

HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD DO THIS AT HOME?

A Guide to Encouraging Self-Sufficiency

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At WSMS, our Montessori curriculum centers around the belief that children are capable of initiating their own learning experiences. Our classrooms feature a compelling mix of materials and activities specifically designed for children to explore independently. By engaging with tasks on their own, children become confident, self-reliant, and self-directed learners. Activities that teach and encourage grace and courtesy—such as setting the table for meals, preparing food, pouring water, sweeping up crumbs, wiping spills, putting materials away, and hanging belongings—are made routine in the classroom. We teachers are often asked, “How can I help my child to do this at home?” Adding some of our common WSMS practices and making some small adjustments to your home environment will help you support your child’s natural curiosity and intrinsic motivation to learn.

How can families implement Montessori practices at home?

Children, even our youngest ones, are capable of so much! Here are some ways to create opportunities for children to demonstrate their independence while taking part in household culture.

Organize your environment

We appreciate the well-known adage: *a place for everything and everything in its place*. Providing a physical space that emphasizes organization helps children create effective habits and influences their inner sense of order. Practically speaking, when you designate a place for items in your home, your child will quickly learn where everything goes! Organization is an essential tool for teaching children to be responsible for their belongings, so it’s important to make sure that the things your child will need are comfortably accessible. Consider incorporating the following ideas to help your child along the path to self-reliance.



KITCHEN

Kitchens offer children many opportunities for independence, from helping to put the groceries away, to cleaning up the floors, to setting the table for meals. When needed things are easy to reach, tasks are simplified and children feel encouraged to do more—with less guidance.

Consider these suggestions to organize your space and make your kitchen more accessible...

Food and beverage storage: Store healthy snacks on a low shelf in your refrigerator or cupboard so your child can help themselves. Keep beverages in small pitchers on a lower shelf in the fridge (with child-friendly cups nearby). When your child is thirsty, allow them to get their own cold drink. You can expect spills to happen, so store a small basket with hand towels or sponges nearby.

Step stools: Place step stools in the kitchen and bathroom to enable your child to wash their hands by themselves. In the kitchen, use of a step stool also allows your child to help with meal preparation and dishwashing.

Dishes and utensils: Keep your child’s cups, plates, bowls, and utensils in a close-to-the-ground cabinet or drawer so they can be easily reached and put away. Let children use “real” utensils and dishes so they become accustomed to the weight. This will help them learn to be more careful while becoming more self-aware.

Helpful items to have available:

- Small basket for hand towels or sponges
- Small dustpan and brush
- Cutting board and child-sized food chopper

BEDROOM

More than for just sleep, your child's bedroom should also promote activities like getting dressed, playing, and relaxing. While accessibility is important in every room your child uses, it's most important here! A minimalist approach will help to prevent distraction—and possibly overwhelming clean-up needs.

Consider these suggestions to organize your space and make your child's bedroom more accessible...

Clothing: Store clothing in close-to-the-ground drawers or baskets. Install closet rods at your child's eye level so your child can reach their clothing. Stock your child's wardrobe with seasonally appropriate clothing that's easy to mix and match, to avoid situations that require unnecessary interference with their decision-making. Clothing with flexible waistbands and limited fasteners will be easiest for your child to put on or take off.

Toy storage: Place toys, games, and art supplies on close-to-the-ground shelves, or in baskets or bins, so your child can easily access them. Organize the toys by category. Limit the number of toys at any given time, and switch them out to ensure interest.

Bedding: We recommend using a bed that your child can get in and out of easily. Low beds or floor beds also let children make their beds with less hassle.

Laundry: Offer your child a designated spot for their dirty laundry. When it's time to do the wash, children can join in. Sorting clothes, loading them into the washer and dryer, and even pouring soap are wonderful ways they can help!



LIVING ROOM

The living room should be accessible and comfortable for all family members. That might mean that there are spaces for your child's items as well as for yours, so consider designating some room for your child's toys and play. Also, it's best to have seating that your child can reach easily, and safely clamber on to and down from.

TIPS AND TRICKS

Get children involved early on

The earlier your child starts participating in household tasks, the more likely they are to build on their skills and stay motivated. Remember to match tasks to age and ability. For example, younger children are perfectly capable of learning to water plants, feed pets, wipe the table after a meal, and pick up their toys. Older children can incorporate more complex tasks into their routines, such as taking out the trash, helping to prepare meals, and doing some basic home maintenance. They can also be excellent teachers for the younger children in your home. That's one of the things we love about our mixed-age classrooms!

Show children how it's done

In our classrooms, teachers demonstrate how to interact with a material or perform a task. Then, when we see readiness in a child, we step away and allow them space and time to try it out on their own. Similarly, children at home will certainly benefit from your guidance initially. After you establish a routine for modeling for them, children will learn quickly, allowing you to provide increasingly more complex tasks for them to perform on their own.



