



# April 2014

## INSIDE THE WOODS

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Edited by Eloise Rochelle

### Annual Spring Picnic is Upon us

Noel Coward famously wrote in a song that mad dogs and Englishmen are the only creatures dorky enough to go out in the mid-day sun.

Nonetheless, our School of the Woods community, fully sane, will be out there for the big Spring Picnic, the Spring Splash so bring your swimsuit. It will be on Sunday, April 27, on the main campus at 1 PM.

You can count on there being all the good stuff to eat – James Coney Islands, barbecue sandwiches, baked potatoes, Frito Pie, sweet treats – plus the drinks – coffee, water, and Slushies.

All the monstrous inflatables, rock wall, games and crafts will be on tap. The highlight, of course will be the amazing Woods High School students showing off their amazing talents.

Your picnic ticket includes everything except class fundraisers and the raffle.

### **TIME FOR BRAIN WORK**

The Book Discussion  
***Your Brain at Work*** by David Rock  
Rescheduled to  
**April 8 - 7 PM**

**The place: home of Bridget Tomlinson  
8841 Cedarbrake.**



### **A Night to Remember**

Our school had a very fine gala on March 7, with an out-of-this world circus theme. Let's call it a blast to the future! Attendance was superior, dinner choices were over the top, and auction items top drawer. All present raved about the entertainment - the Swopesters - who presented their "circus of the future" acts. Here's a photo of our traditional ottoman with components handmade by Early Childhood-Pre-K students. We'll have zillions of photos from the gala in the next issue of *View From the Woods* magazine.



# Aspects of Inclusion in Montessori Education

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Legislation (PL 94-142 and PL 99-457) has mandated mainstreaming or inclusion of children with special needs into classrooms with typically developing peers. While this legislation specifies current mandates for educational practices, it is necessary to examine supports and nurture the individual needs of each child, as well as the whole group.

Children with developmental needs form a very diverse group, with some developmental needs quite different from those of typically developing peers. However, it is important to recognize that all children, with or without diagnosed special needs, have numerous commonly held needs that can be accommodated in a learning environment with full inclusion.

Maria Montessori, an Italian physician and educator at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, began her work with "mentally deficient" children in public asylums. Based upon her studies of early pioneers in the field of special education and her observations of children using concrete learning materials that she accepted and developed, Montessori demonstrated that significant physical and cognitive development was possible for children with special needs whom society had abandoned.

Many characteristics of the Montessori materials and learning environment support the developmental needs of all children and, additionally, reflect what the field of special education deems the best practice techniques. This makes the

Montessori method very viable for schools practicing or implementing a program of full inclusion. They are, specifically:

- Montessori is a personalized approach, which recognizes that each child learns with a unique style and pace. It is a child-centered holistic approach acknowledging that the child's development and education involved many aspects: physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and moral.

This means that the children's daily activities are based on their own needs, strengths and developmental stages. It also means that the writing and implementation of Individual Education Programs (IEPs) and Individual Family Service Programs (IFSPs), as required by law for children with special needs, are easily accomplished in a Montessori environment.

- The Montessori learning environment changes and grows with the developmental needs of each child. The learning materials offer concrete, multi-sensory experiences which actively engage children, correcting, giving the children immediate feedback, and increasing their opportunities for self-directed work. The materials contain many aims or goals and can often be explored at different levels.

Children's developmental progress, learning style, and interests are assessed through scientific observation by the classroom teacher, who directs the lessons/materials offered. This is a reflection of the Curriculum Based Assessment approach currently being

mandated. The Montessori environment allows children with quite different developmental needs to learn side-by-side with the same materials.

- Montessori classrooms contain a three-year age span. This fosters a sense of community in which children come to naturally help and teach one another. Every member is valued for their contribution to the whole. This gives children with special needs the chance to interact with a wide range of people, increasing their motivation and their opportunities to generalize learned skills in new situations.

