

General Introduction to the Practical Life Area

It may be said that the sensorial exercises have their obvious value but the exercises of practical life are mere imitations of adult life. It must be remembered that most of the activities of the child, including play activity, are inspired by observation. The exercises of Practical Life are formative activities. They involve inspiration, repetition, and concentration on precise details. They take into account the natural impulses of the special periods of childhood. Though for the moment the exercises have no merely practical aims, they are a work of adaptation to the environment. Such adaptation to the environment and efficient functioning therein is the very essence of a useful education.

Maria Montessori What You Should Know About Your Child p. 77

The History of the Practical Life Area

The Practical Life area of the Montessori Children's House is **unique** among Early Childhood Education environments. It **evolved** during the early years of Montessori work, **in response to observed needs** as well as **in response to unexpected manifestations** among the children. The organization of the Practical Life area emerged as Montessori's response to many observations and spontaneous revelations during her early work with children. These include:

- Recognition of the child's essential **development of internal order** through the external order of the environment, and the child's natural interest in **perfecting logical sequencing** through imitation of everyday activities observed in the environment
- Recognition of the **importance of physical activity** in children's daily life, reflecting the child's natural work of **perfecting the coordination of movement** – movement of the whole body (locomotion and equilibrium) and movement of the hand (fine motor, eye-hand, and manual dexterity)
- Montessori's own **priorities as a modern Physician** who was interested in issues of hygiene, nutrition, and the phenomena of physical growth
- Observation of **spontaneous interests** of the children, such as their expressed desire to accomplish the tasks of the adults who **care for the environment** of the Casa – tasks of housekeeping, food preparation, and gardening; and children's desire to independently carry out tasks of **self-care**
- Observation of the **children's emergent appreciation of the environment** and their spontaneous impulse to keep its objects in order, to clean up after a spill or when something was broken
- Observation of the children's **spontaneous interest in how to conduct the simple exchanges of social life**



In responding to her observations, Montessori realized that there were two significant **obstacles** to children following these spontaneous needs and interests. One type of obstacle emerged because children did not know how to accomplish the activity that interested them. The other type of obstacle came from the adult size and scale of the tools and objects used to accomplish specific tasks.

Montessori realized that both of these obstacles could be addressed to the benefit of the children. Activities could be modeled in such a way that a child could clearly see how to do an activity and be successful in doing it for themselves. And the objects and implements in use could be scaled to the size and the capacities of the children. **By adapting the activities and materials** available in the general culture, Montessori was able to offer the children the means of taking care of themselves; the means of taking care of their environment; the means of coordinating their own movements in orderly, logical sequences; and the means to conduct their own social relations.

Particularly in terms of the tasks specific to care of self and care of the environment, Montessori was at first motivated as an adult with an outward goal or purpose in mind; and so she offered these activities to the children **assuming** that they, too, had only **utilitarian** – or at most imitative – interests in these activities.

There was, however, an **unexpected outcome** once such activities of daily life became accessible to the children. Standing at the little wash basins provided for the purpose of hand washing, for example, the children did not simply wash their hands until they were clean; they repeated the sequence of movements, or aspects of the sequence, over and over – seemingly oblivious to their hygienic purpose but with great interest and great concentrated effort. In fact, she observed that children pursued this activity whether their hands were dirty or not. Clearly, for the young child this simple exercise – so recently discovered to have such a great importance for personal and public health – had **another purpose entirely for the children themselves**. And this observation was repeated with all of the activities she made accessible to the children.

Such observations were made over and over around these simple activities of housekeeping and personal care, coordinated movement and social life. More importantly, a picture of the child's work of self-construction – motivated by powers of internal development – also began to emerge. Montessori thereby recognized the **significance of practical, everyday activities as motives of activity for the child's self-construction as guided by natural laws of development**. This recognition led to Montessori's significant discovery of **normalization** in first plane children and its extreme importance for individual and social life. We now understand and offer the entire practical life area as the foundation of normalization in a Casa community.

The area of Practical Life thus evolved from such revelations, taking on a pedagogical significance in the Casa which far exceeded any apparent utility or function in its specific activities.

General Organization of the Practical Life Area

Practical Life activities are typically organized into **five sections or aspects**:

- Social Relations (also known as Grace and Courtesy)
- Control and Coordination of Movement
- Preliminary Activities
- Care of the Person
- Care of the Environment

(Individual Introductions to each section follow at the end of this General Introduction)

These are for the most part **parallel** aspects. However, each section has different degrees of importance according to the child's experience in the Prepared Environment. All of the sections represent essential exercises, calling to the child's inner guide and offered as motives of activity for the child's inner work of self-construction.

It is important to realize that not all Practical Life Exercises appear as materials arranged on the shelves. In fact, what we see on the shelves represents only about one-half of the activities of the area. Those which cannot be seen are of as great, if not greater, significance as those so beautifully displayed in the environment. These essential yet **'invisible' activities** of Practical Life are found in the sections for Social Relations, Control and Coordination of Movement, and to some extent Preliminary Activities. All are components of a vital range of opportunities for development offered to children of every age in the Casa.

