

Montessori and the real building of self-esteem

Montessori education has been building self-esteem for over a hundred years long before it became a popular buzzword and a psychological “distortion” of reality. All the trappings of the modern self-esteem movement – participation trophies, not letting children fail, everyone’s outcome is equal – have no place in Montessori or the reality of the world.

Practical life in Montessori is the foundation of all this reality that is to come. Every practical life exercise has a beginning, a process and an ending – just like successful life. But there is something in this process that is so simple yet dynamic – the child builds and feels a sense of power, control, and accomplishment. It is these early experiences, these early real successes that become the foundation for all the success that is to come. This self-esteem is internalized and does not come from outside, from what people tell you but it wells up from within. It comes with the beginning of concentration and self-control (which is the biggest challenge of life – and a great giver of self-esteem.)

True self-esteem is an approval that comes from within. It is not about pleasing people or being validated from outside. That is why grades, awards, punishments are not motivating factors in a Montessori environment. Ironically, self-esteem built in Montessori is not self-centered. The lack of outward competition (for grades and prizes) creates an attitude of family and community where we help each other to succeed which also affects how we feel about ourselves.

The real self-esteem of Montessori comes from the continuing sense of accomplishment and of mastery as the student faces greater challenges and complexity in life. Since making mistakes is part of the Montessori learning process making mistakes does not undermine a child’s sense of self-esteem nor does the child crater when faced with “failure”. Montessori children learn to pick up the pieces and get back in the game. The game of life does not have four quarters, nine innings, eighteen holes or two halves. It is a continually evolving game as you learn new strategies, techniques, gain new information, practice new skills and begin to recognize the patterns of life that lead to success. Montessori children learn first-hand that actions have consequences, that success is spelled w-o-r-k, and that some of the biggest rewards of life are just personal and do not require anyone else’s acknowledgment or affirmation. And that doing the right thing for the right reason is an amazing accomplishment all its own - an amazing adult lesson learned very young.

Self-esteem is “practiced” every day in a Montessori environment. Try – and try again until you reach your goal. Montessori children don’t wait for an adult’s approval because they learn early that it is their effort that achieves success. And every goal that they achieve – on their own - builds that unique amazing sense of accomplishment and self-esteem.