.e., making them habitual, with an ease and spontaneity which never recurs. (213-214)

The implications are these:

1. respect for the child’s capacity and abilities;
2. change in attitude about practical life as “early” work, yet avoiding “dumbing down” (including advanced exercises and a sequential progression from simple to complex); and
3. understanding of the importance of independence and its relation to self-esteem.

Through these exercises, the child has opportunities to

- *Love the environment*, become a steward of the planet Earth. Strong connection means that there will be care and concern. New health care facilities for hospice care and mental health include large gardens for the patients because studies have shown that nature is healing and peaceful.
- *Develop coordination of movement*; direct the body to perform actions with control, precisely and deliberately, as an expression of oneself and one’s intelligence.
- *Develop the will*; have the self-control, patience, and respect to act with consciousness of others. Being responsible for one’s own actions includes cooperation and consideration—a different view of self than the perspective of “entitlement.”

- *Develop concentration*; be so focused and engaged that one is able to “lose oneself” in one’s work. The path to normalization is through purposeful work.
- *Complete a task*; learn about a cycle of activity and have a pattern so much in one’s repertoire that it becomes a way of living to organize oneself with a beginning, middle, and end; develop perseverance, follow-through, and tenacity.
- *Indirectly prepare for later academic work*; mathematical concepts are explored, such as estimation and calculation; geometric shapes are folded; writing and reading are supported with the movements of the hand (circular) as well as left-to-right and top-to-bottom sequencing.

FOUR AREAS OF PRACTICAL LIFE

Care of Person and Care of Environment

Care of person and *care of environment* are both areas that help the child grow in confidence as she tries the daily activities of her own culture. The exercises themselves are individual. The materials have a number of characteristics that are important principles to keep in mind when gathering items for the *Casa*:

- differentiated through color-coding for independence
- physically proportionate to coordinate with the child’s size
- psychologically challenging to offer the right level of difficulty with a progression from simple to complex
- real to give dignity to the child’s efforts (ironing with heat so wrinkles disappear, cutting with functional scissors so paper doesn’t tear)
- culturally relevant to help the child adapt
- attractive to invite use (organic rather than synthetic)

- limited and without duplicates so that the maxim “less is more” is followed, offering more repetition and mastery as well as the development of the will. Rotation then becomes our responsibility to keep the area alive.
- isolation of difficulty so that one is not overwhelmed and can see with more clarity that which is necessary

For every material selected for the practical life area, the guide has the responsibility to know it fluently, so that all movements are analyzed. This implies grace, precision, exactness, consistency, and order. The clarity that is the result of this practiced, rehearsed set of movements allows the child to have a visual image directing his efforts. He tries to emulate the adult, repeating, seeing his own errors, and striving to reach the particular actions and movements that lead to success (points of consciousness). The adult, of course, has the wisdom to show just enough and then get out of the way, so that the child can work to achieve his goal. The expectation is that the child will make a number of mistakes prior to mastery. Whether or not the adult needs to re-present at a later date, emphasizing one of the points of consciousness, will be based on observation.



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Grace and Courtesy

This area is a direct response to the sensitive period for social relations, which is directing the child during the time she is in the Children's House. The exercises of grace and courtesy also are a response to the sensitive periods for movement and language. Montessori environments have often been criticized for being too quiet or suppressed, and too stationary or static. The lively nature of these exercises is sure to undo that myth or stereotype, as the children are interactive in dramatic play while "performing" the roles scripted for the grace and courtesy lessons.

Absence of Materials

These exercises are a bit more difficult because they usually do not have specific, concrete materials, such as a sewing basket or a dressing frame. One has to remember to show lessons that help the children interact in new ways continuously, but it is easy to be guilty of "out of sight, out of mind" forgetfulness, unless we record our observations and are diligent in our lesson planning. At least one exercise of grace and courtesy should be offered per day. A set of cards for follow-up work may be the physical reminder that ensures the inclusion of these important activities.

