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**Protecting the  
Three-Hour  
Work Cycle**

**Montessori  
for the  
ADHD Child**

**Nutritional  
Deficit  
Disorder**

**The  
Magazine  
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# Reasons Why Montessori May Be Better For Your ADHD\* Child

\*Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

BY MATT BRONSIL

As a parent, you probably are already familiar with the Montessori Method of education. You may have been an observer in a classroom. You may have read some of Dr. Montessori's books. You may be a regular and avid reader of this magazine. You see the benefits of this approach with your own children. If you had no knowledge of Montessori, think back to that moment you first saw Montessori in action. If you saw it in a well-run program, the chances are that you were amazed. You never imagined that children were working so well and efficiently. You never imagined the idea that children could both enjoy work and work peacefully in the classroom. Our image of preschool is one where, if the teacher is not actively interacting with students constantly, chaos is bound to erupt. Seeing a Montessori classroom quickly dispels that myth.

While this is a wonderful thing to see, many parents then begin to have doubts.

*"Will my child be able to function at this level?"*

*"Are these somehow 'special' children?"*

*"Are they only like this when there are visitors?"*

Not all parents have these doubts. Several parents jump in and ask for a spot in the program right away. It is, however, very common for many parents to have these concerns. These concerns can be compounded when a child has been diagnosed with having ADHD:

*Is the movement in the classroom going to be disruptive? Isn't it better to have him in a place where everyone is sitting?*

*What if my child does not want to choose?*

*How will my child control himself with all this free choice? Will he start disrupting others?*

To give a definite *yes* or *no* answer to these questions is unreasonable and irresponsible. Every child is different. I will suggest, however, that Montessori is a much more effective system to handle children that have ADHD. There are some key ways that Montessori is beneficial to these students and a preferred method over traditional education.

## Importance of Movement

Parents often feel that a highly distractible child will find a better fit in a classroom where students are required to sit in their seat, not move, and (as a result), there will be less distractions. I think on the surface, it seems like it might be better. In one theory, children are working on these projects with big smiles on their faces and loving every minute of it. They are somehow happy with the fact that, even if they know more (or not enough to actually do this work), everyone is doing the same thing.

In this theoretical world, there are no distractions whatsoever. How could there be? The teacher is there watching over everyone, and the children are happily doing their paperwork. What possi-

ble distractions can come from this?

What we get in that type of school setting are many distractions. Even the quiet, when the method 'works,' can be a distraction. A simple dropping of the pencil distracts the entire room as the child quickly jumps up from his desk to retrieve it. A person in a classroom getting up to throw away a paper draws the attention of everyone.

It is worth pointing out that we have a paradox in our mind with regard to this question and how traditional education addresses the issue of movement. On one hand, we imagine that a child who learns to sit in his seat all day will be less of a problem. However, look over some of the following common suggestions you might find in how to help a child who has ADHD better adapt to a traditional classroom. I found these on various web sites. Your own Google™ search will provide similar results:

*Have all the students stand and stretch, run in place, or do an exercise or movement activity when deemed necessary.*

*Be flexible and allow a child with ADHD to stand up or squat in his chair, if it helps the student complete assignments.*

*Let him, or her, sit on the floor by you or on a large ball if that helps the child do the work. An air-filled pillow or a quiet stationary exercise bike with a desk attached could also be used.*

*Have the student deliver an 'important' letter in a sealed envelope to another teacher or school secretary who understands the child's need to move.*

There are other types of suggestions as well. I chose these because it clearly shows the importance of movement for the child. So important is this movement that I hypothesize that many students with an ADHD are given the diagnosis simply because they are doing what children should naturally be allowed to do (movement) in a classroom that does not allow for movement.

Until we think about it, the reason we think the movement in the Montessori classroom is distracting is because movement in other classrooms is distracting. Movement in real life is not distracting. You could be outside in the park on a nice day, reading a book. As people walk by, you are not necessarily thrown out of the context of the book. This is movement, but is it always a distraction? Of course it is not. Montessori, with its environment closer to what we see in real life, allows for more movement without distraction.