The materials we do find on the shelves represent particular examples of Preliminary Activities, and all of the activities for Care of the Person and Care of the Environment. These materials on the shelves all adhere to the general characteristics of Montessori materials, as found in the Theory Album. We can recapitulate some of these characteristics as **organizational principles** to keep in mind when preparing the Practical Life Area, remembering that external order is of particular importance in the Practical Life area:

- Materials for one section or aspect of Practical Life are kept together
- Within each section, exercises that relate to each other are kept together – such as various activities for dusting, or plant care; where relevant, these will be further organized in developmental progressions according to the levels of challenge or complexity in each activity
- Color-coding is an essential ingredient of this external order on the shelves, visually uniting each object used for a specific activity; the goal should be that each exercise on the shelf at any one time has a color or shade of color distinct from any other exercise

- Many activities have objects in common – such as aprons and mats (also known as underlays); these may be organized in one of two ways: either communally, as found in our demonstration environments; or specifically color-coded and included with each exercise which requires them
- The objects used to accomplish a task are displayed separately from the objects of that task: e.g., metal objects to be polished are cultural items displayed around the room or are useful items which can be found throughout the environment; soiled laundry is accumulated in a laundry basket away from the materials used to clean that dirty laundry; children clean their own or each other’s shoes; etc.
- Supplies needed for these exercises are available to the children for re-supply: e.g., the child places wet towels, used polishing cloths, etc. in designated spots and replaces them before she returns the materials to their place on the shelf
- Practical Life in general follows the rule of having only one exercise of a type available at a time; occasional exceptions would include multiple sets of dusting cloths, several different ways to care for shoes; or two types of metal polishing (such as brass and silver)
- Exercises can be rotated in and out of the area over time: this can be for the sake of variety and to spark new interest; but can also be more developmentally significant – for example, preliminary exercises such as pouring or folding, which have been generally mastered can be removed and replaced by more challenging or complex activities, such as liquid measuring or folding child-sized clothing
- The Practical Life area is not a fixed set of exercises – such as we see in the Sensorial and Mathematics areas; and this area can look very different from classroom to classroom and from culture to culture. Some of this difference reflects the personality and interests of the Montessori guide who prepares the environment; however, by its nature, Practical Life activities also reflect the material and cultural environment of the child’s society. Specifically, Care of the Person reflects that society’s customary practices regarding grooming and garments; and Care of the Environment reflects the actual conditions found in the particular environment.

Concerning the Practical Life materials found on the Casa’s shelves, Montessori says:

Truly the brilliancy, the colours, the beauty of gaily decorated objects are no other than voices which call the attention of the child to themselves and urge him to do something. Those objects possess an eloquence which no mistress can ever attain to. “Take me,” they say, “see that I am not damaged, put me in my place.”

The Discovery of The Child, p. 118

Age and Readiness

An interesting object, a series of movements revolving around this object, and the fixing of attention by the action being done, is the most effective manner of calling the wandering mind of the child.

Creative Development in the Child Vol. 1 p. 59

Practical Life exercises are a **point of entry** for every child, no matter the age when she first joins the Casa. Similarly, the work of Practical Life should be **available to children of every age**, regardless of how long they have been part of the community; and practical life activities should be available **at all times** of the day. There will be exercises of differing levels of challenge, and there will be different degrees of challenge within exercises, so as to attract and satisfy children of all ages and at all levels of development.

Activities from Social Relations, Control and Coordination of Movement, and Preliminary Activities will be of great interest to the newest, youngest children who are orienting and adapting to the environment under the influence of their Human Tendencies, Absorbent Minds, and Sensitive Periods. New older children will also find these activities interesting, but the teacher will want to adapt them for older children. These activities offer a treasure trove of possibilities for the Collective Stage and can readily open the door to concentration.

The question is one of enticement – how to arouse and attract this natural interest; but also of observation of individual capacities for readiness and need. As Montessori environments for children younger than three years old proliferate, we must be particularly careful to meet children who transition from these toddler or infant communities with appropriately new levels of challenge; otherwise we risk insulting and/or boring these children with activities that are below their capacities. On the other hand, older children who are new to the environment might arrive with poorly developed coordination of movement – we will need to provide opportunities to refine and elevate their coordination while accommodating their more mature minds and interests. This is a good place to remember Montessori’s caution and promise for our own development as transformed adult educators:

(The teacher) will learn that she must not hold back minds already abnormally developed by giving to them material less than their individual powers can handle, which creates boredom; she will learn not to offer objects which are beyond the capacity of the child, thus discouraging and destroying the first childish enthusiasm.

The Discovery Of The Child, p. 198



As Self-control Emerges ...

Add new levels of challenge to Social Relations, Coordination of Movement and Preliminaries; and expand individual possibilities with specific, individualized activity for Care of the Person and Care of the Environment.

Meanwhile –

- Observe for spontaneous interest in any specific activity
- Assess levels of coordination and logical sequence already in place – the goal continues to be how to find a balance between not enough challenge (leading to boredom) and too much challenge (overwhelming and discouraging the child)
- Move from simple to complex exercises, building longer sequences onto previous achievements of sequencing and coordination
- Offer progressively complex and purposeful activities to older children so that they apply their independent skills to meet personal and communal needs

The Two Psychological Stages of the Work

Children respond to two different sets of motivation when freely choosing practical life activities – and these two sets of motivations reflect two different levels of development. The young child’s relationship to Practical Life is grounded in unconscious motivations for self-construction – primarily motivations of the Absorbent Mind, and of the Sensitive Periods for Order and for Movement. These Sensitive Periods fade around age 4½, while the construction of the conscious mind proceeds apace for the remainder of the First Plane of Development. “Constructive perfectionment” becomes an increasingly conscious pursuit as the consolidation and crystallization of earlier formations results in a capacity to decide to act as a power of the Will.

For this younger child,

...it is not the cleaning, it is the action which is attractive to the child while the object is a mere point of crystallization, a point of fixing its activity ... The action upon the object is not a purpose, ... but a means, a means for the child to develop his own personality!

