

October 21, 2014

Greetings Kiva Community!

On behalf of the Children's Kiva PTO, I wanted to share with our school community a recap of the terrific parent night we hosted last week. Almost 30 parents, teachers and board members attended the meeting to talk about Montessori philosophy, current brain research, and how we support student success at home. It was clear that this group and our school community is a passionate, thoughtful, collaborative group with a strong commitment to quality education.

The evening was presented in five parts, or "Acts" - inspired by the brave work of Children's House 4-year old, Sarah Spoonemore.

Act One - starring Sarah Spoonemore!

Sarah demonstrated a "work cycle." She chose the Binomial Cube and with deep concentration and focus, completed the complex work with pride. Some of the things we noticed about Sarah's work included:

- Sarah's silence - only her occasional self-assuring deep breaths were heard!
- Sarah's concentration and focus - despite the sound of children in the community room playing hard, Sarah was able to focus on this difficult work and stay on task.
- Sarah's independence and initiative - without coaching or coaxing, Sarah completed the work independently.
- Sarah's organization and attention to detail - she meticulously managed her materials and work space.

Sarah demonstrated what Montessorians call the "normalized child."

Act Two - "Normalization"

We discussed the concept of "Normalization" - the central goal of a successful Montessori education. Normalization is the developing process of self-discipline in children, as evidenced by the following characteristics:

1. Love of order
2. Love of work
3. Concentration
4. Spontaneous self-discipline
5. Love of silence and working alone
6. Sublimation of the possessive instinct
7. Obedience
8. Independence and initiative
9. Attachment to reality
10. Sociability (joyful work)

We talked about how many of these qualities Sarah demonstrated and how everything in a Montessori classroom is set up to facilitate this development (ask your child's teacher for explanations but each of the following is set up specifically to cultivate students' self-discipline and responsibility).

- materials
- work plans
- teacher's actions
- lessons on "graces and courtesies"
- daily schedule

We talked about how a Montessori education strives to cultivate an inner self-discipline, structure from the inside-out. Structure is not imposed on children (i.e. “sit in your desk,” “do _____ now... do _____ in 10 minutes,” “Here is a sticker/candy/star as a reward for that good job”) but instead, we expect children in a Montessori school to be safe, responsible, respectful, and self-disciplined - making the right choices to meet their goals.

In all her writings and research, Maria Montessori was clear describing the purpose of her method. She wrote, “normalization is the single most important result of our work.” *The Absorbent Mind*

Act Three - Executive Function

At this point, we shifted gears into the fields of neuroscience and brain development. In the last few decades, ample research on the developing brain has emphasized the connections between children’s Executive Function skills and later success in life. These skills are so important, numerous studies have highlighted their positive outcomes:

- *EF skills are twice as important as intelligence in predicting academic achievement.*
- *EF skills are a stronger predictor of college completion by age 24 than children’s reading or math score at age 7 or 21.*
- *Children with stronger EF skills become young adults with*
 - better SAT scores*
 - better ratings of ability to control themselves*
 - better able to pursue academic and other goals successfully*
 - better reports about how they were doing as people in their early thirties*
 - higher educational level*
 - higher self-esteem*
- *Children with stronger EF skills become young adults with*
 - less drug use*
 - less likely to engage in bullying behavior*
 - less likely to develop a sense of worthlessness*
 - less likely to feel they are failing in interpersonal relationships*
- *EF skills are #1 predictor of success later in life.*
- *Children with higher executive function skills will be healthier, wealthier, and more socially stable throughout their lives.*

At this point, we talked about the famous “Marshmallow test” conducted by Dr. Walter Mischel from Columbia University - very interesting. Take a quick look at this video to hear him describe the test <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2y-KhIWRUgM>

His study highlighted the relationship between Executive Function skills in children and future life success.

Definitions of Executive Function from various researchers include:

- the ability to think straight: to order your thoughts, to process information in a coherent way, to hold relevant details in your short-term memory, to avoid distractions and mental traps and focus on the task in front of you.
- the ability to control emotional and cognitive impulses
- managing attention, emotions and behavior in order to reach goals. Weaving together social, emotional and intellectual capacities.

Specific Executive Function Skills

- 1.inhibition
- 2.shift (ability to shift mental processes, make transitions)
- 3.emotional control
- 4.initiation
- 5.working memory
- 6.planning/organization
- 7.organization of materials
- 8.self-monitoring

Act Four - Crossovers... Executive Function and Normalization

At this point, we discussed the very apparent crossovers between these essential lifelong success skills of Executive Function, and the key characteristics of a successful Montessori-educated child, Normalization. See if you can identify relationships and connect some of these!

