Parents’ Organization announces events in September

Our traditional all-school-parent events are always great fun. Just so you won’t miss them accidentally, make a note to remember them on the back-page calendar.

The first: Our Parents’ Organization Adult Social celebrating “Back to School.” This will take place on September 7 at the home of Stephanie and Dustin Smith. Place: 7818 Bellewood at Wirt, just a few blocks south of the school. Time: 7 PM. Dress: casual. There will be oceans of food and drink.

The second: A morning event, September 11 – the Parents’ Organization Welcome Coffee, This cozy get-together is held at the home of Sherry Herron, Head of School, which is literally just around the corner from the campus at 12 Hilshire Grove Lane. Time: 8:45 AM. There is always a splendid selection of munchies and chompies.

New! Online sign-up for volunteering

Volunteering to work at Parents’ Organization events couldn’t be more convenient. Check out the Sign-Up Genius button on the front page of the school’s website, schoolofthewoods.org. Join the fun and volunteer for as many school events as you can, such as the Fall Festival & Chili Cook-Off and annual Spring Picnic that are organized and sponsored by the Parents’ Organization. It’s soooo easy!

Parent Education Learning Opportunities

Our PO also has worked diligently with faculty to create a schedule of interactive events to enhance understanding of Montessori education. These include hands-on learning experiences for parents, at the Montessori Journey, open house evenings for all levels, mornings and evenings of learning, coffees with Dr. Betsy Coe for Middle School and High School parents, and the Book Club. The schedule runs from September through next May.

Let’s Talk about BoxTops

Watch for this little pink logo on every product you buy and save ‘em up. They’re everywhere. The organization boxtops4education pays schools 10 cents for each one submitted to them.

After you save a bunch, you can turn them into the School’s main office. Counting and processing is done by Upper Elementary students. A full list of eligible products can be seen online at boxtops4education.com.
Helping Children Integrate Emotion with Experience

By Elizabeth Stepankiw

Plasticity of the brain refers to the fact that experience changes the brain, and this process continues throughout life. Maria Montessori recognized the importance of physical experience for the child, and in her vision of education, she emphasized the idea of educating all aspects of the child’s development, the "whole child." She spoke of the "great potentialities of the human personality in the course of its formation" (pg x, The Discovery of the Child).

In their book titled The Whole-Brain Child, authors Daniel J. Sieger, MD, and Tina Payne Bryson, PhD, affirm that this "new" perspective on integrating the parts of the whole brain builds resilience and intelligence and maximizes our ability to function at full capacity. Their book describes strategies for helping children balance the parts of their brains by paying attention to emotions. These strategies involve helping children connect their logical selves with their emotional selves.

The first strategy is to "connect and redirect." When children are feeling big waves of emotion, rather than immediately trying to direct their attention to something different or tell them the logic behind what has happened, it is important to acknowledge the feeling your child is having. Your child needs to "feel felt," to know that you see the emotion.

Once your child is calmer, you can then appeal to the logical side of the brain by helping your child put what has happened into context through an explanation and then, when needed, by planning for or problem solving the situation. This process creates what the authors call "horizontal balance." The left and right brains become more integrated each time your child has this experience.

Another way to help strengthen the connections between the emotional right brain and the factual left brain is to help children name the emotion they are feeling and encourage them to tell the story of what happened. Helping children use narrative storytelling as they recall how they felt will calm "big emotions." Telling a story this way is simply recalling the events and putting them in order and naming the feelings as the story progresses.

Putting the events in order, bringing in logic, and assigning words to feelings forms neuronal networks between the hemispheres of the brain -- emotion and experience are tied together so the child can understand what happened and then move on to the business of "being a child." The authors emphasize doing this only when both of you are in the right frame of mind. Respect a child who doesn’t want to talk by waiting for the right time and circumstance. Sometimes beginning the conversation gently while you are doing something else will help calm the emotional part of the story.
The right brain gives us the big picture of the meaning and feel of an experience. It receives and interprets emotional information by specializing in images, emotions, and personal memories. The left brain is logical, linguistic (likes words), literal, and linear. It likes to connect cause and effect relationships and expresses logic in language.

The process of connecting the right and left brains leads to a rewiring of the brain; "when neurons fire together they grow connections between them." By taking the time to grow these connections, your child will become happier, more flexible, and better able to deal with the challenges in life that you will not always be there to control.