Creative Development in the Child Vol. 1 p.55

In our developmental context, the child’s motivation towards Practical Life activities begins to change at about the time that the Sensitive Periods for Order and Movement are fading – c. age 4½. This is part of a much greater change in her development. It reflects the ongoing integration of separate creations, and therefore a new interest in the relationship among and between these separate creations. In Practical Life, it is as if she begins to awaken to the relationship between, on the one hand, her own needs and desires and, on the other hand, her own emergent and practiced capacities to act effectively in her environment.

We call this transition “The Second Psychological Stage of the Work”. There are external signs of this transition which the teacher can observe. For example, a child deliberately seeks out a tarnished metal object to polish; she dusts a table because she has left it covered with chalk dust; or scrubs an underlay because it is streaked or dirty from her work. She brushes her hair because it is tangled; and suddenly exhibits the awareness that, for example, she wants to button her sweater (because it will keep her warmer or because she likes how a buttoned sweater looks / feels ...). The realization which fuels this new awareness is the growing awareness that she has the skill to do these things for herself.

During this second psychological stage, the utilitarian purposes of the Practical Life Exercises – so readily apparent to the adult – become operative for the child, as well. Responding to information in her environment, and exercising her developing power of Will, she can decide to carry out an activity because it needs to be done. Acknowledging this, Care of the Environment and Care of the Person will be found listed last among the Purposes in the text for their relevant activities.



They generally describe the motivation of the older child – a choice to act which results from a deliberate decision.

This older child continues to carry out Practical Life activities at this newly aware level and thereby begins to establish habits of a life-long, responsible relationship to her own self and to her world. The teacher must be aware that this represents a new level of self-construction, a new level of developmental work – which it is the teacher’s work to assist and facilitate through the structure of the Practical Life activities she has prepared and presented.

This new stage of work for the older child in the Casa has yet another manifestation: she no longer responds only to her own internal need or a self-recognition; but applies her awareness to recognizing needs in the environment, needs of other individuals, and needs of the community at large. This recognition is an expression of normalized Social Cohesion. She waters a plant because it is dry; she scrubs a table because it is dirty (no matter who has dirtied it); or she washes all of the dusty chalkboards which have accumulated over a morning. She hangs an apron, in passing, which has fallen to the floor from its hook – not simply to restore it to order, but out of respect for the object itself and for those who will use it, as well as to remove a potential obstacle to safe movement. She spontaneously and generously offers help to a younger child who is struggling with a task truly beyond him.

The older child chooses these activities not because she has caused these external conditions, but because she has noticed them and recognizes that she can address them. She has the necessary skill and applies it not just for her own sake, but as a benefit to her community. This is a highly evolved and natural (as in normalized) human achievement in the First Plane of Development: a willed awareness, grounded in empathy and altruism.

The practical skills themselves were built up in the child while she was busy with the inner formations that were motivated by her developmental powers. Then, when the recognition of need matured, the skills were there – as if by magic. Empathy and altruism can also be seen as ‘skills’, and the child has constructed these skills or capacities while busy with her prior developmental pursuits – not so much in pursuits contained in material exercises displayed on the shelf, but through the invisible motives of activity contained in the Exercises of Silence and in the conduct of Courtesy modeled in the presentations of Social Relations.

All of this occurs within the context of a First Plane Society by Cohesion (or Social Cohesion) – a society united by The Absorbent Mind. This is not, as yet, a society consciously organized according to external leadership, rules and expectations, as found in 2nd Plane. The older First Plane child in this Second Psychological Stage of the Work continues to practice Practical Life activities according to her own motivations, as and when she freely chooses, and not according to external direction or an organized schedule. It is the teacher’s responsibility to understand this –

as he understands that the younger child is following the internal motivations of unconscious Powers; and it is the responsibility of the teacher to normalize the conditions in the Casa to facilitate this emergent experience for the older child. The conditions of the environment of the Casa must be such that

- Opportunities exist for the child to act spontaneously according to her new internal motivations
- Limits and consequences function to facilitate and encourage decisions to act in this way

And so, throughout the child's time in the Casa, the same principles operate: that the adult's work is to initiate the child into the activities, and then leave her at liberty to practice these activities as and when she chooses according to her internal motivations. Montessori tells us

... the new education consists not only in supplying the means of development for separate actions but in leaving the child at liberty to make use of them.

The Discovery of the Child, p. 108

Some ways to support the natural emergence of the second psychological stage of work:

- No adult should ever clean in front of the children (this includes teachers and assistants)
- If an adult addresses a need in the environment, always invite at least one child to participate and help
- At any time of the day, tidy the room by gathering a group of available children and using the technique of 'command games' to send children out into the environment with a specific task, such as
 - You can make sure all of the rugs are in the rug rack, (child's name)
 - You can check that all of the dressing frames are fastened, (child's name)
 - You can put empty chairs into tables, (child's name)
 - You can look for puddles on the floor and mop them, (child's name)
 - Etc
- Initiate periodic 'big clean' of the entire environment: all of the children participate in cleaning and beautifying the environment, choosing sections within areas or tasks that are needed according to their skills
- When the children leave for the day, the environment looks as good or better than when they arrived – eliminate the impression that children may leave the environment in disorder and that adults 'magically' restore it to order after they leave

In supporting the natural emergence of the second psychological stage, we are following Montessori's own directive that the teacher must

understand that the environment belongs to the children. It is not hers, because she is the teacher. It is the environment in which she helps the little child to become



master of it. ... The teacher must help the children to be independent, to keep the environment in order by themselves. She must take great pride in seeing all these children become normalized. The teacher can be proudest of all when she is no longer necessary ... She is an enormously successful teacher when she can say “The children can do everything by themselves, they didn’t need me”.

