



A Morning in the Life of a Montessori Child

By Ana Pickering

Do you wonder what young children do each day in a Montessori early childhood centre and more importantly, why are they doing it and what they are learning? I visited a Montessori early childhood centre and shared a morning with Sophie, aged almost three.

Sophie arrives at 8.30am and her father helps her to hang up her bag in the cloakroom. He reminds her to take the pear from her bag and opens the door to her classroom. Sophie's teacher is waiting where she always is, just inside the door. She smiles and shakes Sophie's hand. 'How lovely to see you today Sophie. Have you got a pear for the fruit bowl?' Sophie nods. 'Are you going to put it in the fruit bowl?' Sophie nods again and walks across the room.

Greeting each child personally is an important part of the culture of a Montessori classroom and provides a calm transition for the young child from parent to teacher.

There are four other children who have arrived earlier, now busy with the activities they have chosen. A boy is watering a potted plant using a small watering can. A girl has begun writing words on a mat with the large movable alphabet. Sophie stops to watch an older boy putting on his painting apron and organising his large piece of paper on the easel. She places the fruit in the bowl in the kitchen area, then stands quietly and watches the other children being greeted as they arrive. Sophie sees Bryce, who has recently joined the class, working with a cylinder block on a floor mat. She also chooses a floor mat, carries it to a space next to him and lays it out on the floor.

Floor mats and table mats are used to define the child's workspace and help keep all the materials in a safe place. The children learn how to walk carefully around the floor mats and to respect the work space of other children.

Sophie walks to the shelf and chooses another cylinder block. She places her hands at each end of the block, lifts it off the shelf and places carefully on her mat. She sits down and grasps the knob of the largest cylinder with her thumb and fingers and pulls it out of the block and places it on her mat. 'This one goes here,' she whispers to herself. One by one she takes all the cylinders out. When all the cylinders are removed from the holes in the block she says to Bryce 'Look at this little one' and shows him the smallest cylinder. She tries putting the largest cylinder in smaller hole. She giggles when she realises it will not fit.

Cylinder blocks enable the young child to explore size. Each cylinder can fit in only one of the 10 holes in the block - if the child places the cylinder in the wrong hole, she will soon discover for herself the mistake. The pincer grip used to grasp the knobbed cylinder also prepares the child's hand muscles to hold a pencil.

Sophie moves cylinders from one hole to another, spending another ten minutes exploring how the size of the cylinders and holes relate to each other. Bryce has now put his cylinder block away and is carrying the prisms of the pink tower to his mat. Sophie slides all the cylinders back into their correct holes in the block, returns it to the shelf, rolls up her mat and puts it away.

Children innately desire to repeat activities until they gain a sense of mastery. Returning to the same activity could happen over days, weeks and months. Sophie will return again and again to the cylinder blocks. Sophie's teacher will soon offer her a new challenge of doing two or three or four cylinder blocks at a time.

After a few minutes she goes to the food preparation shelf and selects the juicing exercise. On the tray are a wooden board, a juicer, cloth, a china jug and a glass cup. She carries the tray carefully and places it on the table. Sophie chooses a cut orange half and places it on the squeezer and pushes hard. The orange is large and it is hard for her to hold it with her small hands.



In Montessori classrooms children have real opportunities to develop motor control and to perfect their movements. The materials used in practical life activities are real and breakable and similar to utensils the child would see in their home - china jugs, sharp knives, and glasses. The child is shown how to carry the trays carefully and how to use the utensils so they do not get hurt. These life skills enable the child to become independent and also to make useful contributions to their social group and family.

Her teacher has been watching from a distance and quietly suggests to Miranda, a five year old, to go and offer Sophie some help. Miranda approaches and asks 'Do you need some help, Sophie?' Sophie nods and Miranda takes the orange and presses it on the squeezer. Juice drips into the container underneath. Miranda gives the orange to Sophie who puts it into the compost. Sophie chooses another orange half and gives it to Miranda. 'You try to do it,' instructs Miranda, 'and I will hold the squeezer'. Sophie tries again. 'Stand up,' Miranda suggests. Sophie stands in front of the table and pushes down on the cut orange. 'That's good Sophie,' Miranda says encouragingly.

