**Can you count to 100?**

The count up to the 100th day of school became more than a lesson about counting coins for students in class with Mrs. Dhruv and Mrs. Schwarz.

Throughout this school year, students brought in pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters to add to their class piggy bank each day. One student per day would count enough money to match that day of the school year – on the 10th day, 10 cents went into the bank, on the 95th day, 95 cents went in and so on.

On the 100th day of school the students divided into five small groups to count their coins. A small treasure awaited one of the small groups. The students with Mrs. Schwarz found a 1958 bronze penny in the huge stack of coins. According to the students’ research, the penny is worth 50 cents.

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Child’s Play

Time for Free Play Benefits Children’s Development

If you are wondering which is best for your child – a favorite computer game or going outside to play – current research says, “outside!” Playing outside is really just exercise.

Playing outside provides more than just physical activity however. It helps build muscles and bones, helps control body fat, helps children deal with stressful situations. Children who exercise in the form of playing have the same benefits that would come from a formal weight-training program.

According to research from the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia and Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., in Princeton, outdoor play should be given the highest priority. There are other areas of development that benefit, as well.

Developing the ability to pay attention

This is an important skill in the processes for learning and one which is better developed by free play time. Research suggests that children who get an abundance of play time are better able to learn and are better behaved in the classroom.

Also, outside play being an unstructured environment provides kids with decisions to make and problems to solve, which in turn helps them in classroom learning and in acquiring the complex skills of planning, organizing, sequencing and decision-making.

Learning cooperation skills

During free play outside, children develop the important skills of cooperating with others and how to compromise. During this play time, they also learn to develop empathy for others, as well as flexibility, self-awareness and how to self-regulate their own behavior.

Impact on personality

Everybody knows that playing outside makes children energetic and happy. Such regular physical activity – which is what play is – is generally thought to reduce anxiety, alleviate depression, help with sleep problems, if there are any, and improve emotional well-being.

Is the child too busy to play?

Many children are in fact too busy to have time to play creatively or to relax after school. Those who complain about the number of activities they’re involved in or refuse to go to them may be signaling that they are overscheduled.

If that seems to be a possibility, talk with them about their feelings on extracurricular activities. Adjusting scheduling now, if advisable, would be preferable to handling the effects of this kind of stress later.

In the Montessori classroom the environment is full of materials and lessons appropriate to the age of the children they serve. Self-directed movement is built into the structure of the classroom. With these things, the ultimate goal is to create situations in which the task and the developmental needs of the child “match” and the child becomes absorbed in his work. This is what Csikszentmihalyi called engagement - the state of flow. Montessori described her first “never-to-be-forgotten” discovery of this phenomenon while observing an engaged child:

“I watched the child intently without disturbing her at first, and began to count how many times she repeated the exercise; then, seeing that she was continuing for a long time, I picked up the little arm-chair in which she was seated, and placed chair and child upon the table; the little creature hastily caught up her case of insets, laid it across the arms of her chair, and gathering the cylinders into her lap, set to work again. Then I called upon all the children to sing; they sang, but the little girl continued undisturbed, repeating her exercise even after the short song had come to an end. I counted forty-four repetitions; when at last she ceased, it was quite independently of any surrounding stimuli which might have distracted her, and she looked round with a satisfied air, almost as if awakening from a refreshing nap.

Maria Montessori, Spontaneous Activity in Education

Today neuroscience has been able to identify the exact mechanisms (particular proteins and different types of brain cells) of what is often referred to as brain plasticity—-the fact that the neural circuitry in the brain reorganizes itself in response to experience or sensory stimulation.

Different types of brain plasticity dominate during certain times in a person’s life: It occurs during normal brain development from infancy to adulthood and as an adaptive mechanism to compensate for lost functions or to maximize function.

Our brains are designed to be engaged in meaningful activity. When humans are deprived of engagement in their lives, Csikszentmihalyi found that they are plunged into a state “eerily similar to a serious psychiatric disorder” (Pink).

