

Best Practice

by Amy Kirkham

Amy Kirkham is our 3-6 year speaker at MANZ Conference 2019. She has kindly written this article for you, on how doing our 'best' is based on the skills and knowledge we have at the time.

In the current climate of quality assurance, accountability, ratings and even marketing, the phrase 'best practice' is being heard more often than ever. So, what does this actually mean? How can we do our best and why do we want to?

By nature, we are driven to self-perfection, through work, repetition and a host of other human tendencies. Hopefully we are wanting to do our best not only for the children, the families and our co-workers, but also for ourselves and a feeling that we really have done all we could have done in any given moment and situation.

We do 'our best' with the knowledge and skills we have at the time, building on previous experiences and information. However, this idea of 'best' is not a static one. We can (and should) think of this as an ongoing process so in order to truly do our best we should also be continuously reflecting, evaluating and learning.

This article will focus on just a few Montessori ideas, and invites you to reflect on your practice and how you might raise it to the next level.

When working with children (regardless of their age), we hear about the importance of a prepared environment. An environment that is carefully prepared to take into account the needs, interests and development of the children within it and to meet these. The 3 to 6 environment has 3 main elements: the children, the environment itself and the adult.

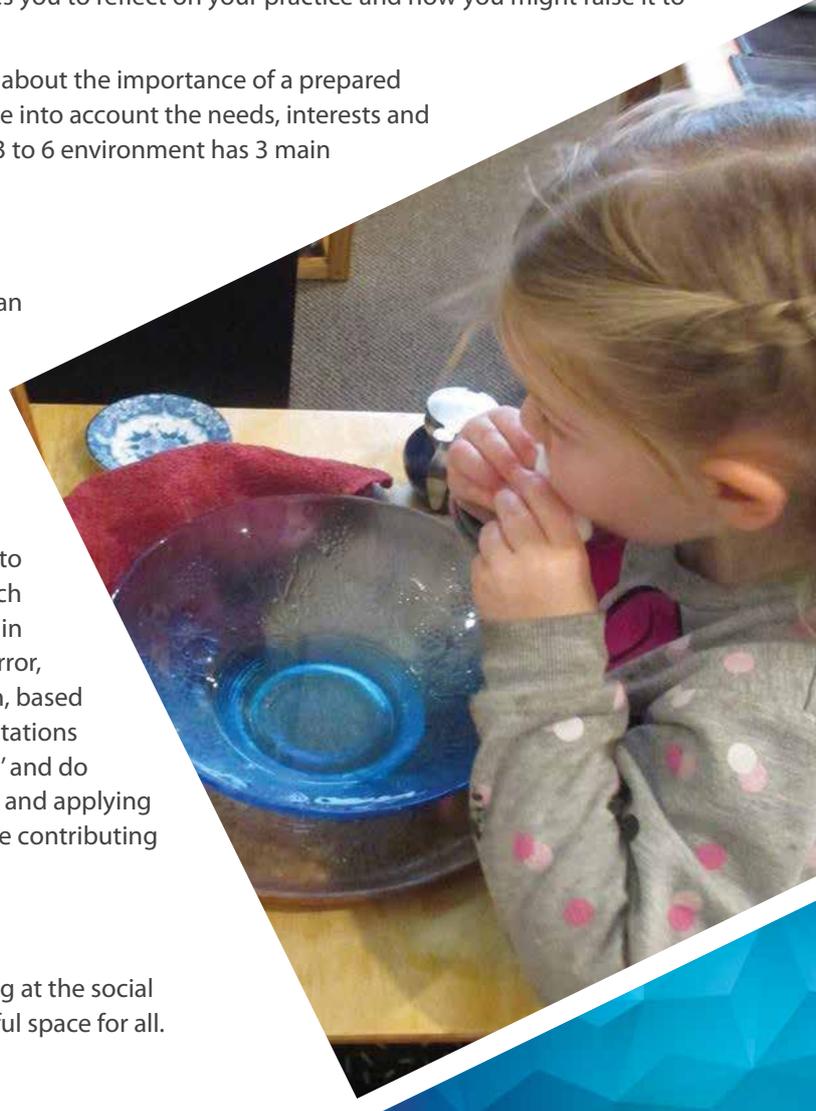
The children

This seems to be a straightforward requirement to meet. We can organise the group, so we have mixed ages, equal numbers of 3, 4 and 5 year olds and even have a balance of genders. We can explain why we have a mixed age group and the benefits of this (role modelling, peer teaching and learning, building a mini community, and so on). However, do we see this in practice?