In a Montessori classroom older children are supported to help younger children. The younger child experiences the daily stimulation of older role models, who in turn flourish through the responsibility of leadership. Children learn how to offer help and to accept a 'no', if the younger child does not want assistance.

Sophie takes the squeezed orange half across to her teacher. 'Look at that!' she exclaims. There is now freshly squeezed orange juice in the jug. Sophie pours it carefully into her glass, dilutes it with water from the china jug and drinks it. Sophie and Miranda take the glass, squeezer and jug to the kitchen sink. Miranda helps Sophie turn the taps on and helps her to wash and dry the utensils. The teacher comes over and gently reminds Miranda: 'Remember to give Sophie help only when she needs it.' Miranda watches and seeing that Sophie can dry the dishes on her own leaves and continues with her own activity. Sophie finishes wiping the tray and table, replaces the wet cloth with a dry one from the supply shelf and places the tray back on the shelf, exactly where she found it.

Learning to complete a cycle of activity - by choosing, doing and returning the activity to the shelf, the young child learns to concentrate, to control muscles, to focus, to analyse logical steps which all prepare her for more complex tasks and increase independent thought and action.

It is now 9.45am and a lovely sunny day beckons. Sophie gets

her sun hat and goes outside past the raised vegetable plots. A group of children are helping to fill the vegetable plots with compost. The beds will soon be ready to plant the summer vegetables; tomatoes, cucumber and lettuces which the children will pick each morning for the community lunch.

Outside the children are engaged in a range of activities: window washing, painting the wooden fence with water, picking spring flowers, pulling a wooden trolley, pedalling a tandem bike and walking on bucket stilts. Many children have brought the inside mats and tables outdoors and are sewing on cloth, building the number rods, tracing the world map puzzle and writing with the large movable alphabet in the spring sunshine.

Sophie wants to have a ride on the tandem bike. She tries asking, 'Can I have a turn?' but the two children exclaim 'No, only two people! It's our turn'. Sophie edges closer and the children quickly ride off. The outdoor teacher observes that Sophie may need some support. 'Do you need some help to ask for a turn?' Sophie nods. The teacher asks the two children 'Did you hear Sophie ask for a turn?' They reply that it is their turn. 'When could Sophie have a turn? Look at her face - I think she is looking sad.' The children look at Sophie and come up with a suggestion 'Sophie can push us.' The teacher checks, 'Are you happy to push Sophie?' Sophie is happy to push for a while and she is soon given a seat on the bike.

The adult supports the children to learn and use social graces, while allowing the children to develop solutions that meet their needs and are mutually respectful.

Sophie watches a group of children involved on an obstacle course that has been set up by the teachers and older children. She decides to join the group and climbs up the ladder, is supported to swing with her hands across the monkey bars, jumps from tyre to tyre and hops from one hoop to another. After several rounds of the obstacle course she is puffing and ready to move on.

As she comes inside her teacher asks, 'Hello, are you back inside now? What would you like to do now?' Sophie looks uncertain. Her teacher suggests 'Choose something you know how to do; perhaps the number rods?' Sophie nods and goes off to get her floor mat. She goes to the shelf to get the number rods and starts carrying them one by one to her mat.

Montessori children enjoy considerable freedom of choice and movement and become used to making decisions themselves. The Montessori teacher is constantly observing so she knows when to leave the child alone or when support is needed. Often the teacher will support the child by offering limited choices or suggestions.

Another child asks the teacher if she can do the number rods. The teacher replies 'Sophie has the number rods now. When she is finished you can have a turn. What else could you choose?'

There is only one of each activity in a Montessori classroom - the children learn to wait their turn and to return the activity to the shelf ready for the next child to use; this way children learn how to be respectful of the needs of their classmates.

Sophie lifts the longest rod off the shelf. It is higher than her head and she grunts with exertion. 'It is very long that big one - I will show you, it is very long.' Squatting down she safely delivers the rod to the mat. She places the 10 rods of the number rods in an order that satisfies her, starting with the

longest rod. She counts the alternating blue and red segments of one of the rods, placing her hand on each segment '1, 2, 3, 4, and 5'. After counting several rods she goes over to her teacher and announces, 'It is finished.' 'What do you want to do - do you want to bring me some numbers rods to count?' Sophie shakes her head. 'If you think you are finished you can put it away.' Sophie takes rods one by one across the room to the shelf until the number rods are on the shelf ready for the next child.