Executive Function

- inhibition
- shift
- emotional control
- initiation
- working memory
- planning/organization
- organization of materials
- self-monitoring

Normalization

- Love of order
- Love of work
- Concentration
- Spontaneous self-discipline
- Love of silence and working alone
- Sublimation of the possessive instinct
- Obedience
- Independence and initiative
- Attachment to reality
- Sociability (joyful work)

To further argue that there really is a connection, that a Montessori education focusing on normalization really cultivates executive function skills, we talked about the Lillard (2006) research on children in the Milwaukee public Montessori schools. Lillard (2006) found children in public Montessori elementary schools outperformed their traditionally educated peers on:

- Reading
- Mathematics
- Social Cognition
- Social Problem-solving
- Interpersonal behavior
- **Executive Function skills**

Our take home message here was that although our school emphasizes excellence in academics, we do it by supporting the development of **normalized** children by cultivating **executive function skills**. Research supports the fact that having normalization and executive function skills is far more important for children than their reading level, math scores, amount of homework, spelling test scores, etc. We care about those academic outcomes, of course - but **we place more value on cultivating inner self-discipline, normalization, and the executive function skills that will foster lifelong success.**

At upcoming parent-teacher conferences, ask your teacher about your child's executive function skills!

Act Five - How do we support these skills at home???

The most fun and engaging part of our evening was Act Five - we broke into small groups and shared ideas for how we can support these important skills at home. Groups talked for about 15 minutes and reported back to the large group. This was incredibly fun. We had old Montessori parents, new Montessori parents, teachers and staff all mixed up, all sharing ideas, frustrations, and successes. Here are some of our findings...

- Respect children as whole people, capable of doing adult things (of course, keeping in mind they will do these things at a "3 year old perfection," "9 year old perfection," etc.)
- Be careful with endless "good jobs!" to our children. Ask what they think about their work or their effort on tasks.
- Step back and let children be independent or take the lead!
- Let go of our controlling instinct and let them make some choices - and also deal with the consequences of those choices.
- Be mindful of our parent energy levels - approach parenting as a spiritual task and make sure we take good care of ourselves so we can bring our best selves forward in our interactions with our children (and also to forgive ourselves when we can't!)
- Be aware of our kids' lives at school and school culture - communicate often with teachers and administration.
- Use the same words and language as teachers to support consistency.
- Don't do anything for kids that they can do for themselves.
- Let kids fail - especially now when they are home with us and the risks are lower - and when we can help pick them back up and build resiliency.
- Give kids freedom within limits - give them some free choice (but you control the choices!)
- Help kids set goals and make plans

It was clear that we needed more time to flesh this list out and to keep going. PTO will be working on upcoming parent education nights around these topics - please get involved!

PTO has requested from school admin and staff that they compile a list for parents about Kiva school culture and language - especially around behavior, transitions, communication, etc. Stay tuned!

Finally, we shared some additional information on how to help at home from various researchers and scientists. The list is attached below.

So many thanks to all the parents, staff and board members who attended this meeting! Your presence and enthusiastic participation is what makes our school such an incredible place. A big thank you to Cari Spoonemore for her leadership and sensitivity to the questions, concerns and needs of our parent community. It is an honor to be working, learning, and collaborating with all of you!

Please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions or ideas.
All the best,

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**How do we support these skills at home continued...
At home....**

“What research tells us is that it is the children who learn throughout their lives to set goals and to be held accountable for achieving those goals who thrive.”

How do we foster strong brain development and Executive Function competencies?

1. Build on what children are doing to control themselves – not by imposing strict discipline.
2. Provide opportunities for children to engage in physical games and experiences; do not make them sit still for long hours
3. Give children opportunities to play – not just academics
4. Encourage children’s interests, do not cut back on them
5. Help children set and achieve goals – do not impose them
6. Help foster a sense of choice, control, and responsibility

“The more time that children spent in less-structured activities,” wrote researchers, “the better their self-directed executive functioning.”

At school....

The best schools support brain development by understanding in theory and practice that:

1. Children are active learners with an innate desire and ability to learn (not “empty vessels”)
2. Children can and should take responsibility for their own learning and become more goal directed
3. Movement and cognition are closely interrelated, and movement enhances thinking and learning
4. Children thrive when they feel a sense of choice and control
5. Children learn best when they are interested in what they are learning
6. Offering extrinsic rewards, like money for reading or high grades for tests, reduce motivation and level of performance once the rewards are moved
7. Every child develops at his own rate
8. Children learn well from and with peers

Additional Resources

- Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child: Enhancing and practicing executive function skills with children from infancy to adolescence:
http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/tools_and_guides/
- Ellen Galinsky, *Mind in the Making: the Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (2006)
- Dr. Steven Hughes, www.goodatdoingthings.com
- Center of the Developing Child, Harvard University: <http://developingchild.harvard.edu>
- American Montessori Society <http://www.amshq.org>
- Mind/Shift... how we will learn blog: <http://blogs.kqed.org/mindshift>
- Email me your questions and ideas! annagcole@gmail.com