

Montessori children, can they really do anything they want?
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“Children can do anything they want” is one of the first things people often hear about Montessori – and they get it wrong! However, it does appear in the daily life of the classroom that children seem to be able to do anything they like. So how do we resolve the conflict? Dr. Montessori said “Children should have unlimited freedom to do right.” That, obviously, is far different than doing anything you want.

A Montessori environment is often misconstrued as a place where there is no discipline – people mistaking the absence of external discipline as a sign that there is no discipline at all. Montessori education operates on a higher plane than just rules and regulations. It operates on the basis of principles to be learned and applied. Having unlimited freedom brings with it great responsibility which children are willing to shoulder because they see and enjoy the benefits (even if they can’t articulate them.)

There are three principles that make this freedom work in a Montessori school. First, you are not allowed to do anything that will harm yourself. Second, you are not allowed to harm others. Third, you are to respect the materials and the environment. You don’t need pages of rules to memorize to order your behavior. You are taught to think and to apply that thinking to your relationships and your surroundings. The child is not burdened with the minutia of rules and regulations but can operate this new freedom secure, also, in the fact that others are operating accordingly.

The difference between rules and principles lies always in the gray areas between the rules. If you have a rule about not writing on the walls some smart child (teenagers are especially good at this) will realize that there is no rule about writing on the ceiling (or floor, or window or door post.) Do you really want to write rules for every eventuality?

Principles cover the gray areas. Being a man or woman of principle used to stand for great integrity and the ability to count on them to do right. It still does! Montessori children learn early how to apply principles – not only of social and moral relevance but of educational value as well.

The reason Montessori children seem to do anything they want is that they are applying these educational principles they have already learned to new areas of discovery and learning. By giving students the keys to learning, they are able to unlock the door to knowledge for themselves. They are able to move forward and to achieve great gains.

Guided by these principles they gain real freedom and with that freedom they take the responsibility for their own learning.