The Child, Society and the World, ‘To Teachers’ p. 15

By supporting the Second Psychological Stage of the Work, we also support each child’s future relationship of responsible stewardship towards both the natural and built environments – a too-often suppressed natural harmony and collaboration with nature and within human society, which is the normalized birthright of human beings.

Guiding and nurturing the Second Psychological Stage of the Work is another test of our vision for the child we meet in the Casa. It is also the test of our new role as educators in relation to this child: to offer the possibility of activity – without commandeering the child’s liberty through our own (adult) direction. This is yet another pattern established through the activities of Practical Life – a pattern which will distinguish all aspects of our relationship with the child and her work, but which is most clearly marked in this area. Montessori offers us a confident assurance of the limitless possibilities which lead from this relation:

The final object of such exercises is the perfecting of the individual who practises them. But the ways which open up and lead to new possibilities are multitudinous; the individual who has gone far forward along the path leading to perfection becomes capable of many things and perfection is not barren of practical results.

The Discovery of the Child, p. 105

Introduction to Social Relations
Grace and Courtesy – Montessori Classroom Management

These are activities which isolate and model appropriate movements which affect others in the community. These activities will include movements involving objects, as well as appropriate language (a specialized control of movement).

This is also Montessori classroom management – how we help children change undesirable behaviors; how we help children adopt desirable behaviors; how we promote positive, pro-social behaviors for individuals and the group. Any observed need in the social relations of the environment can be analyzed through the lens of Grace and Courtesy and be addressed positively through its techniques.

Definitions:

Grace Efficiency and economy of movement
Courtesy Efficiency and economy of movement directed towards others

Grace and Courtesy is an excellent example of effective practice in a Montessori Casa – effective because it is so well matched to the developmental needs and interests of the conscious worker, the child in the second half of the first plane who is perfecting and crystallizing developmental creations with awareness and effortless engagement, the child who is more concerned with ‘what’ to do than with ‘why’ she should do it. The First Plane developmental connections for Grace and Courtesy are as follows:

- The **Absorbent Mind** for its ability to take in the totality image of an activity
- The **Absorbent Mind** for cultural adaptation – the child wants to be like the people around her and to become a fully adapted person of her time and place
- The **Conscious Absorbent Mind** in 3rd embryonic period for development of character and society: Grace and Courtesy supports the development of
 - Positive character traits of the individual
 - Social Cohesion – identification with the group and the desire to promote the good of the group
- The **Mathematical Mind** for the discernment of patterns of cultural behaviors
 Montessori saw the Mathematical Mind at work in the child’s **unconscious cultural adaptation**. As the Absorbent Mind is taking in the language, customs, morals, and beliefs of her culture, the child is essentially absorbing the patterns of that culture: **“...the basic or summarized part, the precise part, which... is repeated in the habitual life of the people”** – in short, what Montessori identified as the mathematical part. She writes that **“Imaginative and spiritual impressions are captured and crystallized by the mathematical powers of the directing mind.”** These crystallized cultural patterns are

“**potent and creative**”, and give form to the personality in the same way that genetic patterns shape physical characteristics of the body. And, she reminds us, once these patterns are established, they become fixed characteristics of the personality.

The Absorbent Mind ‘Further Elaborations through Culture ...’ pp. 187-189

- Grace and Courtesy provides Motives of Activity for three **Sensitive Periods** in the second half of the first plane:
 - **Order:** providing the consistency and security of dependable routines, thereby supporting the emergence of a well oriented child with an orderly mind
 - **Movement:** providing models of self-control and self-discipline supporting the emergent Will and the Integration of the Personality (Mind-Body Integration)
 - **Language:** providing opportunities for the exploration of spoken language as communication as well as the exploration of language as a power to affect others
- Grace and Courtesy supports the social aspect of **functional independence** – I can control my own social interactions by myself for myself without being a burden to others
- Grace and Courtesy appeals to a young child’s intrinsic **interest**, sense of **dignity**, and desire for **respect**

Introduction to Control and Coordination of Movement

... To perfect any given activity, movement will be needed as the last stage of the cycle.
 In other words, a higher spirituality can only be reached through action.

The Absorbent Mind, p. 140

Montessori tells us that the development of movement is "duplex": there are two lines to its development, both of which are dependent upon the muscles. One line is connected to the inner life and accomplishes the development of the hand which works. The other line is biologically driven and accomplishes the coordination of walking and balance. (**The Absorbent Mind, p. 153**). This section of the Practical Life area offers many opportunities to coordinate and refine those movements related to **locomotion** and to **equilibrium** while moving through the space. They also offer opportunities to build on these coordinations by bringing the movement of the whole body under the control of the emergent **Will**; and by supporting the spontaneous development of **Social Cohesion** in the group.

Montessori clearly states the importance of this self-mastery – the coordination of movement under the control of one’s own mind or will – in **The Secret of Childhood, (p. 98)**:

.. the fundamental problem of human life and hence of education is that the ego should be able to animate and master its own instruments of motion, in order that in its actions it should be guided by something higher than material objects or the functions of vegetative life, something which is generally clothed in instinct, but which in man is openly a creative spirit, clothed with intelligence. If the ego cannot attain this essential condition its unity will be shattered. It will be as though an instinct were to go about the world separated from the body it should animate.

