

# *Managing the Day; Managing the Week*

*By Ruby Lau*

We find ourselves today in this very unusual situation when families are at home together. Busy people who are usually out a great deal for work or leisure, people who pack their days with various activities are looking for ways to pass their time with great restrictions on these possibilities. Adults are working from home. Families who are used to people coming to help take care of their homes suddenly find themselves cleaning, washing, sweeping, mopping, preparing and cooking meals. Usually, the children's time is divided between home, school, friends and relatives. Now children are home all day. So adults are also shouldering the responsibility of the various needs of the children who cannot go to school or engage in any normal social activity. To manage the days and the weeks within the home balancing the activities of all members of the family has suddenly become necessary.

**'Manage'** conjures up the idea of coping with a situation or as defined, being in charge, controlling, directing the day. In this case - What to do with the children?

The greatest worry amongst most parents is that because the children are not at school, they are not being educated. However, it is important to remind ourselves about Montessori's idea of education. She says that education should be an AID to life. It should help the child to develop into a person who is able to live life happily and harmoniously with other people. It should sow the 'seeds' for interest in exploration and discovery. The Montessori environment offered by schools, especially to the child in the first six years of life, is called The Children's House. It provides children opportunities which the modern and busy nuclear family is not always able to offer. It is based on the principles of development.

## **Independence**

The goal of Montessori education is to help children become independent, not just physically but psychologically and emotionally. To have the skills to be able to do things for themselves is one aspect of independence. However, to know they can and be able to overcome difficulties and persevere before seeking help is another aspect of independence. To be emotionally independent and not need the assurance of other people is the basis for self-esteem and self-assurance.

In a Montessori environment the children are helped towards self-discipline. They are helped to behave in an acceptable manner without being 'controlled' by adults enforcing rules and consequences. By helping children follow the broad norms of the environment, norms which serve the whole community, children are guided towards finishing what they started and to consider the needs of others alongside their own.

### **Strong Intellect**

An orderly routine allows time for the work of the intellect. It lays a base for what today many people refer to as executive functioning – the ability to organise, plan, problem solve, predict, making good sound judgments, choices, and decisions.

Well -adapted contributors to a social group – first the family, then society and finally the world – able to be happy in themselves and are able to live harmoniously with others.

### **Universal Aspects of Daily Life**

Let us reflect on how humans live our lives and what our human needs are in general. We can look at three important aspects of human life on a daily basis:

We **groom** ourselves - we wash and dress up. Caring for ourselves makes us feel good about ourselves; it uplifts us and builds our self-esteem. We are ready for the day or for any occasion.

We all need to **eat** to live, but many people live to eat. Food provides sustenance but also is the platform for happiness, exploration and creation. Consider the number of cooking programmes watched by millions around the world offering use besides the knowledge of countries and cuisines of different lands, a feast for the eyes. Some people have turned food into an art, exploring and creating new dishes and presenting food for the eyes as well as for the taste buds. Eating offers food for the body, mind and the soul. Cooking for oneself and eating alone is not the same as when it is done for a group. Food is usually the centre of social gatherings. Sharing food, sharing conversations, sharing and gaining knowledge, having discussions are all important offerings of eating together.

We all need to involve ourselves in **work**. Humans need to be active and engaged. Apart from activities required to care for our physical bodies or environment and for financial needs, humans all need to engage in activities that engage the mind and satisfy our spiritual needs. Our

activities for work or leisure should be satisfying and engaging. These may have to be alone or with another person or as part of a group. We need to rest – but rest is only to regenerate physically and mentally. After resting for a sufficient time, we need to return to work.

### **Order and Routine**

An orderly and somewhat predictable routine provides comfort, security and balance in our daily living. Routine and repeating certain tasks at certain moments every day, every week, helps us to function at ease and efficiently. When we have a routine, we have a plan in place and we are clear about what we have to do next, we 'know' how long an activity will take to complete, each one in time.