As they grow older, they too become one of the oldest and can experience the satisfaction of helping or teaching another. Finally, this means that the teacher can perfect certain skills specific to a child's needs (e.g., positioning or sign language), allowing for a more consistent education.

- Team teaching is typical in a Montessori environment, where professionals work together, sharing information and responsibility. This approach lends itself well to inclusion, where many specialists are needed to insure that children with special needs are receiving appropriate and necessary services. A transdisciplinary approach, where all specialists/teachers share responsibility, is beneficial to all children in the classroom.

- Montessori philosophy recognizes parents as an integral part of a child's education. This means that what is required by law -- the inclusion of parents as a part of the transdisciplinary team -- is a natural part of daily classroom life.

- The structure in a Montessori classroom allows freedom of movement and free choice of activities. This encourages the development of independence, initiative and decision making. Children interact socially through most of the school day, which fosters enriched natural school opportunities. Lessons in grace and courtesy from teachers aid the development of positive social skills.

Older children serve as models, which can decrease negative or maladaptive behavior. All of this benefits children with special needs who, as a group, tend to have lower social skills and less independent behaviors, and who make few choices that actually affect the events of their day.

. . . .An AMS Position Paper

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- Thompson, Barbara, et, al. "Expanding the Circle of Inclusion: Integrating Young Children with Severe Multiple Disabilities." *Constructive Triangle*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Winter, 1991). Pages 11-13.
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# Choice, Activity, and Feedback

## Build the Muscles Needed for Concentration

by Elizabeth Stepankiw

"Concentration is the key that opens up to the child the latent treasures within him."

(Maria Montessori: *Her Life and Work*, p 174, Chap X)

"Being able to concentrate...is a skill that might be just as valuable as math ability, or reading ability, or even raw intelligence." (Nurture Shock, pg 171).

Concentration is the ability to sustain one's own interest. To many people concentration in school means to pay attention and be obedient to the teacher—children can't learn if they can't pay attention to things. The opposite of this idea involves activity in which, "kids [aren't] distracted because they're so consumed in the activities they've chosen...kids are thoroughly in the moment." (Nurture Shock, pg 166).

"We have a different concept of discipline... we do not believe that one is disciplined when he is artificially made silent...and...motionless...the discipline we are looking for is active...an individual is disciplined when he is master of himself and...can control himself" (Discovery of the Child, pg. 49).



Building concentration is at the core of some programs that have successfully helped children make substantial gains in school. The children in these programs are encouraged to engage in planned, mature, multidimensional, sustained play. It is necessary for the "task to arouse such an interest that it engages the child's whole personality" (*The Absorbent Mind*, p.188).

The connection between particular types of activity and concentration is an idea that has strong support from the neuroscience research on the growth of executive function, "planning, predicting, controlling impulses, persisting through trouble, and orchestrating thoughts to fulfill a goal" (*Nurture Shock*, pg 169). Testing the development of these functions has shown that children who choose their own activity have stronger executive functions. According to the authors of the book *Nurture Shock*, it is likely that having kids plan their time and set weekly goals

strengthens the part of the brain in the prefrontal cortex that regulates focus, which is also responsible for maintaining concentration. Having this kind of cognitive control over these neural networks helps kids avoid both external and internal distractions. Cognitive control helps the brain when it has to manipulate information and helps in managing emotion and impulses.

Motivation is crucial. When children get to choose their work, they will choose work they are motivated to do. "[The child's] refined senses enable him to observe his surroundings more effectively..attracting his attention", and "leaves him free in the choice and execution of his work" (*Discovery of the Child*, pg 63).

"Motivation is experienced in the brain as the release of dopamine... it enhances the signaling of neurons...the motivated brain, literally, operates better, signals faster. When children are motivated, they learn more." (*Nurture Shock*, pg 173)

It turns out that feedback is also important in developing the ability to concentrate. When children check their own work with answer sheets or work with a partner who checks their work, they gain an awareness of how accurate their work is. What Montessori called the "control of error" (*Discovery of the Child*, pg 103) is designed into Montessori materials and an important aspect of the work time routine.