Movement is a key factor in the Montessori classroom. Maria Montessori described movement as "an essential factor in intellectual growth." What is not discussed often in basic discussions of Montessori is something that is critical. Montessori education not only promotes movement for learning, but it also teaches the refinement of movement. Movement is possible in the Montessori classroom because of how we refine those movements. Refined movements are simply "a selection of the absolutely necessary movements in a succession of acts." When we are looking into a well-run Montessori classroom and we notice exactly how the students are engaging in their activities, we see much of this refinement happening. Parents often comment on how carefully a child carries the red rods to his rug, lines them up, and adjusts them as he sees fit. When done perfectly, and with intent, you do not see any extra, unnecessary movements. This type of preparation helps a child, who is having trouble controlling his physical actions, come to more of a peaceful and focused state in his movements. Movement is, therefore, not discouraged; it is used as a path to inner peace.

### Importance of Choice

We move from the question of movement into the idea of choice. How is it that a child, who has difficulty in a traditional classroom setting, where everything is controlled for him or her, will thrive in a situation where they have the choice of what to do? The reasoning, again, seems logical. If a child cannot get tasks done that the teacher assigns, how is the child going to complete tasks when nobody is forcing him, or her, into specific goals?

In 2005, a book was published that talks about the vast array of studies we have dealing with learning and how those studies support Montessori Education titled *Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius*. Chapter 3 is "Choice and Perceived Control." The entire chapter is dedicated to describing how, study after study, we see when adults choose activities for a child, the child is less likely to do the activities well and have less desire to do the activity. There are also studies that show this trend continues into adulthood. The chapter summary states: "In traditional school environments, children have little choice, yet research shows that the

greater their sense of control in the classroom, the better they fare."

When we are discussing choice, it is also important to look at what exactly a child needs. Often, when we perceive something as unnecessary, it is quite the opposite. I was in a restaurant recently and saw a toddler playing with the cups and glasses. He had a small, empty cup and placed it directly on top of the glass and realized it was a perfect fit. I also observed an adult near the child become increasingly annoyed at this child's behavior. I did not ask him why, but his logic must have been that these things are not to be played with, especially in a restaurant setting. Understanding more the child's need for order, I was fascinated as I observed what happened.

After trying the cup, successfully and unsuccessfully, on many different objects to see if it would fit, he realized the best fit was on the glass in front of him. He picked up a small wooden stick that had been used to eat ice cream and placed it in the glass. He put the cup back on and noticed the cup still fit. The adult grew more agitated. He then took a package that previously held chopsticks and looked at it. You could tell he thought it might be too large, but decid-

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ed to try it anyway. Being that the package was paper, it folded over and fit easily. The child smiled at his recent discovery. The adult became aggravated. The child then reached for a spoon that was too large and would cause the cup not to fit on top of the glass. Without saying a word, the adult reached over and took the spoon out of the child's hand. The child, not caring about what social rules the adult thought he was breaking, reached for a fork, which was also taken away. The child grabbed everything he could — from fork to knife to chopstick — and tried to put it in the glass to test out his experiment. Ultimately, the glass was taken away and the child was frustrated. Luckily, it was a quick frustration, and the child was very quickly interested in something else. How wonderful it would have been for me to intervene and help the child in his scientific discovery of size and material, but there is a time and place for stepping outside of boundaries and this was neither.

What happened with this child? On one level, he was not allowed to do something the adult deemed unnecessary and silly. If we dig deeper, however, we see that the child's choice was providing the child with a learning opportunity that he needed. He may have understood that the spoon would not fit properly, but until he worked with this and manipulated it on his own, the hypothesis remained only in theory. By taking away the choice, this adult controlled what the child should discover. In a very real way, he said, "You may not learn this now."

The story also exemplifies another crucial consideration. When given the opportunity and choice to decide what to learn and when to learn it and by providing materials and presentations on how to work with those materials, children will amaze us with what they are able to do. This adult, for whatever reason, did not see the importance of what was happening within this child. Often, we do not know exactly why a child is doing an activity, especially if it is serving no obvious purpose. When we trust, however, that there may be meaning behind it and observe children to see what discoveries they are seeking from the material, we notice that there is something happening. Children are forming connections that they need.

When an adult steps in and chooses an activity for a child, we often step on the feet of a well-needed lesson that the child is craving. The child may learn from it, but not as well as when the child

has the freedom to choose it on his, or her, own time.