Let us think about our experiences and feelings during this extraordinary time when we first went into lockdown when many people found themselves without a routine. For me, to begin with it was fine like during a holiday. I slept late. I did not do very much. I had no routine. However, after a while waking up without a plan or a work schedule, I found time dragging on. Without plans for work I began to feel lost, irritated with myself for letting the time pass without achieving much. This allowed me to procrastinate. There were lots of things I had pending to do but I could not get things done or finished. Suddenly it would be lunch time and I would be hungry and then have to decide what to eat, and what to prepare. Only when I started to reinstate a routine, organising my time to decide what needed to be done before breakfast, making sure I had a plan of what needed to be done through the day, starting at the same time each day like any working day, did I begin to feel better about myself. I began to have a sense of satisfaction that my day was not wasted. It prevented from just sitting around aimlessly, often overloaded with the depressing news on television.

Consider how we feel when our own adult routine or plans are disrupted – someone phones just when we are getting dressed, someone interrupts as we are preparing breakfast so that there is no time to sit down to enjoy that cup of coffee. We end up feeling rushed and scattered. If plans change, meals delayed, expectations not fulfilled it all can lead to frustrations and irritations.

Currently I am at home with my 91 year old mother. Although she does not quite understand what is going on, like children, she is constantly asking what is going to happen during the day although it is the same every day. The need to always run through the sequence of the day reassures her. She

feels secure in her understanding and expectation and relaxes. When we are unsure, we feel anxious.

Children in Montessori schools at the moment have lost the routine of going to school 5 days a week. They have also lost the variety of activities available to them in school and being with their friends. They have lost the activities which they would have usually been able to do at home when they were not in school, like playing or cycling outside, playing with their friends especially when they are living in a small apartment in a condominium. Some children have not even been able to play out in the corridors outside their homes. This has put a strain on both children and adults.

It is important to create a routine and a space for the children as well as ourselves. What can we do?

We can create an ENVIRONMENT which supports the developmental needs of the children. Children need to have their own space and access to activities where they can function independently and make choices. We cannot set up a school day and provide what a school provides. However, in the environment at school, the children know where to find activities and have all the things they need, can choose what to do but they are also expected to put away things before moving onto the next activity. Having a place for everything will help the children to maintain their things as well as be independent. They need to have access to what they need without having to ask an adult. They need a prepared space of their own where they can keep their things and do things. After all, we can function better when we have set up our desk to work and organised our kitchen with everything conveniently at hand.

What does a day at home look like if it supports the child's development?  
How do we offer Montessori education at home?

A day in any culture is normally punctuated with unchanging events. Wherever we are in the world one can see this as a general human routine of life:

- Wake time followed by grooming
- Breakfast - preparation, consumption and cleaning
- Household chores – dusting, sweeping, mopping, loading the washing machine, hanging out the clothes
- Independent activity – work or leisure

- Lunch - preparation, consumption and cleaning
- Independent activity – work or leisure
- Dinner - preparation, consumption and cleaning
- Sleep time which begins the cycle all over again

All activity within this timeframe is independent 'work' or independent leisure, freely chosen and sometimes done alone sometimes involving some interaction with others.

We take advantage of this natural routine when children are at school. It is of great advantage to children if they experience this both at home and at school. There is a balance and a harmony which is then deeply felt by the children. Education needs to help the development of independence, self-discipline, intellectual functioning and learning to live together. By being involved in all the activities which make up a typical day such as getting ready in the morning, taking care of the house, preparing meals, children are being offered real experiences leading to understanding and applying concepts rather than just learning about them. The process and not the end result will be the education for the child.

### **Activity in the Home**

Activities at home are at the heart of routine. Involvement in these activities will be different from child to child and family to family depending on the child's age and capabilities. The youngest children need to be involved in the form of collaboration where they are doing things side by side with adults. For best effect, the adult shows the child how to do an activity and then lets the child do as much as possible as the adult continues with it. Adults should only give the necessary help, guidance and most of all time for the child to do the activity at hand in order to succeed and attain perfection. The focus is always on process and not result. Showing the children and allowing them to do things will take more time and is not likely to be done as well as you would do it. However, it is our short-term effort that gets the long-term results in the end. The children become capable and confident.

