

Normalization 101

It's the fall. We are exhausted. Not only do we have rather soggy days produced by students who are not quite aware of the liberating joy of independent toileting or the customary use of a faucet, but we also have new parent meetings and school functions that make our days insanely long. Long, soggy days waiting for peace to arrive. Didn't one of our trainers say it would only take a few weeks? Well...maybe a few months? Definitely by May!

Don't worry. There is only one thing required for it to arrive, child-by-child, like dominoes falling into grace. "Normalization comes about through 'concentration' on a piece of work. For this we must provide 'motives for activity' so well adapted to the child's interests that they provoke his deep attention. Their success in this is dependent on the use of the objects for the purposes they are designed to serve, a thing which is also conducive to the child's 'mental order.'" (Montessori. The Absorbent Mind. p 188)

Concentration. Motives for activity. Mental order. Easy, right?

Concentration

We know what concentration looks like but how do we "get" the child to concentrate? We don't. We can not make it happen. Let's get that out of the way right now. We can not require the child to concentrate. We can require them to sit down and "do" something but that is not at all what we are looking for. That is merely a holding pen. Instead, we guide them towards the beauty of concentration. We provide all the causes and conditions so that the child will discover that he can concentrate...and that he likes it. We get them interested in it.

Motivation to Work

"There is only one question you must answer," my meditation partner used to say, "What is your motivation?" Why do we adults do what we do? Often it is because of obligation. But when we are free to choose, why do we choose to take a walk, read a book, look at the sky, watch a show? Because something in that action is compelling, something is interesting, something has captured our attention. Sometimes, like when we fall in love, that some "thing" is really some "one." But the key is that we are interested.

"An interesting piece of work, freely chosen, which has the virtue of inducing concentration rather than fatigue, adds to the child's energies and mental capacities, and leads him to self-mastery." (Montessori. The Absorbent Mind. p 188)

Yes, we have all seen that. We all have some children, okay, maybe only one child, who naturally eases into the prepared environment. They choose work, focus on it, and put it away with joy. But what about the children who just don't seem interested in the materials? How do we entice them to work?

Until concentration arrives, we do whatever we need to do to draw the children to the work. Once concentration arrives...we fade away like a gentle breeze. So, when the children are lost, we are free to do puzzles, finger puppets, even the hokey-pokey! We must gain their attention. In the midst of this, we must demonstrate such tremendous care, affection, and enthusiasm for the work that the children become curious. It is our role to link the children to the gorgeous possibility of...blowing one's nose neatly and competently.

Order & Precision

Well, okay, maybe nose blowing doesn't seem quite what one would normally consider gorgeous. But for the young child, it is. Why? First, the work is relevant to the child; it is a situation that the child regularly encounters. This makes it interesting to them. Next, the child has the possibility of success, of mastery, because the larger task has been broken down into progressive, realizable, ordered steps. Third, we always use the material in that same way so the material's purpose and proper use is unwaveringly clear.

Here is an example based on the less than glamorous nose blowing work mentioned above:

1. Notice that you need to blow your nose.
2. Pick up the tissue. (Notice, non-verbally, that you were able to take only one tissue.)
3. Press the tissue against the right nostril with the thumb and compress the nostril.
4. Press the other side of the tissue against the left nostril with the index and middle fingers without compressing the nostril.
5. Close your mouth.
6. Blow.
7. Open your mouth and breathe through it.
8. Compress the left nostril with the fingers and release the right nostril.
9. Close your mouth.
10. Blow.
11. Press thumb and fingers together and draw the tissue (and mucus—yuck!) forward. (Notice, non-verbally, the mucus.)
12. Throw the tissue away.
13. Breathe through your nose and touch it to check for...more.
14. If another tissue is warranted, return to step 1 and repeat as necessary.
15. Hold the right palm face up just beneath the spout of the hand sanitizer.
16. Push down on the hand sanitizer pump with the palm of the left hand. (Notice, non-verbally, the coolness of the gel on the palm.)
17. Place the palms together.
18. Slide the right hand forward and grasp the left index finger to distribute the gel; repeat for each finger. (Notice, non-verbally, the cool/tingling sensation on the hands and fingers.)

Now your nose blowing procedure may differ from the above. That's fine. The point here is that each step is given pause. As we move slowly and consistently through the steps, the child is able to observe them as individual steps. Thus, he is shown the means of

coordinating his movements. He is shown the specific means of linking the mind and the hand. He can create mental order. If we are consistent in slowly repeating our movements the same exact way every time, the children internalize order and coordination with great speed.

Freedom with Limits

What about the child who turns the red rods into swords or language objects into space ships or the tissue into a tossing game? “Oh no. We can’t use it that way,” we say with a firm, gentle, and light-hearted voice. “We’ll have to put it away and try again another time.” Then promptly and carefully put the item away, walk away *with the child*, and offer an alternative. Maybe we notice something that is out of order on a shelf and pause to straighten it and admire how nice it looks. Maybe we walk on the line. Maybe we notice a spill and clean it up. The point is that *we*, the adults, find something of interest and offer the child the opportunity to participate in meaningful work. We offer the child again and again and again an interesting alternative that he just may choose. And then, after some time has passed, we re-present the misused work. Of course we also make time to observe the children so that we can see what seems to draw their attention. This will give us a greater possibility of presenting them with an alternative that they might actually want to do.

Transformation

We do not know which work will call to which child. We only know that some work will and that concentration on a work, freely chosen by the child, is the key *for every child*. This is the formula, the path to normalization. The arrival of normalization “appears all of a sudden. In any given child, it follows invariably upon a spell of deep concentration on some activity.” (Montessori. The Absorbent Mind. p 184)

The art of the Montessorian dance is to help the child find the work he needs. Since we don’t know what it is, we must approach every work as if it were the key to a child’s transformation. Since we don’t know when that transformation will occur, we must approach every moment as if it were the critical moment for a child’s transformation. And we must remember that the child’s work is not limited to the apparatus on the shelves. It includes communicating with other children. It includes offering help. It includes using the faucet well and walking without bumping into anything. So when we offer alternatives, we remember the invisible work that pervades the prepared environment.

Patience

Okay, so we’re patient and consistent even though our car wouldn’t start and we’ve had four hours of sleep. Yes. We must be vigilant about maintaining our light heart so that we actually feel joy in our work. You just can’t really fake joy. The children know the difference. And when we don’t feel it, we don’t get on our case or give ourselves a hard time. It doesn’t necessarily mean we are in the wrong field. It just means we are human, having a rough day, and we open our hearts to the possibility of receiving compassion as well as offering it

Oh, if only we could force normalization to happen! But we can not. True transformation, the transformation that is permanent, innate, and breathtaking in its beauty, must come from within. Yes, we can require children to do work we assign. We can require them to take turns reading aloud in directed reading. We can require them to recite facts and respond in certain ways to the reading comprehension questions our standardized tests ask. And sometimes, the practical realities of this society make test taking a practical life activity, one that we *must* prepare the children for because the children are, rightly or wrongly, evaluated based on those test results. But we can never force a child to normalize. No amount of drilling or teaching or quizzing will produce it. Instead, we make it hot fudge sundae appealing.

We show the children the road to normalization and we make it a spectacularly interesting road lined with calm enthusiasm. We make it a well paved road that is clearly marked and easy to follow. We model how one walks down that road with careful, light-hearted precision. And we do that again...and again...and again until at some point, a child chooses to join us...and then we exhale and watch the child stroll on by. We sit back and abide in the true nature of that child...and notice that the other children are following *him*—without any help at all.

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