Consider the step-by-step guidelines and tips for approaching the two tasks outlined below. You'll see that we've "chunked" these tasks into approachable steps—a technique you can apply to almost anything!

PUTTING ON CLOTHES

- Choose the clothes before you begin, but take care to present one article of clothing at a time.
- Routines are often most easily accomplished when they happen in the same place each time, so it may be helpful to designate a "dressing place" in your child's bedroom. (Take note: step stools can be really helpful when putting on underwear, pants, socks, and shoes.)
- With each article of clothing, show your child where the "openings" are, while also telling them. For example, "Your pants have two holes," and then, "one for each of your legs."
- Help your child orient each piece of clothing in the appropriate position, and use simple phrases like, "Put your arm in," and "pull it up."
- Once your child is dressed, offer the appropriate validation, such as "You got dressed all by yourself! Now we can go to school."
- If a piece of clothing has a zipper or buttons, make sure to show your child how to use each of those features.
- If getting dressed on their own will be a new routine for your child, start with just one article of clothing that they can put on for themselves. As your child becomes more comfortable and capable, you'll be able to add to their self-dressing repertoire!
- Getting dressed takes a while, especially at first! Be sure to provide your child with the time that's needed, or allow them some independence within the time allotted. As children become more independent, their "times" will improve.

CLEANING UP

- For clean-up competence, create a routine. At school, we always use the same five-minute heads-up message and signal to clean up.
- It's easiest to clean up when a task appears achievable rather than overwhelming! Limiting the toys your child can play with at one time will help when it's time to tidy up.
- Cleaning up goes more smoothly when children feel satisfied with what they've accomplished, so give them a reasonable amount of time for play.
- When it's almost time to clean up, give a five-minute warning. You can use a timer, a song, or a verbal message.
- When the five minutes are up, give the clean-up signal. The cue can be singing a song that repeats, playing a piece of recorded music (the span of the song can also indicate to your child how long the task should take), or a verbal message.
- If your child begins to clean up, let them complete the task to the best of their abilities.
- If your child doesn't begin to clean up, start without them, and more likely than not, your child will follow your lead. If they don't, keep cleaning to establish the routine. Over time, they will join you.
- Validate what your child has accomplished, even if you see things that can be refined. Make a mental note of steps you want to add at a future time. For example, if your child put their books away, but didn't orient them with the spines outward, that's something you can show them later. Then at the next clean-up opportunity, but before you've given the five-minute warning, say something like, "Do you remember when I showed you how to put the books away, all facing in the same direction?..."

Avoid correction, and try again later

In our classrooms we provide guidance up front, so that we don't find ourselves having to correct children along the way. If we see that a child is struggling with something, instead of indicating how they can do better, we try to let them see the activity through, and we make a mental note to demonstrate the important steps before they try again next time. If it turns out that a child isn't ready for a particular material, just put it away and take it out again in a few weeks.

Language is key!

When teaching your child something new, your actions are indeed worth a thousand words! Therefore, limit the language you use, rather than being wordy, and stick to single words or key phrases. Validate your child's actions with comments like "You did it!" and "That was tricky, but you tried until you got it!" Feedback that focuses on what is going well is most effective in encouraging positive behavior.

For successful routines, give direction instead of asking questions

Making direct statements is the clearest way to indicate to your child that you want a task completed. If you say "Do you want to clean up now?" you're giving your child an opportunity to say no! Instead, try saying "It will be time to clean up in five minutes. I'll let you know when it's time to start."



TAKE THE SHOW ON THE ROAD!

The ultimate goal of home and school training is for children to be able to incorporate their skills in real-world situations. Here are a few helpful tips that can set you up for success.

Share the plan

Providing your child with as much information as possible will help them prepare for an event or activity. For example, before we go to the park, we let children know where we are going, what we will be doing, how long we will be out, what they need to bring, and what they can expect to see. (Have we left anything out?) We all tend to do better when we understand the scope of a project and what is needed to complete it!

Preview the expectations

Help set the scene for your child before they enter a situation. Are we going to see a show? Let them know that this is a place where they will need to sit quietly and listen, and later, to applaud. Or, if we are going to a playground, you might indicate that they are encouraged to play, have fun running around, and engage with other children in any number of ways.

Read the signals

Our Montessori principles have us all learning from *each other*—so if you see your child becoming tired or overwhelmed when you are out, it might be time to call it a day (or a night!). It's completely fine to leave a child-centered event early if it seems you need to do that, and you won't be considered rude. Under other circumstances, such as your great-grandmother's hundredth birthday party, you may want to see if you can take your child upstairs for a nap first. The essential notion here is that we want to recognize, honor, and help advance our children's abilities, in all sorts of ways.

It takes a village

Through all the many ways that all of us at WSMS—teachers, staff, and families—promote self-sufficiency in our children, we are fostering their overall development and confidence and setting the foundation for their successful adaptation to whatever life offers. We treasure our partnership with you in furthering your children's education.