Older children by 4 years or so, can do many things on their own. Such independence is possible if they have been prepared from the beginning, given the time and encouragement, shown how to do things and offered guidance when needed. The children will eventually with practice not only be able to do many things by themselves but also to do them well. Children should be expected to contribute to the functioning of the home. They need

to recognise the contribution of every member of the household and understand that this is the way of life.

The activities of the home which form the boundaries of routine have many indirect benefits. For the children, household chores are the base of movement. They offer an opportunity for mental and physical exercise, especially for the younger children, perfecting their coordination. Planning a meal, organising a cupboard, calculating the quantities of food and supplies, preparation of meals, laying the table, washing up the dishes calculating the time taken to do work, are all various aspects of mathematical problems. The questions raised are: What is needed? When? How much? How many? How long? In solving the problems children lay the foundations of experience necessary to learn the basis of decision making. These expand their language and their capacity to think. It also helps them form a loving bond with the adults in the family.

Many questions that arise from food can lead the children and the family to the basis of humanity. Starting from the children's own experiences different foods from different countries can be linked to their climate and soil conditions. People of the world have different ways of dressing, cooking and eating. They use different implements for the same tasks – sweeping, mopping, washing and cleaning. Household activities within the routine allow the children the experience to lay a base for approaching all disciplines.

The intangible aspect of education, where a sense of curiosity, the possibility of exploration, can be established as a way of life, if we help to plant the 'seeds' of interest in finding out about things. This is the base of science, experimentation and discovery.

### **Variety**

Having said that there must be a routine, we know that routine, order and repetition are important, we must also be aware that within this order there needs to be variety. We need variety to keep our interests alive. Variety gives us the possibility of choice. We need to wear different clothes, eat different foods, and be involved in different things to do. Therefore, we need to ensure that there is a sufficient variety of activities accessible to the children, for them to choose from. Within the structure of a basic daily routine, we try to maintain Monday to Friday as 'working' days and plan to spend time with the children in a slightly different, perhaps more open ended way during weekends.

## Living with Children

Every moment in every child's life is precious. Let us not talk about managing the children, their days, their weeks, their lives. Instead let us look upon this time we have as an opportunity. Let us live for a while in the moment. Let us reflect on how to LIVE each Day and LIVE each week.



*Ruby Lau is an AMI 3- 6 Trainer and Consultant. Ruby holds AMI Diplomas at the 0-3, 3-6 and 6-12 age levels. She has a degree in Psychology and worked in advertising before taking the AMI 3 - 6 Diploma in London. After gaining her diploma in London in 1985, she worked both in the school and the training courses at the Maria Montessori Training Organisation in London. She opened her own school in 1990 which she ran for 15 years whilst continuing to work on the training courses.*

*Ruby brings her multi-layered experience to mentor and support training staff and students of AMI training institutes and teachers and schools in many parts of South Asia. Ruby served for 8 years as a member of the Scientific Pedagogy Group at AMI.*

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**Question:** How to prepare for a child friendly environment where there are siblings of different age groups since their needs are very different? Can we create a routine that is different for each of them?

**Answer:** The main principle of any Montessori 'class' is that the group of children must be of mixed ages from 3 - 6, 6 - 9 or 9 - 12 years of age. When there are children in a home of different ages, we have a similar situation. We therefore need to think of how to take advantage of this. In our environments we do not have a timetable as such but the routine and order is established clearly for the children. They know what is expected of them when they arrive from taking off their shoes and placing them and their bags neatly to making choices. They choose their activities; take them out when they are ready to carry it out. They are expected to complete the activity and return them to where they find them before embarking on another activity. The children know how to prepare for lunch and how to clear up after lunch. This clarity and expectation needs to be established at home. If this is the first time you are attempting this with your children, it will be difficult for a while. Preparing the children for these new expectations and our consistency in reminding the children is essential. Everyone should follow the same routine and collaborate together while getting ready in the morning or evening. Household activities such as cleaning, preparing meals, washing the dishes can be thought through to

decide what a child can do by himself, what the child needs help with, what the child can do to help a sibling. Consider what the child's contribution will be. Expectations should be established in a general way. Children should not feel that they are being made to do something. Rather the child is helping the family to complete a task that needs to be done. For example: Instead of saying you must put something away, it is better to say it must be done before proceeding to the next activity. In this way, the adult can do it together with the children rather than end up trying to force them to do something they do not want to do. However, the child should remain with you or even just watch you till the task is over. When there are children of different ages in a home, we have to take it as an advantage for the child. This is a social environment which children need. Taking into account the children's interests establish a few, broad but fair rules. Some days will be better than others. Over time things will be much better if the consistency of routine and expectation is maintained.

