

# Montessori Life

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### On the Cover:

Prosocial behavior, positive actions meant to benefit another, reflect a critical aspect of Montessori education—one child using her knowledge and skill to assist another with gentle respect.

Cover photograph by Jude Keith Rose



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# Creating an **Amazing** Montessori Toddler Home Environment

*By Stephanie Woo*

Our weekly menu has a few consistent items: fried rice on Mondays, butter shrimp on Wednesdays, and scrambled eggs with fresh biscuits on the weekends. My 3-year-old twins prepare these dishes all by themselves. They also sweep the floor, load dishwashers, or wipe down tables afterward. When I say that, it may seem that I am talking about a magical, mythical fairyland that parents can only dream about. But this fairyland is real, and it is called Montessori.

Raising my twins the Montessori way has made my life easy. Imagine two 1-year-olds eating entire meals on their own, setting their own tables by 20 months, and becoming potty-trained before 2. These are not statistics found in just one household. Children raised the Montessori way can take care of themselves and their environment at surprisingly young ages.

In our home, my husband and I are interested in one thing: helping our

children become independent. Our goal is never to push our children into something before they are ready, but we also never hold them back when they show signs of readiness. It is a fine balance that requires knowledge, careful observation, and a thoughtful home environment.

Independence is the ability to do something by yourself without being a burden to others. Independence cannot be given; it is developed internally.

Independence is built over time and predicated on specific abilities. Each new skill makes new levels of independence possible. Every time a child masters something, that mastery leads to new possibilities. This way of parenting requires much more thought than parenting in which you do everything for your child, but its rewards are also much greater.

When I think of the perfect toddler home environment, I think of this



*The prepared home environment*



quote from Maria Montessori:

*It is not important to be able to taste the cake, but to be able to prepare it, to offer it, to organize a party, that is what a child needs. A laid table is not important, but to lay the table, to do it all himself. The very young child needs to move, especially at home. . . . The adult must teach the child how to do it himself, he must give him the means. The basis of the new life of the child is to understand that the child needs a more serious life, a real activity, a social life, where he can act himself. He needs help up to the point that he can do it himself. (Montessori, 1939)*

Few parents would ever dream of letting their young toddler use a knife, scrub tables, or clean windows. Most parents have never seen it done, while others do not know how to engage their toddler in participating in these activities. But, if you visit a toddler Montessori classroom, you will witness children as young as 18 months slicing bananas, dusting shelves, and washing dishes. Children are capable. The only thing they need is the opportunity.

In this article, I will touch on three areas of the home—the kitchen, the

dressing area, and the playroom—into which you can incorporate activities to help your child develop independence. There are three key ingredients to creating an amazing Montessori home: the right physical environment with child-sized furniture and implements, ample opportunities for practicing skills, and adults who encourage the child's burgeoning independence.

### Independence in the Kitchen

The kitchen is the ideal place to begin to involve your toddler. If you are like me, you probably spend a lot of time there, and your child will want to be there with you. You can help her become an active and helpful part of your family's kitchen life by incorporating child-sized furniture. The two most important pieces of furniture to have in the kitchen are a child-sized table and chair. This table should be no more than 14 inches from the tabletop to the floor in order for comfortable sitting. The slatted chairs (pictured, above, middle photo) were designed by Maria Montessori. They are made of birch wood, lightweight enough for young children to carry but also extremely sturdy and safe. Your child can eat meals here and do kitchen work as well. We bought our table and chairs when my girls were 6 months

old and use them every day—they eat their snacks, cut vegetables, and make scrambled eggs (using an electric skillet) at their table.

Keep a pitcher of water as well as some glasses on the table so children can get their own drinks of water when they want. Both the pitcher and glasses should be made of real glass and offered to your child from the very beginning (starting at 6 months old). Not only is it beautiful and pleasurable to use, glass provides real consequences when not properly handled. Experiencing the sight and sound of one broken glass is often enough for young children to learn that glasses need to be handled with care. A small plastic basket kept under the table can be pulled out and used during cleanup. Teach your child to put dirty dishes here. I also recommend sewing loops or wooden rings on cloth napkins and hanging them on a hook attached to the table. When your toddler needs a napkin, it is right there.

