The Myth of the "Perfect" Child

by Sarah Werner Andrews

Drawing on both extensive professional and deeply personal experience, Sarah Werner Andrews' vision of working with children carries profound respect and love throughout her guiding insight. She shares an understanding of those children who are the most challenging and provides a framework that allows us to embrace these and all children. Acknowledging the confusion and frustration that teachers often feel in the face of helping children that are difficult to understand, she sends the message that in order to gain insight and help each child, we must work to help ourselves by opening our minds and embracing the challenges and differences that each child offers. By embracing differences, the true child can be seen, and the child will guide the adult in the quest to help him.

The seed for this topic began to germinate a year or so ago when a student in our course remarked that her daughter's teacher had told her that her daughter was just a "perfect Montessori child." This off-hand remark, clearly meant as a compliment, really rubbed the parent the wrong way, and she didn't understand. What did that teacher really mean? What was she saying about Montessori education?

Language is code. When we hear the word *perfect* many thoughts and images come to mind: Perhaps a child who just *loves* lessons, or who will repeat and repeat and repeat, or a child who can't wait to come to school and eagerly gets busy. Perhaps an image of a helpful class leader comes to mind as well; or the child who is so

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Sarah Werner Andrews *is an AMI teacher trainer, international speaker, Montessori consultant, and is currently part of the training faculty at Montessori Northwest in Portland, OR. She holds a bachelor's degree in music performance, an M.Ed from Loyola University, and AMI primary and elementary diplomas. Sarah has worked in Montessori education since 1987 and has several years of teaching experience at both the primary and elementary levels and experience in administration.*
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connected to the work she is doing that she is completely oblivious to what is happening around her. We can all picture a child or two that fits these descriptions. I'm thinking of six-year-old Arielle who sweetly and earnestly declared, "I just *love* phonograms!" (I mean, who really loves phonograms?!)

Really, it's a beautiful thing, isn't it, that there is a place for children to love school, to love new lessons, and to be able to repeat an activity as long as they choose to, a place for children to lose themselves in their work, and even to love phonograms. We've all worked with children like this, and it truly is remarkable.

But are these the only kinds of behaviors that make children "perfect" or "perfectly suited for Montessori?" And perhaps even more importantly for this parent in our course, what did it mean for her *other* child? She has two children in Montessori, and they are very different from one another; was the other child not perfect?

If that teacher's offhand remark caused the seed for this keynote to germinate, the seed was planted with another well-intentioned remark, much longer ago. I want to tell you another story. Twenty-two years ago, my first child was born prematurely.

I had a normal, uneventful pregnancy, but although my baby was due in March, one morning in January I woke up, and my baby was born two hours later. My bun was out of the oven, but he really was not done baking yet, so he needed to stay in the neonatal intensive care unit. He was very small, and kind of skinny and wrinkly, and without body fat he couldn't regulate his body temperature. His nervous system was not quite developed yet either, so he had trouble with things that typically are automatic, like breathing, and he would occasionally forget to breath, setting off a monitor alarm. He also didn't have the facial muscles to suck effectively, so he had to be tube fed.

But despite all of this, he was the most beautiful baby ever born, and I admired the nurses' self-discipline that they could somehow continue with their work when obviously, they just wanted to stand around and admire my baby all day!

Gradually all of his systems improved, but he still was being tube fed. I was committed to breastfeeding, but he just wasn't strong enough to nurse, and despite the ingenious means we employed to help him learn how, he wasn't gaining weight, and the tube feeding was beginning to cause other problems. He was going to have to learn how to use a bottle. Even though this sounds like a normal, logical step, at the time, in my fragile, new mother state it was devastating to me. Suddenly, with the introduction of a baby bottle and formula, all of my ideals about motherhood were changed and I was overcome with my failure as a mother (the first of many, I must say). Trying to comfort me, one of the nurses said, "It's OK. Maybe next time you'll have your perfect Gerber baby."

I was stunned at her insensitivity. First of all, my baby *was* perfect, thank you very much. Second, Gerber was an evil corporation profiting from chemical- and pesticide-laden pseudo-nutrition for babies! And third, my baby was perfect!

