

Freedom and Responsibility + Grace and Courtesy = Exceptional Learning Environment



Children excel developmentally and academically when they are working in an environment designed to meet their needs. Elementary children have a strong budding sense of morality and justice, so it is especially important that a system of justice in the environment *not take second place to academics*. Children accept challenges and take academic risk in a classroom environment when enough time is first given to establishing a community that feels safe, peaceful, and has a predictable, child-centered system of justice.

Elementary children are key players in building the system of justice in the Montessori environment, making them much more likely to manage themselves according to that system. Additionally, and what we aim for, they are much more likely to implement it with each other free of adult intervention. Building a system of justice with elementary children must be grounded in their collective experiences. The foundation of this system is a balance of freedoms and responsibilities ~ lofty topics for young children and yet they are completely capable of conducting themselves upon this foundation. As with all components of learning we provide a hands-on, visual representation to support even very young children in their understanding that a certain amount of freedom placed in one side of the balance, as pictured above, must have an equal amount of responsibility placed in the other side. Freedoms do not come without corresponding responsibilities or chaos would reign!

The children know that in our Montessori environments they have the freedoms to move, communicate, and choose work, work partners, and work places. Moving responsibly means moving with purpose; carefully and calmly so that all

children can continue our work. Communicating responsibly means children's words are respectful, they do not disturb others' work, and they are words about their work. Choosing responsibly means children are choosing challenging, meaningful work and using materials and supplies respectfully to do that work. It means children are recording their work and completing the required state standards work, too.

If children have misused a freedom, risking their safety, the balance of the community, or disrupting the work environment, other children will give a polite reminder that the child can accept and make a better choice with behavior or work. An adult may also give a polite reminder or limit a certain freedom for a while and the child can accept the limit and work within the limit until he or she is ready to try again with increased responsibility.

Hand in hand with Freedom and Responsibility comes Grace and Courtesy. John Snyder, one of my heroes, says in *Montessori Voices*,

*"If it weren't for grace and courtesy, you wouldn't get the freedom, choice and self-reliance for which Montessori education is so justly famous. In schools where the children are all doing the same thing at the same time, with a teacher presiding over it all to keep everyone on track, Grace and Courtesy would just be a nice add-on ~ call it character development or manners. ...in a classroom of 30 children, each choosing his or her own work space, moving freely around the room, communicating freely with each other and the adults, and doing so, so that the room is quiet enough and calm enough for concentrated work to take place ~ the whole thing would implode were it not for the children's ability to co-habit the space peacefully and in an ordered, mutually respectful way."*

Grace and courtesy presentations include topics such as how to move carefully around others' work, how to interrupt someone when we need help, how to express our big feelings without disturbing others, how to tuck a chair in, how to invite a work partner, how to give and accept polite reminders and so on!

In Montessori school, then, it isn't about policing and disciplining children to establish or maintain an exceptional learning environment; it is about giving children a framework for living and working together in a peaceful and balanced community and then teaching ~ and providing time to practice ~ the skills needed to be happy, productive, and successful in their own right and as a member of that community.

*"It is interesting to see how little by little, these children become aware of forming a community which behaves as such... once they have reached this level, the children no longer act thoughtlessly, but put the group first and try to succeed for its benefit."*

*~ Dr. Maria Montessori, The Absorbent Mind*