Do you allow the children time, opportunity and the freedom to solve their own problems and conflicts, to really learn from each other? Are you modelling the social skills we would like to see in the children such as cooperation, patience, friendliness with error, concentration, repetition? Do you observe the group and then, based on these observations, do you plan grace and courtesy presentations tailored to your group? Are these offered in a 'neutral moment' and do you see children independently and spontaneously practising and applying these skills? Do the children feel and demonstrate that they are contributing members of the group?

The environment

When we consider the children (and adults) we are also looking at the social environment and how to create a positive, caring and respectful space for all.





The physical environment includes how we set up our shelves, other furniture and the materials. Again, this can also appear to be something we can meet easily. For example, we are mindful of including order in the layout, we incorporate colour coding, consider the size and proportions of items so the children can access and use these easily. We consider beauty, ensure everything is complete, unbroken with no parts missing. We check the environment is well maintained, clean and materials are ready for use.

Is your physical environment also functional? For example, can the children really see the importance and purpose of the different care-of-self and care-of-environment activities? Can they apply their skills, for example clean the mirrors in the bathroom, find items incorporated in the environment that really need to be polished? Remember the 3 year old initially does these activities for the movement, however the older child really does want to meet the purpose of 'caring for the environment.'

Does the environment have a mix of large open spaces for the child, who is not only a sensorial learner but a child who is programmed to move, and also quieter spaces to allow for contemplation and protected, concentrated work.

Do you remember that the prepared environment is not just inside but also outside and even the transitional spaces such as the foyer area, area for bags and other belongings? Do the same ideas of allowing the child to be independent, responsible and have the ability to make appropriate choices also apply in those spaces?

Have you considered the 'intangible' aspects of the environment, the psychological environment? This includes aspects such as the freedoms (within limits) given to the children, the attitudes within and the 'feeling' of the environment. Is it an environment that feels warm and inviting, that allows and encourages learning through mistakes? Where all are given time, space and opportunity to repeat, where there are long periods of uninterrupted time.

The adult

The adult is more than an educator, the adult needs to be a dynamic link between the children and the environment. What does this mean? Do you believe that the materials 'teach' the children? Do you 'follow the child,' and again, what does this actually mean?

Do you actively prepare and maintain the environment or is that seen as a task given to someone else? Do you consider which materials you have seen the children working with versus the ones which appear to be avoided or used reluctantly, and wonder why? Do you then act upon this, making changes so materials are inviting, activities joyful? Do you rotate materials (for example, items in your mystery bag, language materials), replace materials (for example, increasing the challenge level of practical life skills such as pouring or folding)?

Do you base your planning and presentations on observations? Have you revisited your presentations and reminded yourself of the purposes? Do you clearly convey these purposes through your presentations letting your movements (versus your voice) do this?

Do you have faith and trust in the child and know that they are capable? How do you convey this to the child, to the group, to your colleagues and to the families? How do you help and support the families to also work with the children? How are you working as a member of a team?

In order to have best practice and to always strive towards better practice we don't need a checklist of things to do or say. We shouldn't need someone to tell us we have to do this or that. What we do need is an open mind, a mind that continues to question and seek answers and then to question further.

So how will you add to your knowledge and skills this year? How will you continue to ensure you are offering best practice? How will you continue to challenge yourself and find inspiration to want to learn more?

To end, here are some quotes you might like to reflect upon and even discuss in your next staff meeting!



"An ordinary teacher cannot be transformed into a Montessori teacher, but must be created anew, having rid herself of pedagogical prejudices. The first step is self-preparation of the imagination, for the Montessori teacher has to visualise a child who is not yet there, materially speaking, and must have faith in the child who will reveal himself through work."

(Education for a New World)



"This means that it is not enough to set the child among objects in proportion to his size and strength; the adult who is to help him must have learned how to do so. If the adult, through a fatal misunderstanding, instead of helping the child to do things for himself, substitutes himself for the child, then that adult becomes the blindest and most powerful obstacle to the development of the child's psychic life."

(The Secret of Childhood)



"In her duty of guiding a child in using the material, a teacher must make a distinction between two different periods. In the first she puts the child in contact with the material and initiates him in its use. In the second she intervenes to enlighten a child who has already succeeded in distinguishing differences through his own spontaneous efforts. It is then that she can determine the ideas acquired by a child, if this is necessary, and provide him with words to describe the differences he has perceived."

(The Discovery of the Child)



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Amy has been an Examiner for courses in Australia, New Zealand, China and Thailand. She serves on the Australian Montessori Quality Assurance Council and is actively involved in the provision of professional development as well as parent and community education. Amy also continues to enjoy working with children in the 3 to 6 environment when she is not working with adults.