The activities of this section are organized into two categories: Walking on the Line and the Silence Game.

Walking on the Line

... man's legs, which are his natural means of transport, carry him to the places where he can work, but his work he does with his hands ...

The Absorbent Mind, p. 153

We have constant, everyday evidence of children’s spontaneous activity towards mastery of this ‘natural means of transport’. For example:

A young child, walking along an urban sidewalk, arrives at a section with a curb raised several inches above it: the child spontaneously steps up onto this curb and walks along its straight and narrow course; when it abruptly ends, she stops and hops back down.

Suddenly, there is a network of cracks in the surface of the sidewalk: with many footsteps the child meticulously follows their meandering course; a fallen log parallels a forest trail –

the child finds this, too, an irresistible challenge, perhaps seeking an adult hand to help her climb to the top of its rough curved surface, then struggling for balance to walk its bumpy length unaided. At the front of my old house, there is a staircase of 14 cement steps. On one side is a railing offering a secure hand hold; on the other a cement strip separates the steps from a planted slope. This strip rises in a straight line at the angle of the staircase. I have never seen a child capable of walking unaided up stairs, who one day didn't turn her back on the security of the railing, and step off the treads of the staircase to walk this smooth steep ascent to the house.

With these examples we see that it is not the shortest distance between two points which lures the young child, nor the conservation of energy in traversing space. If there are tiles creating right-angled corners, her feet will trace their pattern; if a low wall surrounds a fountain in a perfect circle, she will follow its circuit perfectly. Whenever a natural, fortuitous or precarious path suddenly presents itself, she will always choose it in preference to that invisible straight line which guides an adult succinctly from Point A to Point B. And if walking that path should prove too easy, the child will run it, exuberantly. And so the coordinations of locomotion are perfected, the muscles of equilibrium are nurtured, and physics is absorbed.

In the Casa, we capture this natural interest of the child in the pursuit of self-development, and offer it the novel and challenging progress of the **Ellipse**. Not a straight line which proceeds unchanged and then stops abruptly. Not a meandering path with random, discontinuous change; nor the straight lines of a square or rectangle requiring exact, precise, but identical adjustment at each corner. Nor the perfect circle, which the child may follow round and round and round in one constant position without any bodily adjustment at all.

The ellipse describes a gradual curve, with a constant rate of change requiring a gradual yet constant adjustment of the muscles in order to walk its path accurately. There is no radical stopping, adjusting, then moving on in another position or direction; just a fairly uniform, somewhat predictable fluidity which is both physically rhythmical and psychologically calming. The child's attention is constantly engaged to coordinate the movements so that her feet can successfully follow this curve, yet in a way that is psychically meditative and centering: energies are gathered and focused, rather than dissipated; and a fluid precision and control is refined over time through a progression of exercises. Montessori specifically references the advantage of an ellipse for these exercises in [The Discovery of the Child](#), 'Education in Movement – The Line' p. 103. If other lines are available indoors and outdoors, they may also be ellipses or offer other shapes to follow.

In more contemporary terms, the exercises of Walking on the Line focus the child's attention on 'proprioception' – an awareness of the position of the body in space.

Walking on the Line as a Group Activity

All of the exercises of Walking on the Line are offered as group or collective lessons. Children of different developmental levels and experience participate at their respective levels at the same time. The maximum size of a group is determined partly by the size of the ellipse, but also by the logistics of the room and the experience level of the participants. During presentations as well as during guided exercises, children may alternately participate and observe, thereby accommodating many children but allowing a comfortable and variable limit to the number of children on the line at any one time.

The teacher should have a clear idea as to the organization of these group activities, particularly as to initiating the work and dismissing children at the end of a cycle. All procedures should be simple, clear, and consistently followed. Many principles of group lessons are applicable. Walking on the Line can be organizationally challenging in that individual children pursue the same activity simultaneously but according to the developmental capacities of each. The teacher must be responsive both to the dynamic of the group and to the observed needs of each participant. She must also be aware that a communal achievement is underway, concomitant with individual levels of accomplishment.

The comments and reflections of Montessori's colleague, Mrs. Rosie Joosten-Chotzen, are particularly relevant to these collective activities of Walking on the Line:

Those who give lessons ... should never forget that their real value is proved by the way they appeal to the interest, the imagination and the creative spirit of the individual or the group who enjoy what then becomes the privilege of receiving a lesson... A lesson will have the greater constructive value the more it evokes life and interest and functions as a 'key' to individual or collective activity and elaboration.

She continues, noting the necessary "**natural rhythm of the work**":

By rhythm of work we understand the way in which stimuli given by adults and subsequent activities of the children overlap and develop. There must be left a great measure of elasticity... A time-table would go against the manifestation of spontaneous inner needs. A period of activity (also called an 'activity wave') with its initial growth of intensity and extension, with its culminating period and its point of saturation and gradual decline must follow a natural pattern. If not, we cannot appreciate and classify it as a spontaneous phenomenon which opens our eyes and our minds to unknown potentialities.

**Rosy Joosten-Chotzen, 'Group and Collective Lessons in the Montessori School',
1959**

reprinted in AMI Communications, 1983, #4. pp. 7 - 9)

This image of "elasticity" is particularly helpful to characterize the teacher's attitude as she confidently guides the children's activities of Walking on the Line while, with patience and humility, awaiting her own enlightenment through the revelation of "unknown potentialities".