Perfection, it would seem, has a dark side. These stories are just two examples of the negative effects of projecting one's own image of perfection onto someone else. For example, a perfect baby looks like a Gerber baby and anything else is imperfect, characterized by defects or weakness. If we have a perfect Montessori child, what does that make the rest of the children? Imperfect? Deviated? And what are we even talking about when we use the word *perfect*?

Let's take a closer look at what *perfect* means. The first three dictionary definitions of *perfect* are:

- "conforming absolutely to the description or definition of an ideal type"
- "excellent or complete beyond practical or theoretical improvement"
- "exactly fitting the need in a certain situation or for a certain purpose"

The dark side grows from wanting or expecting all children to conform to these definitions of perfection. I don't believe any Montessori teacher in their heart really wants children to conform

or to be these definitions of perfection, but these ideas creep into our work very quietly and very insidiously.

I think this sneaky idea of perfection is behind too many people saying, "Yeah, Montessori, it works well for some children." For *some* children. What do people mean when they say that? Which children? The ones who are already perfect? The ones who can conform to the description of an ideal type? The children who are already "excellent and beyond improvement?" The ones who exactly "fit the need in our certain situations" or for "our purposes?" The common perception that Montessori works well for *some* children is one that I've encountered more often than I'd like. And we have to admit, message heard is message given.

In some Montessori schools, these definitions of perfection might influence policy decisions, such as not accepting any new five-year-olds, or children with special needs, or determining when a child is "ready" or not to move to the elementary or the primary from a toddler class. Some schools interview the children to determine if they will be a good fit for the school. What does a *good fit* mean? The child is already normalized? They are already independent, socially competent, verbal, and outgoing? They don't present any challenges? This is like a doctor complaining because all these sick people keep coming to the clinic! It is the children who challenge us who need us and a Montessori environment the most.

It is the children on the edge, the children with disabilities, the children who seem oppositional, the children who are angry, and the children who have learned before their fifth birthday that adults are not to be trusted and that the world is a dangerous place; these are children who need us the most.

It is not only the children that we expect to be perfect. How many of you teachers are perfectionists? Do you have in your mind's eye a vision of the perfect classroom? The perfect teacher? A level of perfectionism that you can never attain because it is "beyond practical or theoretical improvement?" Is there a little voice inside your head that says, "You're not good enough?" There is a fine line between setting a high bar for yourself and making that bar so high that it can never be reached.

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I find most Montessori teachers have very high standards. Why would we want low standards? High standards, in and of themselves are not a bad thing; we need to hold ourselves to a high standard, but a high standard that supports optimal development, not one that thwarts our best work.

We know that our prepared environments are important, and we have high standards with our classroom environments. Our training centers have beautiful and carefully cultivated prepared environments, so that as teachers you are inspired to create beautiful spaces for children that promote care, attention, and nurture the spirits of all who work and live together.

We have high standards for our intellectual preparation. We cultivate a deep understanding of child development and respect for human potential. And as teachers, our spiritual preparation involves constant self-reflection and a high level of integrity. We have very high standards for ourselves.

But if our high standards become a desire for perfection, no matter what the cost, we can become an obstacle to development. We become obstacles if our vision of the "child who is not yet there" keeps us from fully appreciating the child who is right here in front

of us. Whether consciously or unconsciously, if for ourselves or the children or the families, if our aim is *perfection*, then instead of nurturing the human spirit and supporting the child's work of *self*-construction, our work becomes conforming absolutely, beyond improvement, and exactly fitting.

Cultivating perfection can also cultivate anger and pride, two traits that have no place at all in our work with children. Anger and pride are closely aligned to one another. Montessori describes pride as cloaking anger in a "pleasing camouflage" (*The Secret of Childhood* 111) because pride can look noble, or even deserving of respect. But pride comes when we put ourselves in front of our work with children, when we care too much about appearances or looking good. Or looking "perfect."

In a lecture on the preparation of the adult, Montessori trainer Nikki Hughes talked about three words associated with pride and anger: *extension, expectation*, and *exploitation*.