Concentration is increased when an immediate feedback system is in place because it helps the child become more aware of the need to concentrate. Children become more sensitive to how they are doing and how accurate their work is.

It is interesting that Ernest Wood, who founded School of the Woods along with his wife, wrote a book titled *Concentration: An Approach to Meditation*. His positive message says that whatever you aim to do in life, you can do, but, "whatever you choose, one thing you will need in all things and at all times [is] concentration of purpose, of thought, of feeling, of action; so that this, like a powerful magnet, will polarize everything with which you deal" (*Concentration*, pg 3). He continues to describe the physical and mental exercises that will help his readers take charge of their minds. He takes his information from what we would today call the mindful practices people have observed throughout history and from the traditions of both the East and the West.

What is today called mindfulness, the practice of "being in the moment" of what you are doing, has been demonstrated to improve concentration along with other executive functions. In their Brief Summary of Mindfulness Research, Greg Flaxman and Lisa Flook, Ph.D., at UCLA, discuss the fact that these practices improve relationships and physical and mental health. The

beneficial effects of mindfulness practices are being increasingly studied.

Maria Montessori recognized the importance of concentration and therefore arranged the physical and mental aspects of the classroom to enhance the child's opportunities to practice it. "The first essential for the child's development is concentration. It lays the whole basis for his character and social behavior. He must find out how to concentrate, and for this he needs things to concentrate upon. This shows the importance of his surroundings, for no one acting on the child from outside can cause him to concentrate. Only he can organize his psychic life." (*The Absorbent Mind*, p 202).

Concentration can be affected by many things outside of the classroom activities, including the home environment, and even how recently the child ate. Self-regulation uses up a lot of energy in the brain; sometimes children need interventions that will make more dopamine available in the brain. How long a child is asked to concentrate affects self-control because the systems that oversee control can become fatigued. But "once [the child's] attention has been focused, he becomes his own master and can exert control over his world." (*The Absorbent Mind*, p 198, Ch. 21)

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Sources for this article:

*Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work* by E.M. Standing

*Nurture Shock : New Thinking About Children* by Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman

*Discovery of the Child* by Maria Montessori

*Concentration: An Approach to Meditation* by Ernest Wood

*The Absorbent Mind* by Maria Montessori

<http://marc.ucla.edu/workfiles/pdfs/MARC-mindfulness-research-summary.pdf>

## **Your Presence Is Your Present**

Do you ever worry about getting the "right" gift for the special people in your life? Let's take a few minutes and make sure we are giving the gifts that can only come from the heart.

### **The Present of Listening**

How do we really listen? We turn off our cell phones, the television and the computer, and we focus on the person who is talking to us. We think in terms of their interests, their dreams and their disappointments. We are non-judgmental. We ask questions. We don't offer our own anecdotes. We focus on what is being said. We just try to understand.

### **The Present of Tenderness**

It is with small actions that we are remembered. The touch of tenderness comes from the heart and can express what perhaps a thousand words cannot. A hug, a kiss, a pat on the back, a touch of the hand. A cup of coffee. A cookie and milk. These tiny gestures show the love we have for family and friends.

## **The Present of Good Humor**

Laugh, and the world laughs with you. Clip the comics. Learn to tell a joke or two. Tell a few funny stories on yourself. Share your laughter because laughter sounds like angels' music. Smile to light up a room.

### **The Present of Being Alone**

As much as we like to be with other people, at times being by ourselves is a wonderful gift. Be aware when the best gift for family and friends might simply be to let them have some time alone to rest and rejuvenate. Time alone helps us refill our love buckets.

### **The Present of Kindness**

Do something that lets loved ones know that you are thinking of them. Growing up, my mom would ask me if I would like to split a stick of chewing gum with her. To me, that gesture of offering to share a stick of gum communicated a lot of love and thoughtfulness.