If these parts of the brain are not integrated, we turn into a person who is overwhelmed by our emotions; we will either be too rigid or live in emotional chaos. Integrating the parts of the brain to build connections gives our lives order and structure. It is important to take the opportunities offered in everyday situations to help children understand themselves and the larger world around them.

In very young children, the right brain dominates, but they can be helped to make these connections in uncomplicated terms. When a toddler begins asking "why?" it is your clue that the left brain is beginning to play a larger role, and the child will be more able to follow the logic of events.

Even elementary children are often not able to put a story into words. You can help them by filling in some parts of the story for them. Specific questions can be helpful-- the best thing that happened, the worst, the most fun, or something they did that helped someone else-- are more likely to give you the opportunity to help them build the right and left brain connections.

Parents and teachers have the power to help children grow to be more resilient from their experiences. "As parents, we are wired to try to save our children from any harm or hurt, but ultimately we can't. They'll fall down, they'll get their feelings hurt, and they'll get sad and angry." (pg xi, Sieger and Bryson). You can be confident that over time, with the right kind of help, children will become more proficient at handling conflicts independently.

The authors urge us to view challenging situations as "gifts," opportunities to help children thrive. Communication between school and home are important so we can act as facilitators to help the child master the moments when he or she feels out of control. If we do this, life's events can be made much less frightening and painful.

An integrated brain is able to do a lot more than the individual parts, academically as well as socially. Over 40 years after she started her first school, Maria Montessori wrote: "My own experience is interesting because, apart from previous studies and prejudices, it offered a complex environment that provided a perfect unity not only for the education of a child but for social life and sentiments as well" (pg 34, Discovery of the Child).

Sources for this article:


Montessori Moment: The Choice Chasm
by R B Fast

Choice. It is a central tenant of the Montessori philosophy, both at home and at school. We feverishly emphasize the importance of adults offering children choices and allowing them and to become confident decision makers. As a parent, I pride myself on finding every opportunity I can to give my daughter every opportunity to choose for herself. In a Montessori world, choice matters.

Now is the time to clarify what we mean by ‘choice.’ When we discuss choices in a Montessori environment, we are talking about adults empowering children to become independent thinkers and doers. Offering choices ties directly into the Montessori theories regarding freedom and limits. Namely, we must offer the children freedom, and we must simultaneously establish parameters around those freedoms that limit the potential outcomes.

Offering choices to a child is a good thing. Allowing a child to do whatever he so pleases, or allowing a child to have everything she wants, are not the types of choices we are talking about in a Montessori approach. In fact, I argue that children will be markedly less happy people if they have the freedom to do what they want and own every object they desire.

In 2004, a psychologist by the name of Barry Schwartz published a book called *The Paradox of Choice* that illuminates and clarifies this idea that too much choice is a bad thing. He starts off by laying out what he calls the “official dogma” regarding choice. This dogma is as follows:

*The job of society is to maximize the welfare of the people. Welfare is maximized when freedom is maximized. Freedom is maximized when the amount of choices available are increased.*

On the surface, this makes a ton of sense. Of course, we should have freedom and of course, we should be able to make choices for ourselves. The rub comes when we begin to believe that we are most free when we have a lot of choices available to use. The truth is while we may have freedom because we have choices, we will also be less happy with whatever it is that we choose. Why is this? According to Mr. Schwartz, there are two measurable side effects of this smorgasbord of choice: one – it produces paralysis due to fear that we might make the wrong choice, and, two, it produces less satisfaction with the choice that is made, because we wonder if the option with the other features would have been better.

So what does this mean for you and your children? While being encouraged to empower your child with choices, you are being told that choice can be a detriment to happiness. Where does one draw the line with all this? Well, for starters, you don’t need to buy a lot of stuff, and when you do buy stuff, you can rotate out items that are no longer used or needed. Your child doesn’t need everything all the time. None of us do.

One of the reasons why the Montessori classroom isn’t packed with stuff is because we see the value in limiting the choices that we offer. When a material is being ignored or misused, we rotate it out of the room and put something different in its place.

When the new material comes in, the children are enthusiastic about using it. They experience surprise and gratitude at having something familiar yet new in their space. You can do the same thing at home. You don’t need to have everything that your child owns out and available all the time. It will likely seem more special to see
something that hasn’t been around for a while reappear in their room.

The next question is: How do we balance offering choices with limiting choices? A perfect real-world example of this is getting ready in the morning. Parents of young children can pretty much unanimously agree that getting a child ready and out the door in the morning can be an exhausting challenge.