Let's unpack this a little bit. Pride shows its dark side when we view the children as *extensions* of ourselves. "*My* class works." "The children in *my* class behave." We see the children as a reflection of ourselves; if the children are quiet, well-behaved, and always working, then I am a good teacher and I'm doing a good job. But if they're not, then it's because I'm not a good teacher, or people won't think I am working hard enough. The unspoken message to the child is, "The way you are reveals me; you cannot truly be yourself because you are an extension of me."

These are unconscious feelings, but they still affect the children. If we see the child as an extension of ourselves, then we develop certain expectations of the child. The child's behavior, sense of order, and academic achievement must all meet our adult expectations, because our sense of self depends on what the children do. "All of my children read before they leave the Casa." "At my gatherings, all of the children sit quietly." What is the cost of making these expectations a reality? Many adult and child conflicts arise because the children are not able to live up to the adult's expectations. Often our expectations do not match what the children are capable of at a particular moment.

In order for the child to conform to the adult's expectations, the child is *exploited*. Free choice goes out the window because the child might not choose the "right" work (something we think is "challenging" enough) or the child might not choose to act in the way we want him to. To prevent this, the adult begins to direct the activity, and become more controlling. "I need you to take out the stamp game now." "I need you to keep your hands in your lap." Somehow, we think that if we use an "I statement," we are being respectful, but what we really mean is, "Do the stamp game right now!" Rewards and punishments start to creep in to our interactions, and we find ourselves using our adult power to manipulate the child's behavior.

Of course, with extension, expectation, and exploitation, anger is not far behind. Anger enters when the adult's pride is threatened. "This child won't work, and it makes me look bad." The teacher is angry with the child because her pride is damaged. "You will listen to me. I am the adult and I said so." From this point, it is a short step to tyranny. Anger and pride can have a devastating effect on children. They're not so healthy for teachers either.

> Until the child is connected to some kind of purposeful activity, we never give up. It is only after the child is engaged that we pull back.

I just painted a pretty gruesome picture, but I want to tell you a story of another way that these words manifest. Once upon a time, a young, optimistic teacher took over an established classroom from a teacher who had been with the class for many years but was not returning. In this school, only the returning children came to school for the first two weeks, and then the new children were phased in gradually. The new teacher decided to keep all the same systems for snack, lunch, indoor shoes, etc., since that was what the children were used to, and not introduce anything new until she got the lay of the land. She was amazed at how the returning children followed all of the procedures and systems–they were perfect! She couldn't believe how well the children just came in, changed their shoes, got right to work, set up their lunches, cleaned up. She remembers thinking, "Wow. That old teacher must have been a lot better teacher than

me because my class has never looked this good." I know, because that new teacher was me.

But over time, little cracks started to form. One day at lunch, I decided to play some music that I really enjoyed, and that I thought the children would also like. We were listening to the music, the room was very calm, and the children were quietly eating their lunches, and again I thought to myself, "These children are amazing. Look at how quietly and politely they sit and eat, and how much they seem to enjoy listening to the music." Then one of the older girls came up to me in tears, and sobbed, "W-w-w-we want to talk!" I looked at her blankly, not understanding why she was crying, and replied, "Of course you can talk." She sobbed again, "B-b-b-but the music is still on." Apparently, there was a rule from last year that I didn't know about: If there was music playing at lunch, no one could talk.

Over the next several days, with me as their new teacher, what seemed to be a perfect, finely tuned machine of a Montessori classroom began to fall apart. I thought it was because I must just not be a very good teacher–after all, things seemed to be going so great at the beginning of the year, and now they weren't. Finally, I went to my administrator for help. "I don't understand it. They used to choose work, follow the routines, the classroom used to be so quiet. What am I doing wrong?"

My administrator smiled, and said that she had been waiting for me to come see her. She then explained that the previous teacher was loving and kind, but was so controlling that the children had not developed any self-discipline or true independence. They just did exactly what she told them to do and conformed exactly to what the teacher envisioned for them. And when they left this classroom, they fell apart. They were the worst behaved children on the playground, in aftercare, and before-school care, and the old teacher couldn't understand it. My administrator explained that since I was not directing the children's every move, and they had not developed their own ability to self-direct, the children were completely at loose ends.