Dr. Montessori believed that the educational practices of her day, dependent on total teacher control, actually caused problems in children. She came to realize that when children have a stable environment in which they can experience engagement with the materials, many psychological and behavioral problems disappeared and the children were able to reach their full human potential.

Csikszentmihalyi and Montessori both came to understand how in humans the boundaries between work and play are somewhat artificial and that children, when left to their own devices, are our best example of this.
Happy Valentine’s Day
February 14, 2011
A simple way to keep your family humming

Do you schedule a meeting with your family each week? Chances are, you don’t. But designating a time and place to sit down together each week keeps your family connected and has a way of taking the edge off contentious discussions.

Why meet? Jan Miksovsky, co-founder of Cozi.com, the online family calendar and organizer, is so committed to family meetings that his family has met every Sunday for the past six years. They see three big benefits of a weekly family meeting:

- It’s a safe and productive way to discuss problems and rules
- It prepares the family for upcoming events and activities
- It gives children a clear and tangible voice in the family.

Start with a plan

First, choose a time and place so the family looks forward to the meeting – like dessert.

And it’s important to have an agenda, even if it’s loose and flexible. For ideas, here is the Miksovsky family agenda:

Thank-yous. Each family member thanks another for something in the past week.

White-board items: The Mikovskys have a white board in their home for jotting down problems that came up during the week. One child is unhappy about another using his toys? Having trouble getting the kids into bed on time? Chores not getting done?

Instead of trying to solve these problems in the heat of the moment, the white board is an easy outlet for recording the problem. During the white board part of the family meeting, the family discusses solutions to problems and all parties have a voice.

Miksovsky notes, however, that parents agree to listen, but the ultimate decision on how to resolve the problems and enforce household rules is up to the parents.

The family calendar

Go over upcoming events, changes to the usual routine, family plans and holidays so everyone gets on the same page about the week’s schedule.

The children get excited about special events like a birthday party; plus, they get prepared for the dull stuff, too, like running errands with Mom or cleaning the house before guests arrive. You can even go over the meal plan for the week to help avoid last minute negotiations.

Rewards. A nice way to close the meeting is to rotate a household privilege. The Metsovskys let their girls decide what to eat for one dinner meal the next week.

Let’s talk about more places to go and things to see

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston usually will have one or more exhibits of interest to the whole family. In that connection, remember that every first Sunday of every month is FREE! FREE! FREE! courtesy of Target Stores.

The Museum of Printing History: There are relatively few museums of printing history in the U.S. and Houston has one of the best for its fine collection of antique and historical machinery and tools.

Also, this month, if you hurry, you will see a retrospective of work of Ernest F. de Soto, a Tamarind Master Printer. Ends March 5.

For a wonder unto itself, you can’t beat the Houston Museum of Natural Science. Right now, and through December 31, there is an exhibit called “Searching for Eternity,” about Ancient Egypt.

Its permanent exhibits, however, especially the Hall of Paleontology, Strake Hall of Malacology (that’s seashells to you and me), and the Collection of Mineral Crystals earmarks this museum for repeated visits.

And, one could watch the HMNS Foucault’s Pendulum, forever.
Putting Your Trust in the Process

Margot Garfield Anderson
(The Montessori Foundation)

One of the first things I do each morning when I start my workday is to read Google Alerts. This is a search engine I have entered into my profile that sends me links to any major newspaper articles or blogs from around the globe that contain the keyword Montessori. I recently read this interesting article written by an AMI teacher named Pilar Lozano, who teaches in California. I talked with Pilar about this article and received her permission to share excerpts with our readers.

Nurturing and sustaining community is a prevailing theme, not just in this issue of Tomorrow's Child and at our November Florida conference but in Montessori in general. We achieve this by making certain that our school families have a solid understanding of how Montessori is best practiced at school and at home; however, since most of our parents have non-Montessori educational backgrounds, it is often challenging to ask them to put aside the 'known' and just let the process work the way it was designed.