Some of these challenges may be because of the child becoming overwhelmed by the abundance of choices available to her at that time. By offering limited choices, we allow the child to be the decision maker while creating limits that keep her safe and prevent her from being overwhelmed.

However, it is also critical to point out that you must be firm in requiring your child to live with the choice he has made. When you offer your child a choice between red and blue, and he chooses blue, immediately out the red shirt away. If he says he has changed his mind, let him know that the shirt is safe in the dresser and will be available to choose for tomorrow. He will be very angry with you, it will get ugly, and you will question yourself. Stick to requiring the choice he made and follow through with. Your child will test you on this because he will want to know if he can really trust you to provide secure limits.

This is like a trick question. Your child will resist having to live with the choices he has made because he wants you to stand up to him and be firm. If you allow him to change his mind, you indicate that he really has the freedom to choose anything he wants in the closet, and you are back at square one: with a child who is overwhelmed, paralyzed, and dissatisfied by the plethora of choice in his life.

If you stick to your guns, he will learn two things: (1) you are a person that he can trust to say what you mean and give safe limits; and (2) we all have to live with the choices that we make, regardless of how much we regret them.

As parents, we now have a choice to make regarding how we approach this paradox in our own household. How do we balance freedom and limits? When do we give a choice and when do we just make the choice? How much stuff do we have readily available in our homes, and how much more should we bring in? Gosh, with the selection of choices available to us, we might be a little bit overwhelmed and unsure of how to choose.

Now, just imagine being a two-year-old trying to negotiate the choices that confront us daily in this world.

The examples in this article suggest some ways to adjust your language first thing in the morning, so that your child is empowered without being overwhelmed.

### Alice and the White Queen

“I’m just one hundred and one, five months and a day.”

“I can’t believe that!” said Alice.

“Can’t you?” the Queen said in a pitying tone. “Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.”

Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said: “one can’t believe impossible things.”

“I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

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<tr>
<th>Instead of saying . . .</th>
<th>Try saying . . .</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you want to wear today?</td>
<td>Do you want to wear your blue shirt or you red shirt?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do you want for breakfast?</td>
<td>Would you like to have oatmeal or eggs</td>
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<td>What do you want to do while I get ready?</td>
<td>Are you going to read books or do art while I get ready?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What toy do you want to take in the car?</td>
<td>Do you want to bring your bear or a book in the car?</td>
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Article from “Tomorrow’s Child” magazine, published by The Montessori Foundation, April 2013.
"You can't make me!" yells our darling child. Instantly our breathing quickens, our heart rate elevates, our blood pressure rises and a throb starts at the temples. At times we feel like we "have to" make our children do some things against their will. Brush their teeth. Take a bath. Get dressed. Take their medicine.

Unfortunately, our children are taunting us with the truth. In the long run, they are right. We can't make them do anything against their will. We can force them physically to do something, but we win the battle only to damage a peaceable relationship that should be built on trust. How can we avoid these power struggles with our young children?

First, sidestep confrontation. We can't control our children's behavior, but we can control our own. When we hear, "You can't make me," simply move to leave the room and invite cooperation by saying, "Please, let me know when you're ready to cooperate." Then go on with your activity. Brush your teeth. Get dressed. Take your vitamins. Sweep the floor. Hum. Hum some more.

Avoid pushing back, and the resistance doesn't have any buttons to push.

Give choices when appropriate. Would you like to brush your teeth before or after your bath? Do you want bubble bath tonight, or no bubbles in your bath? Do you want to wear your red shirt or your blue shirt? Notice that the choice is not do you want to brush your teeth, take a bath, or get dressed—or not. The choice is when.

Giving choices invites cooperation. As you give choices, also listen for your children's suggestions, as in, "No, I want to wear my yellow shirt." The yellow shirt may not be the choice we gave, but it is an offer of cooperation.

Sidestepping confrontation and offering choices to gain cooperation lead us to a win/win situation. Our relationship with our children shouldn't be a contest with winners and losers.

We can also invite our children to problem solve with us. "It's important to me that you have clean, healthy teeth. Would you be willing to think of ways to make sure you have clean healthy teeth?"

Our children are full of viable ideas if we give them a chance to think and ourselves time to listen. When the solution comes from our children, we have buy-in and a commitment to make a situation better.

Can't make me do it? Remember: sidestep confrontation, invite cooperation by giving choices, and invite win/win problem solving.