It turned out that the children were not perfect, but neither were they *imperfect*. What we were experiencing was the breaking down

of *external* control, and the beginnings of the building up of *internal* control: self-discipline, will, and independence.

I also want you to know that this previous teacher was not a friend, she loved her work, and the children loved her, but her vision of perfection prevented her from giving the children the liberty to make mistakes, to make messes, to construct themselves from their own experiences. I believe that out of kindness, she was trying to construct the children, to mold them, to spare them the pain of growth, and in doing so, spare herself the discomfort of not knowing, of experimenting, of making mistakes, and of the realization that she might not be perfect either.

The truth is, there is no such thing as a perfect child, a perfect class, or a perfect teacher. If we try to make ourselves or the children conform to an abstraction of perfection, we risk destroying the foundational principles of Montessori education. Montessori education is based upon the belief that self-construction is the work of the child. What do children construct? Character, intellect, independence, will, and self-discipline. And we know that children will construct themselves out of whatever they find in their environment. That is all that they can do.

The thing is, construction is messy. Even under the best of circumstances, with any construction there will be mistakes, mishaps, change orders, shipments will be delayed, and it's a good bet that it will probably take longer and cost more than we expected. Why would it be any different for children? And with children who experience obstacles to their development, there is no doubt it will take longer and require more patience and flexibility because these children have encountered building materials in their environments that do not produce sound, strong constructions. Sometimes the constructions the children have already made are so uninhabitable that the only thing to do is tear them down and rebuild with new materials.

Every child will encounter some obstacles to their development, but these obstacles, and how children respond to them, are as different as the individuals who encounter them. Obstacles to development are like debris in a river: Smaller pebbles and sticks

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can get swept along with the force of the river, and we may not even be aware of them unless they are deposited further along the riverbanks downstream. We all have encountered issues like this in our early development, and as adults we see traces of them in our lives and in our patterns of interactions, but they don't cause us to breakdown.

Bigger obstacles, like larger rocks and boulders, cannot just be swept along with the river, and they cause the flow of the river to detour around them, sometimes creating a divergent stream going off in another direction. We see these children in our classrooms; their path of healthy, happy development is thwarted, and they are going off in other directions. Sometimes this is OK, and sometimes they need us to bring them back to rejoin the river.

If there are just too many obstacles to flow over or go around, those rocks and boulders can build up and create a dam, inhibiting the flow of water so that even the smaller sticks and pebbles get caught up in the barrier. Every obstacle, large or small, becomes impossible to get past; what was once a natural stream of flowing water backs up upon itself and floods the banks, spilling out in all directions, and sometimes altering the landscape forever. We see

these children too; every little thing becomes an explosion. They seem unable to manage even the smallest setback. We have to remember that it wasn't always like this; their lives got this way from repeated obstacles and resistance.

The obstacles that children encounter vary in significance according to their severity and the child's age. Difficulties or obstacles that occur during pregnancy can be much more difficult to overcome; we know how challenging it is for children born with fetal alcohol syndrome or drug addiction. Once children are born, they are susceptible to societal conditions they find themselves in: extreme poverty, violence, deprivation, and we certainly see children of all socio-economic levels affected by toxic stress.

The years from 3-6, when the child is still forming personality, can be a time to remediate many negative conditions, but those that are not corrected, not only remain, but worsen. The effects of these obstacles can become a permanent fixture in the child's personality. The older a child gets, the more difficult it is, and the more conscious effort it requires to work through these obstacles.

Regardless of what the child brings to us, our work as teachers is to prepare an environment that supports positive self-construction: a safe, beautiful place where children find the raw materials they need to do their work. It doesn't matter whether their work is learning how to get along with others or practicing independence or learning that adults can be trustworthy or learning how to take risks or learning how to build the number rods. We know that the psychological environment that we prepare is even more important than the physical environment.

