

The Inside Voice

One of the things that probably impressed you when you visited your Montessori school was something you didn't see, or actually, hear – cacophony. Cacophony is a ten dollar word that might be best described by what you experience in a New York traffic jam, or when an orchestra tunes up – or in a typical day care. The lack of cacophony (might as well get all the use we can out of the ten dollar word) begins with a very simple premise, and most notably found in Montessori schools – the inside voice. It is an amazingly simple, yet profound exercise. When there is a ceiling above your head – you use your inside voice.

The advantages of the training that comes with “the inside voice” are many. No one is yelling quiet. You can hear yourself think – which is one of the great outcomes of a Montessori education – the ability to think. You operate in a peaceful, calm environment. You can have quiet conversations without having to raise your voice. It is much easier to concentrate. With concentration comes easier learning and mastery. And when you go home – you are not wired. (Thank your teachers.)

You might wonder if the use of the inside voice might be oppressive to children who seem to be so full of exuberance. When you compare it to someone yelling at you to be quiet there is no contest. Re-reading the instructions – “When there is a ceiling above your head – you use your inside voice.” You consider its corollary “When there is NO ceiling above your head – you may use your outside voice.” Montessori playgrounds are full of exuberance.

How do you maintain the inside voice? First, the lesson (it is training) is given many times in the course of all the lessons that are presented. Second, when a teacher lowers her voice, children usually match her volume. Or third, a simple pointing to the ceiling, with a smile, is a sufficient reminder.

As wonderful as the outcomes of the inside voice are for the classroom, its real benefit stays with your child indefinitely. The inside voice is one of the first lessons of self-control. It is a lesson and an action that is accessible to them. They do not lose their voice (be quiet) but learn to control their voice. This will be the first of many lessons of self-control that a Montessori education affords them.

There are many other common exercises of a Montessori education that provide dual benefits both to the classroom and long term to your child. There is the inside walk, which prevents accidents and disturbing other people's work. This is a second major experience of self-control that is within their abilities. A third common exercise is to put everything back exactly where they found it. This experience is the beginning of the self-control to finish completely what you have started.

These exercises of self-control are major and not as simple as they seem to adults. These exercises call for great restraint of natural impulses that achieving these are like scaling mini Mount Everests. Children always seem to have two modes – fast and faster, loud and louder, messy and messier – and the control of these is the beginning of the foundation of self-control that they will need to achieve success in life not only for academics but for their place in society and their relationships.

This beginning of self-control is within their grasp hidden in the lesson of “the inside voice.”