Another important piece of furniture in the kitchen is a shelving solution used to store your children's kitchen items. Some parents give their children the lowest shelf in a cupboard or the lower rung of a kitchen shelf. Don't put their things in a closed drawer because your child won't be

able to see what's inside. After they pass the phase of wanting to open and close everything, the closed drawer just becomes an obstacle to them finding everything they need. So if you want them to participate in the kitchen, make it easy for them by keeping things out in the open. If you need to create a custom shelving solution, think about buying a low two-tiered bookshelf. Ideally, shelving will be adjustable so you can change the height of the shelves as your child grows.

Another great custom solution is to buy a lightweight rolling cart. These placemats can be bought at online Montessori stores (or made them at home by drawing outlines of a plate, bowl, fork and knife on a piece of paper, then laminating it). This placemat makes it so easy for little ones to set their own table. When they are setting the table, you will see them point at the outline of the fork and say, "Fork," then go to the cart to get a fork, then point at the outline of the plate and say, "Plate," then get one, and so on. The placemat serves as a great little cheat sheet! The middle shelf of the cart held everything my girls needed to set the table, including bowls, plates, forks, and spoons. And the bottom shelf held extra cloth napkins and a sponge for wiping the table.

As your children become more capable of helping out in the kitchen, you can add another rolling cart for commonly used kitchen utensils, such as eggbeaters, wooden mixing spoons, colanders, juicers, a cutting board, etc. Make sure all the implements are child-size—small and light enough for the child to carry from the shelf to his work table. For example, an adult-size eggbeater is too heavy, so it would be difficult for a child to make the correct beating movement with it. Remember, we want the child to experience success, and the only way this will happen is if they have the right tools to work with.



*Cracking an egg*

If your child appears to be in the middle of uncontrollable disorder, assess the disorder before you act. If she is learning to pour water, overfilling the cup and spilling water on the table is normal. Let him keep on practicing. But if he breaks something or overfills the cup for days or weeks, then consider that your pitcher is too heavy or too light, too big or too small, or somehow too difficult to use. Also, did you demonstrate pouring with two hands? When children have the right tools and the right demonstrations, they can do extraordinary things. This takes careful observation on your part to see what is working and what is not, and adjusting accordingly.

### **Toddler-Friendly Tips for Getting Dressed**

Does your child play with clothes? Maybe she pulled every sock out of the sock drawer or you found her swimming in a pile of shirts and pants. Maybe she keeps playing with shoes or even putting them in her mouth.

Believe it or not, those are all signs that your child is interested in clothing.

Allowing a small selection of clothes from which to choose really helps encourage your child to learn to dress himself. A child-size shelf will help with this process. We used a short shelf from IKEA and did not install the doors that came with it. Again, having the clothes out in the open makes it accessible. We want to encourage children to dress themselves and even play with the clothes, for playing is how they learn. I've watched my own children spend endless hours in front of this shelf, putting on and taking off various items of clothing.

On this shelving unit, we have separated the clothing by categories. The top shelf holds socks. The middle shelf holds shirts. The bottom shelf holds pants, underwear, and potty training pants. We installed simple hooks on the wall for their jackets. We limit the number of items we have out, keeping the rest of their clothes in a bedroom closet, rotating them as we see fit.

Since my girls started crawling,





*The essentials, organized*

we have kept their clothes in baskets or on open, accessible shelving. They can play with their clothes and shoes as much as they want. In the beginning, they were too young to clean up, so I would find myself putting clothes back on the shelf constantly, but I always did this when they were around so they could see how it was done. Your careful modeling teaches them what to do when they have the skills to do it themselves.

Toddlers need choices, but not too many choices. By providing an open closet solution like this, they are empowered to dress themselves when and how they wish. And don't correct them. What is the harm of wearing two different colored socks or wearing shoes on opposite feet? My children regularly put on multiple pairs of pants, swimsuits, and dresses—none of them matching—all on top of each other. I try not to let my vanity get in the way and let them go out in whatever they choose to wear. Why? Because the joy of dressing oneself successfully sows seeds of confidence.

And that matters more than a matching outfit—at least most of the time!

### Don't Cram the Playroom

I encourage parents to provide a variety of toys and activities for their children, but, just as with clothing, not to put everything out at once. A playroom crammed with toys becomes overwhelming. So, how should you organize your toys? Again, low shelving is essential, so children don't need your help to access what they want. Also, each toy should have its own spot on the shelf and, if the toy has pieces or parts, those are contained in an attractive basket, small bin, or tray. Children can learn to take out toys and put them back only if they are familiar with the order of things. If everything is strewn about or the toys are dumped into one big container, then that is all they learn to do. Instead, we want to cultivate order in the child's mind. That's why we separate puzzles from the art and music activities. We also have plant-care activities, like watering or dusting leaves, separate

from self-care activities, like combing hair or putting on mittens.