Our work is to connect children to the prepared environment. That means we need to cultivate our relationship with each of the children so that they trust us to provide what they need and trust us to stop them if they are straying too far away. It means we need to observe carefully, to figure out what the obstacles are, and to remove them one by one.

At last we withdraw once that connection is made, so that each child is free to work as long or as little as he needs to, without in-

terruption or interference and without judgment. Until the child is connected to some kind of purposeful activity, we never give up. It is only after the child is engaged that we pull back.

While we hold a vision of "the child who is not yet there" out of respect for human potential, we also observe tirelessly the child who is right here in front of us because our work is to provide him with what he needs, not to make him into something else that conforms to our ideas of what he should be, but to provide what he needs so that he can fulfill his own potential and promise. We can't do this without consistent, careful observation and creative reflection.

We don't know who this child will become, or what he is capable of, or what will capture his attention. That's the child's work. Our work is to observe, to study, to be a detective, and uncover what each unique child needs for his own self-construction.

We have learned in our training, and from reading Montessori's work, that the child's self-construction relies on concentration or fixed attention. Concentration is the key to getting back on that path of healthy, happy development, or in the privacy of our *Casas* what we refer to as *normalization*. Montessori wrote in *The Absorbent Mind*, "…the fixing of his attention is basic to all that comes afterwards. No one says it must always fixate in the same way, or on the same things, but unless it does fixate, formation cannot begin" (216). Concentration is kind of our holy grail. And for children who struggle, concentration seems like an impossible achievement.

We all know concentration is essential, but what does concentration look like? This is where I think perfection becomes another obstacle. Many of us hold a particular vision of perfect concentration and it comes from Montessori herself. That famous story of the little girl with the cylinder block.

Montessori discovered the phenomenon of concentration when she observed a little three-year-old working with a cylinder block. She was struck by the intensity with which the child worked, such that when Dr. Montessori called her name, she didn't even hear her. She called again, but still the child didn't respond. Then Montessori went over and picked up the child in the chair, but then the

child just started taking as many cylinders as she could and putting them in her lap so she could still do her work. Still failing to "disturb" the child's concentration, Montessori called the other children to gather around her and sing and parade around the little girl. Montessori counted how many times the little girl put the cylinders in and took them out again. Amidst all of this tumult and chaos, the child did the cylinder blocks 42 times (Standing 40). Montessori was amazed at this extraordinary level of concentration in such a small child, and it opened up for her an entire universe of possibility resulting from the phenomenon of concentration.

> When we let go of any preconceptions of what we think children are supposed to be, or what work is "supposed to look like," we open our minds and our eyes to a new vision: Difference is not only normal, difference is expected, and difference is celebrated. We begin to seek out the children that other people have left behind because they are too challenging, because we know that children who challenge us the most, need us the most.

I don't remember when I first read an account of this story, but I'm pretty sure it was in my first year of teaching. This image of concentration, instead of being extraordinary, became my vision of what concentration *should* look like, and anything else fell short. This meant, of course, since this level of concentration is rare, that I believed that the children were never concentrating well enough. My vision of concentration, my expectation of what concentration *should* look like, prevented me from seeing what was right in front of me, the many children concentrating in many different ways, on many different kinds of activities.

Let's go back to that quote from *The Absorbent Mind*, "No one says it must always fixate in the same way, or on the same things…." While there are certainly similarities in how fixed attention manifests from child to child, particularly in the focus of hands and eyes, concentration may look different on different children, depending on the child's age, the nature of the work, and the child's individual personality. We do a disservice to the children if we expect every child to concentrate in the same way as the little child with the cyl-

inder block. We never will know what materials or activities will touch the center of a child's being and bring him back to the path of normalization.

I want to tell you another story that involves a cylinder block and a child's path back from the edge and then back to normalization: the happy, healthy path of development.

This is the story of Aarush, a five-year-old boy who came to my class in my second year of teaching (Aarush is a real child whose name and certain identifying details have been changed in order to protect his privacy). Before Aarush came to our community, his parents warned me that they had just moved, and their child had a very negative experience at his last school. He was terrified of school and of teachers. The only way they could convince him to try Montessori school was by telling him that he could leave at any time. Aarush agreed to come for one day.