Pilar speaks about how to achieve the balance between parent expectations and best Montessori practice and how we need to encourage and educate parents to put trust in the process. Here are some scenarios that often confront administrators, guides, and parents – with some suggestions as to how these might be best addressed.

A Montessori response: By letting the children go through this process they gain a tremendous sense of accomplishment that leads to more self-confidence and independence. When a parent can see that as the end-game result they tend to relax enough to allow this to happen. The teachers are trained observers and know when they need to intervene or not, as the case may be.

Children need to learn how to work through a frustrating or difficult task in order to master a skill set or lesson. If a teacher or parent is always on hand to rescue or complete something for the child, there is no real lesson learned.

Scenario 1: "Montessori education allows the child to explore with the materials, get stuck, make mistakes, work through challenges, and ask for help if necessary (preferably from an older child)."

Parents often wonder why the teachers don't step in to 'help' or correct a child's mistakes.

Scenario 2: "Montessori education is a process; some days are peaceful, some days are active. Some days are so beautiful, you wish they would never end; some days everything falls apart and you end up sitting everyone down and singing The Wheels on the Bus while counting the seconds until pickup time."

Parents often expect that what they will find each time they visit the class will be similar to the last time they dropped in. If not, perhaps something is wrong!

A Montessori response. While consistency is a key factor and a real basic precept in the classroom, parents need to understand that the flow of the class will ebb and wane throughout the year. Pilar explains that if parents observe something different from one observation to the next, they should not fear that something has gone wrong. Again, trust in the process.
Scenario 3: Montessori education encourages the teacher to focus on the presentation being given and the child who is receiving it; she will observe any inappropriate behavior on the other side of the classroom and address it when she finishes presenting.

*Parents often expect teachers to “nip any negative behavior in the bud.” This prevents children from learning how to work things out amongst themselves.*

A Montessori response: This, in no way, implies that a teacher would allow a situation that could cause harm or total disruption in the classroom to continue. Parents should expect a teacher to address the situation and help the child understand that there are consequences for actions and limits on unacceptable behavior in the classroom. Teachers are trained to figure out if there’s something else causing the behavioral issue and help the child understand what he or she may need.

Scenario 4: “Montessori education allows sweaters and lunch boxes to be left in the classroom by tots who are learning to be responsible.”

*Parents are sometimes frustrated and concerned when their children leave things at school and wonder why the teachers do not double check that nothing is left behind.*

A Montessori response: By the end of the year, parents will see tremendous growth in their child’s ability not only to care for the classroom environment but for their personal belongings at home, as well. When parents reinforce behaviors in the same way as the teachers, the message to the child is not just better learned but there is less frustration for all. Remember, a small child will, from time to time, forget or misplace objects such as lunch boxes and mittens. (I seem to lose my cell phone and car keys on a daily basis.) But, by having a place for everything to go back to, such as the classroom, helps everyone in this scenario.

Scenario 5: Montessori education provides children with an inspiring environment in which to develop awareness, discover the joy of learning, and become increasingly independent – not just physically, but also emotionally.

*Sometimes, parents with children enrolled in Montessori wish the school would be different: more structured, more focused on predictable lessons and progress and teacher-directed learning. While this instinctive wish for a more familiar and more traditional approach may seem natural, it actually fosters children’s dependence on adults, rather than independence and self-motivation.*

A Montessori response: We all want to believe that the parents who have committed themselves to providing a Montessori education for the families want the best for their child(ren). That is why they chose this dynamic approach to learning. When a parent first observes a Montessori classroom, what seems to draw them in is the ability of young children to develop the skills needed to become lifelong learners who are self-directed, self-sufficient, confident, and filled with joy and wonderment of the world and its surroundings. This is only possible when you put your trust in the Montessori certified teachers who lead your child’s class and the community to which you now belong.

In view of the fact that Montessori education is different from the traditional classroom, School of the Woods is committed to providing information on a regular basis to our parents so they can better understand the basic principles of the system.

Adapted from the article in “Tomorrow’s Child,” March 2010