Walking on the Line is neither optional nor extraneous to the other assistance we give to the coordination of movement or to the life of the spirit which animates that movement. These exercises are essential to the life of a child at this stage of development. To ignore or neglect them is to remove a fundamental assistance to individual development. They are equally important to the life of the Casa in general and to the achievement of normalization in the Casa community: to the degree that they are lacking or misapplied, a fundamental piece in the creation of the Children's House community is also eliminated.

Ideally the Line should be available for use at all times, with few obstacles to move out of the way. Its placement is one of the first considerations to be made in preparing the environment, along with the arrangement of shelves, tables and chairs, rug spaces, and areas for gathering. Children need to be able to walk it with both arms outstretched. In this light – that the line is a motivation for movement – it is clear that the line is not itself a place for immobile gathering. The teacher can establish and support helpful limits that the line is not for sitting and that floor rugs and tables can be placed beside but not on the line.

These arrangements can be a creative challenge for the Guide, but one well worth solution. As collective exercises, some aspect of Walking on the Line should be offered frequently – on a daily basis, sometimes even several times in a day, and at a minimum several times a week. The fewer physical and logistical obstacles to its access the more likely it is that a teacher will do so.

Walking on the Line as an Individual Activity

As children become familiar with activity on the line, this work can be available at any time for individual, independent choice as well. For this, it is essential that no furniture straddles the line and that children place floor rugs so as not to touch it. When first establishing Walking on the Line as an individual activity, a system can be created for one child to choose the line as his work, perhaps indicated by wearing a designated necklace; once a choice is indicated (as with any other material) the line is not available to anyone else until that child had finished. As the group matures, this limit can expand, until any number of children can spontaneously initiate activities suitable for the line – with, of course, the typical caveat that their activity does not disturb the concentrated work of others.

The advantages of this arrangement and the unequivocal benefits it offers to the community of the children over time, are doorways to appreciation and understanding of the importance of Walking on the Line – both for the coordination of individual movement and for the emergence of social cohesion and group independence.

The Silence Game

.... self-control – as mastery over self – is one of the ingredients of concentration, of meditation, of objectivity, of detachment. As regard to person, it leads to clearmindedness and to serenity. Towards others it leads to cooperation and tolerance. Self-control is included in all what (sic) I mentioned, but this includes only a few elements because self-control has a vastness few consider. It starts from the earthy and reaches the mystic, by expanding successive spheres: the physical, the mental, and the spiritual. Each is separate as successive steps of a ladder and each can be separately attained through will, effort and repetition. However, once self-control has been acquired at any level, the exercise of will, of effort and repetition is no longer necessary. Self-control has become so much part of one as if it had been innate.

**Mario Montessori, "Meditation on Silence"
(AMI Communications, 1967 #4, p. 20)**

Silence in the Montessori Casa consists of several preliminary exercises and the Silence Game. These are prepared through other activities of Practical Life; and are cumulative in nature, one exercise leading to and preparing the next. The mechanics of these exercises are very simple and straightforward: children, as a group, are led in successive stages to create silence through willed immobility. This willed immobility is an experience which is offered to the children, and which is accomplished by them. It is not a command imposed upon or coerced from them.

Montessori describes the origins of the Silence Game in several places, most notably in The Secret of Childhood, in the section titled 'What They Showed Me', with her anecdote of bringing a sleeping infant into the first Casa in San Lorenzo. Silence as an activity is also discussed in sources as diverse as 'The Education of the Senses' (in The Montessori Method, p. 212); 'Elevation' (in The Discovery of the Child, p. 184, 'Silence: Abstractions Materialized'); and 'The Three Levels of Obedience' (in The Absorbent Mind, p. 261).

An excellent source is also found in the collection The Child, Society and the World, pp. 50-58 – 'The Lesson of Silence', from the 1938 Course Lecture in Laren, The Netherlands. Here, Montessori refers to this lesson as one of two lessons in the method which have become very well known (the other being the Three Period Lesson). There are, in addition, articles related to the theory and practice of the Silence exercises by Mr. Joosten; C. A. Claremont; Dr. Mary Black Verschuur; as well as Mario Montessori's "Meditation on Silence". Mr. Joosten particularly tells us that

**... in the history of the revelations of the children in the first `Casa dei Bambini', the silence lesson came much later than other fundamental and guiding revelations"
'The Silence Lesson', p. 27**

Silence in a Montessori Context

In Chapter 14 of The Discovery of the Child ('Elevation'), Dr. Montessori uses the example of the Silence Game to illustrate a significant and profound difference between our method and more typical methods of education. In the traditional school, silence defines the normal working order of the group, necessary for the master to give a lesson. This state, which is externally compelled, tends frequently to disintegrate into disorder, noise and restlessness, disturbing the working order which must then be re-established by an energetic call for "silence", an energetic call which is intended to bring affairs back into their normal condition.

In the Casa, however, the normal order is very different, since it results from the individual labors of the pupils. The normal working order necessarily involves activity, movement, voices, and sound; and this normal working order ... is a point of departure for climbing to a higher level. Montessori elaborates:

... the silence of immobility suspends the normal life, suspends useful work and has no practical aim. All its importance, all its fascination, springs from the fact that by suspending the communal life it raises the individual to a higher level where utility does not exist but where it is the conquest of self which calls him.

Mary Black Verschuur provides a wonderful summation of the Montessori concept of Silence as
... a state of calmness and stillness willed by the individual and arrived at through self-direction and out of spontaneous interest.