His parents were not exaggerating. When Aarush arrived at school, he was the most frightened child I have ever seen. He stood just inside the door, wouldn't come in, didn't want to greet anyone, didn't want to play or sing, or even eat snack. I just tried to appear as friendly as I could, and let him stand by the door all morning. He agreed to come back for one more day.

On a day-by-day basis, Aarush gradually entered the classroom. He watched everything silently but declined my offers of conversation, lessons, stories, singing, and snacks. I was starting to feel like I wasn't doing this boy any good; after all, he was five years old but couldn't read or write, and I wasn't making any headway. But his parents were thrilled that he was willing to come to school at all, so he continued coming.

One day, Aarush was watching me straighten some papers, and he said, "I have some of that at my house." Astonished that he actually spoke to me, but afraid I might scare him off, I said very casually, "Oh, you have paper at your house?" He proceeded to tell me how he liked to make paper airplanes at his house. I asked him if he would like to do that here, and he said he might. I quickly gathered together some paper, tape, scissors, and string, and he began to make

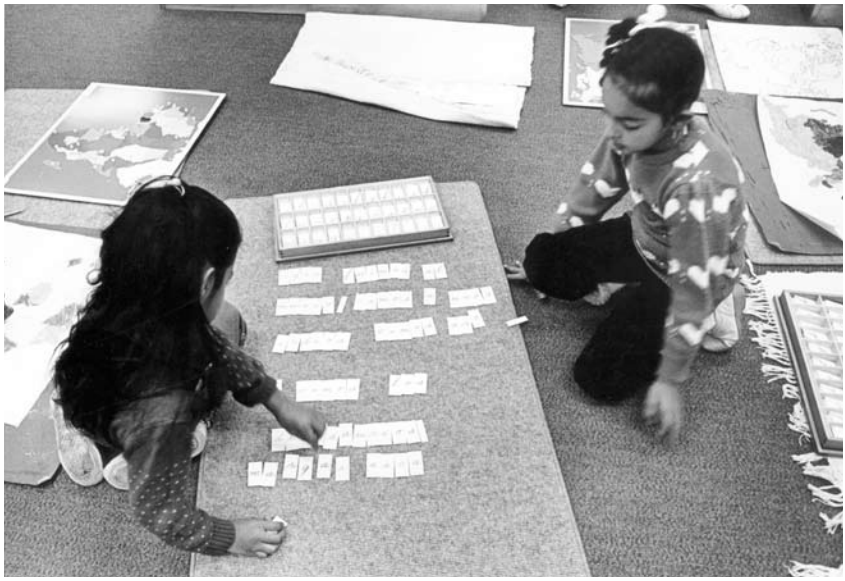
paper airplanes. He made them for several days. He brought them outside at recess and pulled them in the air by the string.

Meanwhile, he still had not touched a single piece of Montessori material. I was starting to worry about what my administrator would think about this boy who just flew paper airplanes alone all day, or that his parents would complain that he wasn't learning anything. What if all the other children wanted to quit working with the Montessori materials and make paper airplanes all day too?

One day, Aarush was sitting at a table, making a paper airplane, when I presented a cylinder block to a little three-year-old at a nearby table. Aarush watched the lesson, looked at me and said, "I think I could do that." I jumped at the opportunity, and said of course, he could choose it any time! Aarush took a cylinder block (mind you, an activity usually for the very youngest children), worked with it, and then I offered him two blocks, then three, then all four, and then a blindfold! That was the moment that Aarush finally let go of his fears and became a child transformed.

From that point on, Aarush worked insatiably. He was chatty, witty, and helpful. He wanted new lessons every day. He taught himself to read, to write, and raced through all of the math materials. One day he saw me dusting some encyclopedias on a high shelf and asked what book I was dusting. "This is volume G," I replied, and he asked if he could read it. I took it down and gave it to him. He was engrossed for the rest of the day. After about an hour, he looked up, eyes shining, and said, "This is a great book!"

