

Finding what you are looking for

The red pencil phenomena

It is a truism in life that you will find what you are looking for even if it is subconsciously. We've all experienced it – you buy a red car and then you begin to notice how many red cars there are on the road. There is another truism shared in Montessori training – “We teach teaching and not correction.” It sounds simple enough and worth affirming but it is not the default attitude of teachers or people in general.

The key skill of a Montessori teacher is the power to observe – to look – and to adjust your teaching according to what you see. Our traditional experience – how we went through school – preschool through university – is that someone always had a red pencil. Someone was always looking for where we were wrong. That is a tough way to go through life always looking over your shoulder for someone with the red pencil.

Montessori teachers are trained differently. They are trained to look at the child long before they look at the curriculum. If you are looking for the child's gifts, character, abilities, personality it will emerge for you but it has to become your go to attitude. This transformation, this learned optimism, costs a great deal emotionally and intellectually for the guide. You go from the dark side to the bright side. Instead of looking for error you begin to look for what is good (and you find it.)

It takes great will power not to interfere when a child is making a mistake with the materials. It is so “easy” for us to say, “No, that's wrong.” And we break the child's concentration as well as negatively touching something within their unfolding personality and self-confidence.

For perfectionists this becomes a challenge wanting to fix what we can see while often damaging what we cannot see. The Montessori solution to immediate correction is instead to present the material over and to model again the way forward. This is not the “efficient” model of traditional education but it is the effective way for allowing discovery to happen. What you learn for yourself is superior than what you memorize for someone else.

This Montessori practice of not “red-penciling” every error is also effective at home. Patience is one of the most effective tools we have as we guide our children to maturity and excellence. Modeling instead of telling is the preferred Montessori practice. Yes, it takes more time but it accomplishes the goal far more effectively.

Some of us claim a birthright to a negative personality but entering into the Montessori world challenges that assumption. We can learn to be more positive but you have to look for it. The easy negative is always obvious but the good intentions and the effort are often hidden.

You will find what you are looking for. So, determine to look for what is good.

(This also works with spouses.)