**"The Nature and Theory of Silence Activities in the Children's House"
 NAMTA Journal, Vol. 13, #1, 1987, p. 101**

Elsewhere, Dr. Montessori writes that

... silence means the suspension of every movement...
The Discovery of the Child, p. 111

and that

... this exercise called for an inhibition of impulse as well as for the control of movement. The Absorbent Mind, p. 262

Calmness Stillness Suspension Inhibition Control Self-direction Spontaneous interest Willed

To examine this juxtaposition of words is to approach the heart of the matter.

Silence: A Collective Achievement

In his essay, 'Meditation on Silence' (AMI Communications, 1967 #4, p. 23), Mario Montessori highlights the importance of the Silence lesson as **“one of the most precious items of the Montessori approach”**; and concludes: **“Ways to prepare the children for it should ever be present in the minds of those who guide the children in the fulfillment of their potentialities.”**

He is reminding us that – since we cannot and do not command silence – we have to prepare and lead the children towards this experience as a spontaneous and self-directed achievement.

In her 1938 Lecture, Montessori is quite specific on this as well, saying,

... if we want silence, we should teach it. And before we teach it ... we have to demonstrate it and allow the children to become familiar with it. ... it really needs an explanation and a preparation of the surroundings.

The Child, Society and the World p. 52; p. 55

To support this preparation, all other activity is temporarily put aside. We must assure the consent of each member of the group to this activity of Silence, for it cannot happen unless everyone present agrees: **“the entire class must want to be silent”**. There are no observers for this activity – everyone present in the environment must voluntarily suspend all movement for complete silence to be achieved. Silence then is a profound experience of social cohesion – of each child willingly suspending their own immediate desires for the sake of a communal achievement.

To support this, silence is never externally compelled or ordered by the adults in the environment. Mr. Joosten (among others) is adamant on this point, and elaborates it succinctly:

The silence lesson is never to be used by the teacher as a disciplinary imposition, i.e., the silence lesson may never be given in order to reduce the community to silence when it is rowdy. If the activities of the children should be accompanied by excessive noise, its reason should be discovered and dealt with (usually lack of real interest and concentration). The silence lesson presupposes a high capacity of concentration and inner discipline and can therefore never serve as a means to remedy the lack of them. Silence is a point of arrival not a point of departure.

‘The Silence Lesson’, AMI Communications, 1967 #4, p. 27

Introduction to Preliminary Activities

*In a word, there is no action which we do not try and teach so as to approach perfection.
We leave nothing to chance.*

quoted in E.M. Standing, Maria Montessori – Her Life and Work, p. 216

Preliminary Activities are typically offered as another point of entry for any child in the environment; as such, they are significant for the child's orientation to the environment. Many preliminary Activities are offered during a child's first weeks in the group, they can be among the earliest individual presentations given to a new child, and many preliminary activities are similar to transitional activities. However, we must distinguish these Preliminary Activities from purely transitional exercises because Preliminaries relate directly to the child's progression of work with the Montessori materials and to the child's life as member of the Casa community. Also, Preliminary Activities can be created and offered to a child at any time that the need for them arises out of a child's work.

Definition:

Preliminary Activities: Exercises which present a movement or activity which the child will apply later in another context.

Preliminary Activities are of **two types**.

1. Activities which isolate a movement in relation to an object or an action used in the environment

Here we isolate movements which the child will need for functional independence, comfort, and confidence in the environment, and which she will use generally in more involved sequences of work. These are prepared by the Teacher for a specific presentation, but do not exist in isolation on the shelf. They are typically offered according to the general technique for a Grace and Courtesy lesson and are very similar to those lessons for Social Relations.

Examples: moving a chair; laying out a work rug; carrying a pitcher of water; fetching water; carrying a tray with something on it; walking around a work rug

2. Activities which isolate a particular but significant movement from a more complicated sequence of work

Particular movements are isolated, analyzed, and presented for the child's practice, so that their lack does not become an obstacle to the initial presentation of the complete exercise. These are generally found as exercises within the logical sequence of materials arranged on the shelves. They are typically offered as an individual presentation.

Examples: opening and closing various containers; exercises in pouring from one container to another; use of scissors; folding various cloths; bead stringing as a preliminary to sewing; an exercise to present the technique of handling a safety pin prior to presentation of the safety pin frame

Preliminary Activities can be offered at any time and can be refreshed frequently. For both types, each exercise will isolate a single aspect of movement. In the sequence of a complete exercise, and in the challenges of day to day functioning in the environment, the child uses these separate skills and combinations of these separate skills constantly to accomplish her work and to successfully negotiate the challenges of group life. As she matures in her work, the movements themselves might become quite peripheral to the larger purposes of a particular activity – when pouring water in an exercise for washing, for example; yet the skill or lack thereof will be pivotal in accomplishing that larger purpose with control and confidence.

All children will need the assistance of Preliminary Activities. However, children who arrive from a Montessori Infant community must be observed carefully, for many preliminaries will already be perfected during their previous experience in a Montessori environment. In general, all arriving children can be observed and evaluated in terms of skills that have already been mastered and those which would benefit from isolated practice and perfection.

The list of potential Preliminary Activities is long and varied. Many can be predictably prepared and planned for most children. Others emerge out of the observed needs either of an individual child or of the group as a whole. We can relate Preliminary Activities to the larger categories of “Isolation of Difficulty” and “Indirect Preparation” – which are at work throughout the Prepared Environment. The Teacher understands these principles and can apply them in whatever specific circumstance arises. His responsibility is to offer these opportunities in a timely manner, being sure that the necessary preliminaries are secure before offering activities which further challenge the child’s capacities. In this, he removes obstacles in the child’s path of self-perfection. Many aspects of daily life, social cohesion, self-confidence, functional independence, and issues often described as “classroom management”, can actually be isolated and positively addressed through this simple approach.