### **The Present of a Handwritten Note**

In today's world of e-mails, the handwritten note becomes deeply personal.

Your handwriting reflects your personality and sends a non-verbal message that is difficult to duplicate. Seeing my dad's handwritten notes in the books he left me is a gift that gives every time I see his script or doodles.

### **The Present of Appreciation**

Being able to recognize others with gratitude in a sincere manner is a gift. Give a compliment to someone for the work they have done. A few words-- "What a great meal," "Thanks for setting the table" or "I think you are handsome in that shirt"-- can brighten anybody's day.

### **The Present of a Positive Attitude**

There's enough doom and gloom in the world. We don't need to bring a rain cloud along. Help those around you see the beautiful, the hopeful and the wonderful in the world around them.

These are the jewels that shine across the decades of our lives, the golden nuggets of time in the velvet boxes of our memories. Our loving presence is our priceless present.

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

# YOUR SMART PHONE OR YOUR LIFE

by P. Donohue Shortridge, MA

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On a crisp Saturday morning at a Denver farmers' market, the smell of roasted chilies hangs in the air. A wiggly 10-year-old girl waits in line at the burrito vendor's cart, arm linked with her dad's. All skinny jeans, sweatshirt and braces, she sways to the nearby music of a guitar and mandolin duo.

Food in hand, daughter and dad sit across from each other at a small café table. She looks adoringly at him as she's about to take her first bite. In that golden moment, dad slips his phone out of his pocket. Her eyes pivot instantly to that thing, that mortal enemy that will once again rob her of her dad.

Engrossed in his phone, he does not notice as his daughter draws back from the table, her eyes glaze over and she looks distractedly at the moving crowd, accepting her not-unfamiliar plight. At any moment, her dad may abandon her for his phone, exiting this intimate father-daughter space and going elsewhere.

This true story is one of many. Anecdotally, parents use mobile devices in front of their children all the time. Children have become used to their precious parent time being interrupted, without apology or permission, by their parents' exiting at will to attend to their electronic life.

The device's ubiquitous presence at the dinner table, on the nature walk, and during drive time and downtime

signals to sons and daughters that they must compete with these inanimate objects for their parents' attention or simply resign themselves to the shared attention. Some children act out, thinking negative attention is better than no attention. Others adapt and imitate their parents' behavior, begging for a mobile device of their own. New research from Common Sense Media found that "almost twice as many children have used mobile media compared to two years ago and the average time children spent using mobile devices has tripled." (2013, pg. 9)

Distracted parents model that it is acceptable not to be present when you spend time with your loved ones. Children quickly learn that attending to a mobile device is an approved value.

But how do children really feel about their parents' use of mobile devices in their presence? In her book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, Sherry Turkle recounts one boy's lament that he could understand it better when his dad worked at his computer than when he sat next to him with his mobile device in hand, physically there but not fully present.

Says Turkle, "Children have always competed for their parents' attention . . . with parents being off with work, friends, or each other. Today, children contend with parents who are physically close, tantalizingly so, but mentally elsewhere." (2011, pg. 267)

Our children need and deserve our full attention when we are with them. So what's a parent to do?

- Keep your 'smart phone' out of sight when you're with your children. Better yet, turn it off and put it in another room. If you do need to use it, excuse yourself and take the call elsewhere. Make it short, come back quickly, and apologize for the interruption – because that's what it is, an interruption of your in-the-moment life with your child. The same goes for checking or sending voice mail, email, or text messages.

- If you're going to look something up on your device when with your children, ask their permission before doing so. This is a good habit to get into whenever you are with another person.

- Vow to break the habit of fooling yourself that your electronic gadget use when with your children is not a distraction. It is. And it cuts deep.

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Source: Reprinted from Montessori Life Magazine, Spring issue, 2014, pg. 60.