

What's the Big Deal about Table Washing?

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Many parents are attracted to Montessori because of its tremendous reputation for giving their children a great academic education. Parents are willing to spend impressive amounts of money to give their children this academic advantage. But as often as parents are impressed with Montessori excellence, they are a little bewildered that their children come home excited about mopping floors, doing dishes and washing tables. (This is what successful people hire others to do.) So there is a real disconnect between what you want, what you are paying for and what you think you are getting.

How then does Montessori get this academic reputation if all you are seeing for six months or a year is table washing and practical life? Montessori success is not built on its finished academic product but on its sure foundation. So what kind of academics comes from table washing? It is the foundation of what constitutes Montessori education which is built on an enduring set of scientific principles. The first is that you always begin with the concrete before moving on to the abstract. There is nothing more concrete in the child's life than the exercises of practical life. Second, Montessori education begins with the development of all the senses before moving on to the intellectual. Rest assured your child will arrive. Third, Montessori starts with the control of the physical abilities as a precursor to control of intellectual capacity. Fourth, it builds physical discipline – being able to follow through and complete a project before embarking on intellectual discipline. Fifth, it significantly develops focus on details as a skill set to accomplish academic goals. There is a major difference between $2 + 3$ and 2×3 – and it is only a minor detail. Sixth, table washing (and all of practical life) is not only a physical challenge for beginner learners but becomes an emotional and psychological building block in the development of confidence and self esteem. Real confidence and self esteem is not built on words such as “You did a good job” (whether you did or not) but is built on real achievement and mastery. For a three, four or five year old the process of successfully completing table washing or any other practical life exercise begins a pattern of success. It is a success that comes from beginning a project, working it step by step for as long as it takes until you come to the successful conclusion. This pattern becomes the model for the next stages of academic competence.

What practical life achieves in your child is first a feeling of “I can take care of myself” whether it is table washing or tying shoes. I am given a sense of security that I have some control over my environment and my place in it. Second, it teaches me how to follow steps to success. Third, it builds my confidence by having mastered some challenge which prepares me to tackle even more complex challenges. Fourth, it refines my senses and muscular control so I can effectively use all of the hands on materials in the Montessori classroom to advance my intellectual development. Every sense, every motion, every action is focused to help me achieve academically. The academic success you hear about in Montessori is built on humble and less than impressive activities that

are foundational to this amazing achievement that develops the whole child and prepares him or her for significant academic success.

Practical life is a portrait of the future!

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