Montessori materials for younger children appeal to their need for movement and spontaneous exploration. Lifting, carrying and building with large prisms and rods and cubes give the child the opportunity to gain physical skills, control of movement and give a very strong impression of size, weight and length. Montessori materials for older children are smaller, lighter and require more refined motor skills and dexterity.

Sophie looks around for her teacher again. 'What do you want to do now - how about sandpaper letters?' Sophie nods and goes to get the box of sandpaper letters. The teacher chooses four letters that Sophie is familiar with and places the letters on a floor mat. Sophie traces the letters and then takes a tray and goes over to the teacher. 'Sophie, can you bring me the sound 's'?' Sophie nods. 'What sound will you bring?' checks the teacher. 'Ssss' replies Sophie. She walks over to the mat and picks up the board with the symbol 's' and places it on the tray. Sophie walks back to the teacher and shows her the letter. 'What sound did you bring?' 'Ssss' says Sophie. 'Take it back and come back for a new sound', says the teacher. This 'bring me' game is played for some time with Sophie finding all the sounds on her mat. The last sound is 'e'. 'Eh' says Sophie as she walks across the room. 'Eh' says Sophie as she sits down. 'Eh,eh, eh, eh' she sings to herself. She sits for a while singing the sound. Her teacher comes over 'I was waiting. Can you bring 'e'?' She looks again at Sophie and gently enquires 'Do you want to do some more?' 'No' says Sophie. 'Well, pack it away and we will do some more another day.' Sophie puts the sandpaper letters, tray and mat away.

Montessori teachers are skilled in 'following the child' and responding to the changing interests and



needs of each child, presenting the next new challenge when they observe the child is ready and knowing when the child has had enough, for now.

During the morning several children have been busy preparing food for lunch. Fruit has been cut, celery sliced and carrots grated for sandwiches. After 11.40am the teacher calls the children together. The morning is finished and it is time to prepare for lunch. Children put their work away and come together for a short group time prior to going to lunch. If their work is unfinished they can choose to leave it on their mat where it will remain undisturbed until they return to it. Two older children are already laying the tables for lunch and move quietly about the room placing table mats, china bowls and spoons.

Dr Montessori discovered that young children desire to be active for long periods of time in concentrated activity. If interrupted by group work or whole class activities children are not able to reach a state of deep focus and choose work that needs a only superficial involvement. The children in this class have had a three-hour work cycle with the freedom to choose activities inside and outside.

Sophie notices a boy is still putting away his number rods. Sophie asks him 'Can I help you?' He nods and she tells the teacher excitedly 'Stuart said I can help him!'. Sophie helps take some rods to the shelf and as Stuart starts rolling the mat she says 'Let's roll it together!' They put the mat away and join the group of children.

In Montessori classrooms the children learn to interact with each other in nurturing and respectful ways. As a younger child Sophie has received help from older children. When she sees an opportunity to help someone she responds spontaneously and is excited that she is able to contribute.

The children go to wash their hands and then stand behind their chairs to wait for everyone to be ready. One child says a simple karakia, or blessing, and the children sit down to a lunch of baked beans, sandwiches with grated cheese and carrot, fruit and a glass of water. It is a sociable time with the children talking quietly as they eat their lunch. When everyone is finished two children will clear the tables, put the dishes on a trolley and take it into the kitchen to pack the dishwasher. Some children are picked up at 1pm and others go outside before the afternoon programme begins.

Sophie has spent the entire morning making choices for herself. What will I do? Where is it kept? What will I need? Who can help me? How shall I use the materials? She has a rich choice of Montessori learning materials that call her to explore actively with her hands and make her own discoveries. She has older children to help her and adults who stand back and respect her need to 'do it myself'. Sophie has opportunities to help others and feel the satisfaction of contributing to her learning community. Her teachers are ready to support her and to provide more challenge when she is ready. Sophie has the freedom and time to become deeply absorbed in her chosen task and a community culture that protects her concentration and right to work uninterrupted.

So when you wonder why and what and how about Montessori, remember Sophie and her busy morning.

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