In regard to children not choosing, there are children that do take some time to come to the realization that they are able to choose in a Montessori classroom. The ADHD-diagnosed children are generally **not** those children. As you can imagine, they often start off their Montessori years excited and choosing too much and not ready to focus on anything. This goes back to the refinement of movement and concentration that comes from proper use of the materials. Given time and freedom, children adjust. They can get out the energy they need through movement and are provided with the academics they need through choice. Once a child has learned what is needed from the material, the material is not as attractive. Children are naturally ready to move on and readily accept learning new concepts. It is no longer of interest to a child of five years to constantly work with the pink tower and red rods. There are extensions they can do to still provide them with a learning opportunity, but they mastered this material years ago and are ready to move on. This is the power that choice gives them. In traditional education, they *have* to move on. In Montessori education, they *want* to move on.

#### Other Advantages of Montessori Over Traditional Education

Montessori provides many benefits that make it arguably a better choice for a child that has ADHD. I have already shown two fantastic benefits: movement and choice. I want to briefly mention other benefits as well that I feel you should consider. Montessori offers:

- Hands-on, self correcting materials. Part of the benefit with this involves movement, as discussed above. The self-correcting aspect is also important. Materials have built into them something we call the "control of error." This simply means that the materials are designed so that children cannot complete the task set out before them without doing it properly. The classic example of this are the cylinder blocks. This material is a set of four wooden blocks that the children may either do one at a time or up to four at a time. Cut out of each of the wooden blocks are ten cylinders the child can remove and rearrange. They vary in size and will only fit properly into one of the holes. The child cannot return this

material to the shelf if they make a mistake, because there will always be one cylinder left over. The material, in essence, is correcting the child. It provides immediate feedback and allows the child the immediate opportunity to correct his or her mistake without teacher intervention. This also builds confidence when a child says, "I can do this on my own," as opposed to, "Teacher, did I do this right?"

- Longer work cycle. Many criticisms of television programs site that, although they may be educational, they do not help build a child's focus. Many programs move from one concept and skip to the next. With so much change, how much time do children have to really reflect on these concepts, work with them, and test them? Traditional teachers cannot fully understand the importance of a three-hour uninterrupted work cycle. (See page 5 in this issue for more on this topic.) They often cannot even imagine it. Remember that what you are seeking for your child is the chance to develop his or her concentration. This is not going to happen if the focus quickly changes throughout the day.
- The teacher is not a distraction. When a group of students are working on a project, the teacher can often be a distraction. The teacher may give more directions, clarify questions, or even the simple act of watching a child work is a distraction. It is important in Montessori to observe children, but not necessarily make it obvious you are watching that child. If you watch a child, you then become something else in the child's environment. In nature, if you want to observe how an animal acts naturally, it is best to seek that animal in its environment and be careful to not be noticed. If the animal notices you, its behavior may change. It is similar to how Montessori is carried out in the classroom. We observe children to notice how they naturally react to the environment and see how to help them develop. This is dynamically different from a teacher imposing how to act. It also yields quite different results.

### *Why is there so much ADHD?*

I have never conducted an official survey of this statement, but it seems through my discussions with teachers, most seem to believe the number of diagnosed ADHD children is unnecessarily high. Based on the benefits of a proper environment, these numbers can be dramatically reduced. I do believe that some children have the need for medication and specialized intervention. I also believe that the majority of students diagnosed with ADHD are simply reacting to an environment that does not provide them optimum opportunity to learn and focus.

When looking at classroom behavior, we can look at three things: *nature, nurture, and environment*. The nature we may not be able to necessarily change. The nurture, you will generally find in many classrooms, so this is not a Montessori vs. traditional debate. That simply leaves the environment. Montessori was right when she said, "A child is a discoverer. He is an amorphous, splendid being in search of his own proper form." Given the right environment, that child can form into something wonderful.

*Matt Bronsil grew up in Montessori Schools. Both his parents were Montessori teachers and trainers. He started working in Montessori Schools in 2001 and has been teaching ever since. He welcomes all your questions and comments about Montessori. His E-Mail is MattBronsil@cinci.rr.com. He also runs a Montessori blog that can be found online at <http://www.myspace.com/MontessoriBlog>*

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\*available online through the Montessori Bookshelf: [www.montessori.org](http://www.montessori.org)