To initiate perfection at this time of life is an immensely productive piece of educational work: the teacher reaps a wonderful harvest after a minimum of trouble given to sowing the seed.

The Discovery of the Child p.100

**Introduction to Care of the Person
(Materials for Independent Work)**

Care of the Person consists of a variety of materials for independent work found ‘on the shelf’ in the Casa. These exercises are typically organized around **grooming** and **hygiene**, as well as care of **clothing and personal items**. They offer strong support for the development of **self-confidence**, a **positive self-image**, a sense of **personal efficacy**, and skills for **functional independence**.

Examples: Combing Hair; Washing Hands; Various Fastenings on Clothing; Cleaning Shoes; Various Types of Sewing; etc

With Care of the Person activities, it is very important to understand the difference between doing an activity for **developmental purposes** and doing the activity for its **utilitarian purposes**. Montessori readily adapted the materials available in her general culture for the children of the first Casa – offering them the means of taking care of themselves independently. As an adult with a purpose in mind, she provided these activities to the children assuming that they too had only utilitarian – or at most imitative – interests in these activities. Here, however, Montessori observed the famous unexpected outcome (as described in the general introduction). Similarly, very practical skills of buttoning or zipping are practiced with great interest by very young children – but initially not to develop that skill, but for the pure joy of perfecting their own being; only later, as the child matures, will there be equal delight in applying the skill effectively and independently – a skill which seems to have been acquired ‘by magic’, without the child’s awareness that it was being built. The practical skills themselves are built up in the child while she is busy with the inner formations motivated by her developmental powers – the Human Tendencies, the Absorbent Mind, the Sensitive Periods for Movement and Order. Montessori also observed that the activities of Care of the Person are essential invitations to **Normalization**.

Care of the Person will very much reflect the child’s family and ethnic cultures, as well as the material culture and social expectations of the surrounding society. Therefore, **there is no fixed set of Care of the Person activities** to be found in every Casa anywhere in the world. We examine the common practices and expectations of the culture to decide which activities to provide and how to organize them. The Practical Life album represents examples of the kinds of activities which can be created and offered to the children and models of how these activities can be organized and presented to children.

There will be similarities from Casa to Casa: **grooming** will include hygiene, such as hand washing and face washing, but perhaps also foot washing in a culture where children go barefoot or wear open sandals; ways to care for hair, using implements appropriate for the hair types and styles of the children in the group.



We also show the analyzed movements and sequences for independently putting on and taking off the **garments** these children actually wear – snow suits and snow boots in cold climates; raincoats and rain boots in temperate rain forests; sweaters and sweatshirts where cool mornings become warm afternoons. There will always be some type of dressing frames, but based in the common fastenings used on the clothing of a particular society. And there will be care for foot wear – polishing leather shoes, for example, if children in that Casa actually wear leather shoes, but perhaps washing flip flops, if that is the common foot gear.

There can be, as well, a set of social expectations around Personal Care in the Casa, which do not necessarily match those of the external culture – procedures for washing before and after eating, for example; standards of cleanliness before using materials; ways to clean or repair clothing which needs attention during the day.

A great guideline for the Casa is that **children leave for the day looking as good as or better than when they arrived**. This will set the standard for nurturing and effective Care of the Person in the Casa, and also support excellent parent relations. This is not a guideline, however, enforced or followed by the adults in the Casa; instead, it represents a standard which is transferred naturally to the responsibility of the children themselves.

**Introduction to Care of the Environment
(Materials for Independent Work)**

Care of the Environment consists of a variety of materials for independent work found ‘on the shelf’ in the Casa. These exercises are organized around the **care and maintenance of the immediate surroundings** – both indoors and outdoors. These exercises offer strong support for the development of **personal responsibility** and **functional independence**, the **awareness of the social consequences of individual choices**, and a relationship of **stewardship and gratitude towards the environment**.

Examples: Care of various types of furniture; care of floor surfaces and exterior grounds; cleaning various objects in the environment; indoor plant care; gardening; cleaning and maintaining tools used for cleaning; etc

The comments contrasting **developmental and utilitarian motivations** of children, as found in the Introduction to Care of the Person, also apply here. This area is also particularly significant for the emergence of the **Second Psychological Stage of the Work** as children mature into the late first plane. It is also observed to provide essential experiences supporting **Normalization**.

As with Care of the Person, there is **no fixed set of Care of the Environment activities** found uniformly in every Montessori Casa. Instead, the Practical Life album represents examples of the kinds of activities which can be created and offered to the children and models of how these activities can be organized and presented to children.

The range and nature of these exercises are determined by the contents and organization of the particular prepared environment; they also reflect the material culture of the larger society. When planning for these activities, the teacher explores the possibilities inherent in the physical space indoors and outdoors and the objects found in the environment – these possibilities dictate whether there will be a broom for sweeping bare floors; a carpet sweeper for rugs; a rake for leaves; and / or a shovel for snow. Similarly – there is brass polishing if brass objects are scattered about the room as decorative and useful objects; there is table washing if there are tables; and we will have dish washing and cloth scrubbing if dirty dishes and soiled laundry accumulate from the daily activities in the environment.

The best guideline for supporting the goals of Care of the Environment in general, and Montessori’s mandate that we transfer care of the environment to the children is that every day **when the children leave the environment looks as good or better than when they arrived**.