We also want to cultivate appreciation for our belongings; that's why everything broken is mended or taken away. Toys that have lost their appeal should be stored in a closet. Rotate them back in after a month or two, and often they will be as interesting as when they were new.

It is never too early to cultivate a sense of beauty. Your playroom should be beautiful, organized, orderly, and sparse. It's better to have too few toys than too many. Consider having plants and fresh flowers. Here's a piece of advice: the plants should be hardy and able to withstand much watering.

### It's All in the Planning

A Montessori home is not just about low shelves and accessible clothing. If our goal is to cultivate independence and self-confidence, we must think through how to help the child. Every act of independence can be broken down into multiple steps. During your planning phase, think about which activity you want your child to master. Do you want to teach her to put on a jacket, set the table, or pour a glass of milk? While you are planning, consider these steps.

1. Which activity do you want your toddler to do? Make this as specific as possible. Is it setting the table, clearing the table, or brushing his own hair?
2. Which implements will you need? Make a careful list of everything you will need and how to procure them. Many online stores, like Montessori Services, Michael Olaf, How We Montessori, and Etsy (search "Montessori" on the latter site), offer child-size tools and implements.
3. Do a test run on your own with an imaginary child. Write down the list of steps, being as detailed as possible.

See if you can do it without talking, just letting your hands do the work.

4. Practice showing the steps to another person (not your child). Make sure your steps are clear and sequential. Remember that a child will do *exactly* what you show him. Any extraneous movements will be incorporated into the child's version. My hair used to get in my way when I bent down. When my daughter, Brooke, started to put her hair behind her ears every time she set the table, I knew she had picked it up from me when I first showed her table-setting!

5. Place the activity on your child's shelf. Then find a good time when your child is well-fed and well-rested, and show her how to do the activity. Be excited about the activity and your demonstration.

6. Continue to watch your child, offering assistance when necessary.

But mostly, just watch. Let him spill, present his own version of what you did, complete steps out of your demonstrated order. Let her struggle to figure out steps and, perhaps, missteps. If something doesn't seem to be working, assess what you might need to alter in the environment. What isn't working? How can you help your child be more successful?

### Bringing It Home

I feed my children healthy, organic food. I keep them clean and make sure they're dressed warmly when needed. I also hug them, hold them, and lavish them with love every day. But none of those things, not even my deepest devotion and love, can provide the kind of mental nourishment the young child needs to thrive. That's what a Montessori home environment does. It enriches the whole child—body, mind, and soul.

During my journey, I've learned to distinguish between a good water pitcher and an excellent water pitcher. I know the best cup to give a 6-month-old, a 12-month-old, a 24-month-old, and a 3-year-old (it's a different cup for each of these ages). I know what signs to look for before giving a child a pair of scissors or a bead-stringing toy. I've learned hundreds of details like this from my Montessori teacher education and from my own trials and errors while creating my home environment.

The Montessori home environment should be a living, breathing thing, just like your child. I think of my children and my Montessori home environment as best friends. When you put them together and you've honed in on the right combination, they can play together for hours and your child will do amazing things, like



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those I mentioned at the beginning of this article. Meanwhile, you will be in awe of your child and wonder what other parents mean when they talk about the terrible twos. If you are not experiencing ease and freedom with your toddler, then I invite you to consider that something in your environment is not right. You'll need to observe. You'll need to use your discernment. But mostly, you'll need persistence and humility to figure out what is not working and how to fix it.

Soon enough, you'll find yourself gasping and your heart skipping because your child just did something you never expected such a small person to do. Maybe he just peeled a cucumber perfectly or he just set the entire family table all by himself. And in that moment, you'll know, this isn't a mythical fairyland. This is Montessori.

#### Reference

Montessori, M. (1939). *Preparation of the environment for the young child in the family*. Communications, 2009/2, 8–15.

STEPHANIE WOO is AMI-trained and the author of *Raising Your Twins: Real Life Tips on Parenting Your Children with Ease*. She is also a speaker and family consultant, specializing in children ages 0–3. Stephanie lives in Portland, OR, with her husband and twin 3-year-old girls. Visit her blog at [www.MontessoriOntheDouble.com](http://www.MontessoriOntheDouble.com).

Photography by Stephanie Woo

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