**Question:** How do we involve a 3-year-old in household chores? Chores are not very interesting even to adults! How should we prepare a child friendly environment?

**Answer:** Children need to have a space prepared for them for which they are responsible. Order is not just routine; it also includes the way our environment is organised. Things we need must be arranged low so that the children have easy access. There must be a variety and a small range of choice in the activities. Like with adults, we cannot force involvement. We become involved when we are interested. Young children are usually interested in doing what the adult is doing. Children pick up on the attitudes of adults. Do not regard the necessities of life as 'chores' but as part of the work of life. Enjoy the moment of mopping or wiping down the counter. The children sense that inner harmony. Check if the materials for sweeping, mopping, washing etc. are child-size, functional, stored in an orderly way and accessible. Make sure that the children have the time to do it. Value the process that they are going through without correcting them or worrying only about the result.

**Question:** How do parents who are working from home manage this?

**Answer:** Help working parents to prepare a 'work' area for their children where they can function independently. However small the space it doesn't matter. What matters is consistency, access, organisation and order. There must be a variety of activities for them to choose from. For this the children need to be prepared at the times the adult is not working. The children can

be involved in setting up the space. They need to understand that when you are working you are busy and cannot be disturbed. However young the children are tell the children the truth about the hours you need to work. Make sure during the breaks you take to talk to the children, explaining that you will need to get back to your work. Have a conversation with the children as you make tea and pause to ask if they are enjoying the work that they are doing.

**Question:** Sometimes it is difficult to be consistent at home with the children. There are many changes which are out of our control. In some situations, children listen to the teachers rather than their parents! Do you have any suggestions?

**Answer:** Routines are a way of life. Reasonable expectations have to be decided on and clearly explained to the children. It is important that adults are consistent with their responses. Parents often wonder how their children function differently at home and at school. The routine, expectations and the order in a Montessori environment are consistent. Children need order and routine to help them to understand how to function. This offers them security, comfort and ease. Children are learning to trust what you are saying. If you have said something has to be done, then it has to be done. Do not say 'no' unless you can hold the line whatever the children do. Children of this age do not respond well to reasons, particularly if they are upset about the changes that have made them insecure. Be clear and firm. Do not offer children your anger or irritation, they need your calmness and your understanding.

**Question:** How do we offer children emotional support? How do we deal with children who do not have stability?

**Answer:** We can only help children by offering them an orderly and stable environment. Predictability gives comfort. We must also understand our role. We are not the parent of the child. It is our responsibility to support the children in the environment. We can talk to the parents, better still listen to the parents to understand the child's life. We need to be listeners so that parents will turn to us and communicate with us. If we constantly tell parents what to do all, communication will break down. We must try to communicate the child's needs to the parents without judgement, without prejudice.

**Question:** Besides parent support as a Montessori teacher can we send them activity plans? Can we send them work if they are already reading and writing?

**Answer:** Along with order and routine children need variety and choice of work. It is household work that is the core of the home. It is life with movement and language that children need to be involved with. This is their education. If we send homework and worksheets we fall in the trap of narrowing the view of education. If the child has a prepared environment at home, writing or reading are choices the children have too. It cannot be a plan set by a teacher.

**Question:** Please suggest some books for beginners in Montessori education.

**Answer:** For parents and caregivers we always recommend Dr. Montessori's books. These are published by IMF. Please do visit the store section and contact the IMF distributor for more information. Try asking beginners to read any of the following:

- *Education for a New World by Maria Montessori*
- *The Child in the Family by Maria Montessori*
- *What you should know about your Child by Maria Montessori*
- *Foundations of Montessori Pedagogy by A. M. Joosten*