Grace and Courtesy Lessons

- Blowing one's nose
- Covering one's mouth
- Passing by a tight space
- Getting to the aisle
- Walking around a conversation
- Greeting by name
- Introducing oneself
- Introducing two friends
- Introducing an adult (using a title)

- Opening a door for another
- Knocking before entering
- Offering help to a friend
- Offering a chair to a visitor
- Serving a guest
- Giving comfort to a friend
- Ordering food in a restaurant
- Passing a platter of food
- Choosing one item from a platter
- Using a napkin
- Excusing oneself from the table
- Giving and receiving a gift
- Answering the telephone
- Retrieving the person called
- Leaving a message on an answering machine
- Apologizing for calling the wrong number

Small Groups

The exercises require skill in gathering and directing a small group of children in a role-play exercise and leaving them with independent work to practice. In a small group, the children can take many turns with each part, and the guide can watch to see which points of consciousness have been grasped. Were we to attempt to take a shortcut and present to the entire class, we would be forgetting about a few of the above-mentioned characteristics of our lessons. We want everyone involved, which is unlikely if we are with the whole group. Some will get bored waiting for their turn. Some will

be bored because they already know this protocol. Repetition will be limited. The group in general may wonder if this demonstration is a result of their errors, and thus feel like they are being lectured, corrected, or scolded.

Importance of Repetition

The mindset of the adult often requires a reminder that “practice makes perfect” or repetition builds repertoire. We understand the process of learning when we reflect on a child who is beginning to tie. The bow frame is used many times, sometimes over months, before a child can make beautiful bows on the frame, and then more practice is needed before this new acquisition can be applied consistently to one’s shoes. Sometimes we forget this when it comes to proper behavior and manners. We find ourselves saying, “I just told you to [fill in: chew with your mouth closed, not call across the room, etc].” The motto “practice what you preach” is partially correct in that we do want to model all that we would expect the children to do, so there is no double standard: “Do as I say, not as I do.” But we want to present as our teaching method rather than preach.

Teach Teaching, Not Correcting

Or maybe we presume the skill before the presentation. It is common for adults to test the child rather than teach the child. I’d like to share a story with you that illustrates this point. After many attempts by an adult to have a child use the word please when requesting something, the adult thought of a way that she imagined would be helpful for the child to know what was missing and therefore how to fill in the blank. The adult said, “What’s the magic word?” The child smiled, finally realizing what the adult wanted, and happily replied, “Abracadabra!” The three parts of learning include the first introduction, the ongoing necessary practice, and, finally, the spontaneous application.

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Another reminder for us is that other practical life exercises are demonstrated with great analysis to the child who is “ready” and then are available for independent choice. The lessons grow in complexity, continuing throughout the three years in the *Casa* environment.

How can we make grace and courtesy lessons attractive so that the child appreciates them?

- The timing is essential. If we can anticipate the need, the child feels our thoughtfulness. He is grateful for the lesson because he sees that he might have use for it in the future. In *The Secret of Childhood*, Dr. Montessori describes the sense of dignity occasioned by a lesson on blowing one’s nose (126). Another example would be knowing how to greet a guest or visitor. If we observe a transgression or an inappropriate interaction, we must make note of it and wait for a neutral time to demonstrate a different way. Nurturing the respectful community means building trust, learning acts of kindness, helping love grow. To nurture implies to assist and support, with the expectation of time as one essential ingredient. When one feels shame and embarrassment for doing something wrong, one becomes defended and closed. One is not open to learning at this time but instead aware of the awkwardness or *faux pas*, resulting in feeling inferior, inadequate, unsure, or uneasy.
- The small group is fun. Children enjoy pretending. The drama may result in laughter. They are being offered a way to interact in a social manner, rather than always being segregated from each other to work alone.
- The activity is short. Usually the lesson lasts five to seven minutes. It spontaneously closes as the children lose interest. It can be repeated again the next day, with new children joining in.

- A model child included is helpful. Sometimes this is the child who can exactly imitate the adult, so that the children see the demonstration accurately portrayed twice. A child who already knows how to do what is being shown can be the model, giving help to the others. Children often welcome guidance from each other, as they have respect and admiration for their peers, especially those who have been in the *Casa* a bit longer.

Grace and courtesy exercises work as “lubricants” to help the children be comfortable and natural with others and with themselves. We offer these exercises for life so that the children grow into individuals who are poised, natural, and authentic. It is our hope that they learn healthy ways to resolve conflict, share differing opinions, work through opposing points of view, and continue to establish, maintain, and improve their relationships. It is also through living these aspects of culture in our daily lives that people become more tolerant, accepting, patient, tender, and charitable.