Aarush was extraordinary, and I learned a lot from him in the two years he was with me. I never would have chosen paper airplanes or cylinder blocks as a "normalizing activity" for Aarush, but I was willing to follow the child and to let Aarush teach me. If we have only one vision or expectation of what concentration is, or what meaningful work is, then we take away the child's own unique expression and either try to make them conform to our expectation, or limit who and what we bring into our environments. A new four- or five-year-old may never exhibit the kind of concentration Montessori observed in that three-year-old with the cylinder block,



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but that doesn't mean that we can't serve this child or that older children can't be successful in our programs.

One of the strengths of Montessori education is that we have the capacity for individualized education. We can meet each child at the door, and help him find just what he needs. Within our communities, we have the potential to serve a wide range of differences, of challenges, and serve all the children. When we let go of any preconceptions of what we think children are supposed to be, or what work is "supposed to look like," we open our minds and our eyes to a new vision: Difference is not only normal, difference is expected, and difference is celebrated. We begin to seek out the children that other people have left behind because they are too challenging, because we know that children who challenge us the most, need us the most.

The thing is, in the words of Ross Greene, "Children do well when they can." We should blaze those words on our souls. Children do well when they can. We are here to help them.

Children don't like how it feels when they are angry, or hurting others, or misbehaving; no one does. They don't want to be this

way. We can help them by understanding that they behave the way they do because they have encountered obstacles, then do our best to remove the obstacles to their development. We clear away the obstacles and the debris, so that they *can* do well.

We believe that within every child is the capacity and the desire to do well, and all we need to do is remove what is not beautiful and helpful. Just like the story of Michelangelo and his sculpture of David; David was already there inside the marble, all Michelangelo needed to do was just remove the rock that was *not* the David.

In biology, the word "perfect" has a different meaning than what we've talked about so far. In biology, perfect means *complete*, lacking nothing, having all of its parts. When we look at the children in our care, and see them as lacking nothing, then we can truly support the development of the whole child.

We don't need to make the children perfect, they are already perfect. But sometimes, that perfection is hidden away. When we look at a child, we mustn't see what he is lacking, or what he *can't* do, or how he could disrupt our classrooms. Instead, we can see a perfect child, who lacks nothing but opportunity to flourish, and our work is to clear away the debris, so that this perfect child can grow and blossom.

It's important that we also grant *ourselves* this permission to be perfect–to see ourselves as lacking nothing. Even though we will make mistakes, we will learn from them; we will try again. This is what "perfect" teachers really do. We have to love and accept ourselves too. It's not about what we are doing wrong, but what can we do differently. Only then are we perfectly poised to support the whole child, and to help every child become his best self. Only then can we help every individual, unique, perfect snowflake of a child.

Remember our task as Montessori educators: to prepare an environment that is perfectly suited to the community of children who live there each day, all of them perfect snowflakes in our care. Our environment must be perfect, but not perfect in that is beyond improvement or conforming to an ideal, but perfect in

that we take care that our environments are *complete,* and *lacking nothing necessary* for development: the physical environment, but more so, the psychological environment.

The way we make our environment perfect is through our knowledge of the children. This knowledge comes through careful observation. If we are to truly know these children, as teachers, we must touch one by one, heart by heart, and mind by mind, each individual in our care. Knowing the individuals means knowing that every child is different, every child has special needs, every child is on her own path of development, every child needs support, and although the developmental continuum is universal, every child is in her own place on that continuum.

It is only when we know the children that we can connect them with just the right materials and activities–not just the next lesson on a check sheet, or a rote presentation that is given in exactly the same way to every child. Regardless of the child or the situation, we connect the child so the material or activity will inspire the kind of concentration and engagement that will nurture each child's spirit.

And finally, when we "withdraw" we are not abandoning the children, we are trusting in their own agency. We grant the children the liberty to push their own boundaries, to make their own mistakes, and to discover what their own interests are, the kind of interests that lead to concentration and work; work that integrates the body and the mind, and brings children back from the edge, to a path of healthy happy development. With meaningful work comes the development of independence, of will, of character, and the liberation of spirit that is the hallmark of Montessori education and the birthright of every child.

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