**Learning to Engage**

Knowing and not doing, is really not to know at all. To truly know and experience something, we must engage. We can watch all the football games in the world, but until we learn to throw an accurate pass, run past a halfback, or have been tackled, we really don't know football, we only know about football.

If we really want to learn something, we have to engage with our environment—the world around us. Our environments consist of people, objects, tools, ideas and nature. What is it that our children need to learn?

The simple answer is our children need to learn who they are and who they can be. To live life to the best of their abilities, engagement is essential.

Engagement requires time, deep time. Time to explore. Time to make deep connections and interconnections. Time to cloud watch. Time to dream. Time to make dreams come true. Time to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. Mistakes are at the cutting edge of learning. We should be friendly towards errors—our children's and our own.

Engagement means that a decision to act has occurred. My high school years were spent in Heidelberg, Germany and I walked back and forth from school through the castle gardens. Overlooking the Old Town is a bench with a plaque that commemorates the fact that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe liked to sit and think at this spot. Goethe wrote this piece that speaks of the importance of engagement:
Goethe would tell us that learning to engage seems to be the antidote to regret. "Begin it, and the work will be completed."

We loiter in our lives because we feel we don’t have the time, the money, the right tools, the right people, the right space to fulfill our dreams.

Engagement—deciding to act—brings to itself the power to connect us to all that is necessary to fulfill our dreams. "Boldness has genius, power and magic in it."

A place where there are objects and tools that engage the hand and the mind and offer connections between seemingly unrelated concepts. A place where nature is experienced as engagement with life.

Helping our children learn to engage in a prepared environment of meaningful activities is a huge help to life as our children learn who they are and who they can be.

Maren Schmidt, M.Ed.
www.kidstalknews.com

Right here under our noses!

A trove of artistic treasures exists just a short distance from School of the Woods but who knew? The reference is to some 20 creations in the medium of sculptured cement. (1) These were commissioned by and installed in Woodlawn Cemetery (1-10/Antoine) in 1940.

Sculptured cement as an art form is thought to have originated in France some 150 years ago, where it was called faux bois (false wood) and was highly fancied by Marie Antoinette. Eventually, the technique spread across other parts of the world, even to Mexico, where it is called trabajo rustico (rustic work). Both names suggest items for outdoor use.

How it came to be here: About 1922 or so, an artisan came from Mexico, headed for San Antonio. The medium he worked with was sculptured cement. This artisan was named Dionicio Rodriguez (1891-1955) and he was highly skilled, having perfected his own methods of creating and coloring such works. He quickly established himself as a master craftsman and was commissioned by the City of San Antonio and by individuals to create dozens of installations in that city. A famous one is the entrance to the Japanese Tea Garden in Brackenridge Park.

His reputation for highly artistic and very finely detailed creations spread and he soon found himself with commissions ranging over a large part of the US – Michigan, Arkansas, New Mexico, Tennessee, Chicago, New York, Maryland and more places in Texas. He had many commissions in Arkansas between 1932-36. His most famous creation was “The Old Mill,” a full-size building and surrounding area in North Little Rock,(3) It still has thousands of visitors each year. His only other works in Houston are at the Houston Zoo – a rock fountain and two large trees. Originally at the Aviary, now they are habitat.

At Woodlawn, Rodriguez created many short benches, a woven basket, a rock fountain, a rock planter, and a ‘fallen tree’ bench, some 36 ft. long, the “Annie Laurie” wishing chair a replica of the original in Scotland, (3) an arboretum and a huge cross. On entering the cemetery from the I-10 side, the main roadway straight ahead passes many of his creations. At road end is the 25-ft. high cross, simulating one made of rough-sawn timbers. It could make you weep in its simplicity.

It is well worth the time to visit this site and search out these unique creations, which are still in good condition after some 65 years. The website of Houston’s Woodlawn Garden of Memories has a separate section on Dionicio Rodriguez and a drawing showing locations of his works.

(1) Hardly a modern invention; cement was invented by the Romans more than 2000 years ago.
(2) Rodriguez deemed “The Old Mill” his masterwork. It certainly impressed someone in Hollywood; a photo of it was used as background for some screen credits in “Gone With The Wind.” No one knows the ‘who’ or ‘why’ of that.
(3) Possibly located in Glencairn.

Sources:
• National Register of Historic Places, Sculpture of Dionicio Rodriguez in Texas, National Park Service.
• Website: arkansasroadstories.com
• Website: Wikipedia, Dionicio Rodriguez
• Website: Woodlawn fh.com