Movement

There are two special exercises of movement: walking on the line and the silence game. Each of these is important in that it is done with the collective group. Cohesion of the group is experienced through the harmony that is reached. There are many stages of preparation, with increased challenges as the group is ready.

Before even beginning any work on the line, children need to have lessons in elementary movement. We show them how to walk around mats or with a tray. It is a great challenge for some of the youngest ones to be able to travel around the ever-changing maze without tripping or bumping anyone. Within the first few weeks, we introduce the actual exercise of walking on the line. If we do this as adults, we see that it is calming and centering. More than physical equilibrium is achieved. We start walking in unison. The pace is no longer individual but becomes the collective work of the group. We sometimes find ourselves unaware of the person in front of or behind us, yet we maintain distance and keep up the movement. In



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other words, the exercise can bring about deep concentration. Each of these pieces is practiced for a long time before they culminate in group success. This can only happen if this exercise is done daily, with the challenge of many or all walking at once.

These characteristics are necessary for success with the line exercises:

- The material of the line is treated with care and respect, as we do with other materials. The children need to be shown how to check their mats and chairs

to be sure the line is not obstructed. In other words, it should always be available. It should be used for its intended purpose, which is movement. It is therefore not an anchoring spot, never used for sitting in a group. This will help prevent the line from peeling off the floor, as often occurs when children sit on it for long periods. If the tape does start to peel, it should be repaired immediately.

- The line should be elliptical so that the body experiences some walking that is without change to the center of gravity and then a gradual turning at each end. The curved shape helps not only with equilibrium but also with the group aspect of the exercise. The children are able to see each other and move together. In an ellipse, there is no beginning or end. It should be approximately one-half to three-quarters of an inch thick and contrast slightly with the color of the flooring. The ellipse should be large enough to accommodate everyone at once. If this is impossible, one ellipse concentric to another will still promote social cohesion.
- The children should be shown procedures for removing their shoes if they are going to walk in their socks or barefoot outdoors. Show them how to enter and exit from the same invisible spot, going in the same direction, so as to avoid confusion or traffic problems.
- The exercise should be practiced daily. The guide should initiate the activity with the group. Spontaneously at other times children will walk on the line, forming a small cluster. Even a child (or adult) who is disturbed or troubled in some way might find it restful and grounding to walk until feeling better.
- The gradual progression to more advanced stages should be based on observation. When the group is ready for more challenge, walking heel-to-toe results in slowing the pace and walking with more balance.

Objects held in front of oneself also slow one's movements. When one feels oneself teetering, it is natural to extend one's arms, so carrying an item sometimes helps center the body. Posture changes as the child focuses forward. Music is introduced in the background to accompany the walking. The final stages include movements dictated by discernible beats or rhythms, such as marches, gallops, processions, etc.

The ultimate control of movement is achieved with the silence game, which is played only when we are certain that the children will succeed; it acts as testimony to a long-awaited arrival point. There is more respect and awareness of each movement in the care of self and care of environment exercises when we realize how they prepare the child for this culminating act. Each time the child waits for the last drop in pouring or waits for the stem to seal itself after it has been snipped in flower cutting and arranging, she is finding the self-control needed to reach a higher level of being. Each trip to replace a soiled towel or cloth, even when called to many other interesting distractions, is strengthening her will. Finishing and returning materials to their proper place becomes ever more challenging as the sequence lengthens; this challenge aids the child's development.

Additional direct preparatory activities and games to practice the control of movement and to aid listening are offered:

1. Echo clapping
4. Following a traveling sound
5. Identifying familiar sounds
6. Identifying different hand bells
7. Whispering names
8. Watching a bird on a bird feeder (at the window)
9. Watching an oil dripper

10. Passing a bell silently
11. Striking one bell and listening until there is no sound
12. Striking a gong and listening until there is no sound
13. Playing “Freeze” (singing “Move around, and Stop”)
14. Listening to a musical composition

The group, once normalization has occurred, can play and achieve a profound serenity and peace. Dr. Montessori’s words are worth rereading regarding the meaning and value of silence:

No thought is given to the meaning of the word. There is no realization that there is a need for immobility and, as it were, of a suspension of life for a moment of silence to be realized. Silence consists in the suspension of every movement and is not, as it is generally thought to be in other schools, a suspension of the din added to the ordinary noises tolerated in an environment. ...

... silence can be positively understood as a state of transcending the ordinary run of things. It is a momentary check requiring an effort, a straining of the will, which separates and isolates the soul from the ordinary sounds of life and external voices.

This is a silence which we have attained in our schools. It is a profound silence produced in a class of more than forty little children between the ages of three and six. A command would never be able to produce the marvelous union of wills in checking every act in a period of life when movement seems natural and irresistible. And this collective action is attained by the very children who have been accustomed to act on their own account for their quest for inner satisfaction.

But children must be taught silence. I therefore make them go through various exercises in silence, which add greatly to the remarkable ability of our children to discipline themselves. ...

Very many become interested in a fact which they have never before observed, namely, that there are so many noises which they do not notice, and that there are different degrees of silence. There is an absolute silence, where nothing, absolutely nothing moves. They look at me in amazement when I stop directly in the center of the room and seem not to be really there. Then all strive to imitate me and attempt to do the same. I notice that here and there a foot moves almost inadvertently. The attention of the children is drawn to every part of the body in their eager desire to attain immobility. As they proceed in their efforts, there actually is produced a silence different from that which is superficially called silence. It seems that life gradually disappears, that the room little by little becomes empty, as if there were no longer anyone present. Then they begin to hear the tick-tock of the clock upon the wall, and this tick-tock seems gradually to increase in intensity as the silence becomes absolute. From outside



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in the courtyard, which has seemed silent til now, come different sounds, the chirping of a bird or the walk of a child. The children are fascinated by this silence as a real conquest which they have made. ...

The children, after making these efforts and experiencing the joys of silence, were like ships sailing into port. They were happy about everything, about having learned something new, about having won a victory. This was their recompense. They forgot the promised sweets and did not bother to take the objects which I had imagined would attract them. I thus gave up these idle incentives and saw to my amazement that when the game was repeated it was carried out with ever increasing perfection, so that three-year-old children remained motionless in the silence during all the time it took to summon more than forty others out of the room. Then I realized that the soul of a child also has its spiritual joys and rewards. After such exercises it seemed that they loved me the more. Certainly they became more obedient, more sweet and gentle. We had become isolated from the world and had passed some minutes together in union with each other. During that time I had longed for, and called, them; and they had in turn heard in the deepest silence that voice which was directly personal to the one judged to be the best of all at the moment of call. (*The Discovery of the Child*, 152-155)

The game itself calls upon the will of each individual to birth silence, carry it to another place, and hold it once in the new location. It is challenging to wait for one's name to be called, or to wait for someone else to hear her name. The right moment to play is when there is a great calmness already. The ability to reconnect with the spiritual side of life is offered through the silence within one's own mind and body. We often are so busy, so rushed, that stillness is no longer familiar or comfortable. When we allow stillness, our perceptions are heightened. We have a greater awareness and appreciation. By slowing ourselves down, we actually find our creative self. In a later chapter of *The Discovery of the Child*, called "Elevation," Montessori writes,

The silence of immobility, on the other hand, suspends normal life and work, and has no practical aim. All its importance and fascination comes from the fact that by suspending the ordinary routine of life it raises an individual to a higher level. Here there is no question of utility; the only attraction is that of self-conquest.

When little children of three or four ask for silence, or when having been invited to create it, they immediately respond with the keenest interest, they afford us with a meaningful proof of the fact that children have a tendency to raise themselves up and that they enjoy higher pleasures. Many people have been present at one or other of those surprising scenes when a teacher begins to write the word "silence" on the blackboard and have noticed that before she has even finished writing the word a profound silence has pervaded the room, where seconds before forty or fifty little children were intent on their occupations.

The life of movement has been suspended almost instantly. Some child or other read the first letter of the word and understood that the order for silence was coming. Then, suspending his own activities, he began the silence which the others immediately suspected and joined in keeping. Thus silence called for silence without a single word being spoken. (191)

Through many preparations, indirect and direct, the child comes back to this sacred place of a quiet soul. Montessori said that this was preparing the person for the meditative side of life. Isn't this what contributes to a better society? Isn't this what we would name "being in a state of grace"?

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