

# *Using Internet Resources Wisely*

*By Rukmini Ramachandran*

Every generation has said that it lives in a world that is rapidly changing. Our parents said it, our grandparents said it, and perhaps even their parents and grandparents said it about their own time. And we, in our own time, living through the current crisis, say it too! We talk about the alarming pace at which fundamental changes have occurred. The internet has impacted every aspect of our lives recently – our work, our culture, our entertainment, our shopping, our engagement with family and friends. It is time for us to reflect on this change.

The question parents and educators are asking is simple. What is the best way to engage children in learning effectively in the climate of social distancing remotely over the internet? This question is usually accompanied by a host of other questions. Which is the best platform? What form should the lessons take? What will replace the presence of a teacher? Should the lessons be live or recorded? How do we help children become interested?

Let us consider some issues that arise from these questions.

## **Children without Maps**

We do not send our children out alone on unknown streets, let them loose in the city. Even if they are not with us we try to ensure that they are within call of help. It seems that adults are very aware of the dangers of the internet that are obvious. We are worried about whom children interact with on the internet, whether they may accidentally or otherwise access adult content. It is the same worry for their safety that we have when young children wander out alone on the streets. Children are vulnerable, they are innocent, and they may get into trouble of which they are unaware.

We now look upon the internet as a repository of all knowledge, a giant bank that holds all that we could possibly want to know. While we worry about the safety of a child most adults do not seem to fear the dangers of misinformation that children may fall prey to as they negotiate the jumble of information. Reliable and precise information, partial and superficial information, inaccurate or incorrect information, in-depth studies, commercial advertising crowd jostle together in the tangle that the child

freely enters and often the children are lost. There are no road maps or signposts offered to them in this wilderness of knowledge.

### **Choosing Resources**

What is out there on the internet? As anyone looking for information online about anything is well aware it is extremely difficult to find anything we want. There is more information accessible than we can possibly access.

To search for information always takes time. It requires skill. In order to find exactly, for children, to find the answers they seek they have to sift through a lot of information that they do not want, travel through websites that do not yield what they are looking for. When they arrive at what they seek they have to be able to recognise it even if it was not what they expected. When they have found it they have to be able to separate it from the rest. The children have to be able to read, to comprehend what they read, they have to be able to judge the quality and quantity of content and exercise their discrimination. Ultimately they have to know when to stop, how to gather all that they have found and organise it for retrieval.

We are not worried that children may fall prey to believing incorrect information. We are not worried that what the children have collected is largely inaccurate and not founded on scholarly discipline. We are not worried that the children are not building the skills to perceive the difference between good sources of information and dubious ones. We are not worried that they are not able to recognise the difference between truths and half-truths. These must be our real fears.

We must seek out good ways to protect children from misinformation. However, we ourselves are ill-equipped to guide them. When we search for something on the internet, our search pulls up pages and pages of possible websites. We need to wade through these thousands of possible sources of information in order to find the information. Do we? We do not. We look mainly at the top two and take in what it says as quickly as possible. Most of us cannot tell the difference between one source and another. Yet we all know that the website with the most abundant information is not always the most accurate information. So it is quite complicated for us even as adults. How do we do it?

Our experience and exposure helps us. When we see information on the National Geographic site we are sure of its accuracy. When we see the BBC or the Encyclopaedia Britannica or the Bombay Natural History Society or the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy we believe that the information

on these sites will be more trustworthy. We use prior experience, pieces of rudimentary knowledge already gathered, intuition and logic to decide that we have found what we are looking for. So, when we say that these days we can find out anything at the click of a button, this is not really the case.

Children have very limited life experience. They are therefore at greater risk of being lost in this ocean of information. It is in fact difficult for children to find what they are looking for unless they know what sources of information they can trust. It is not enough to understand how to use the computer, or even the technicalities of the internet. They need to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate information, superficial information and information of some depth, partial information and complete information which is in context, information put together by an interested amateur and an experienced professional. The children must have independent opportunity with guidance to build such experience.

We do not want children to believe that whatever they read is true. What the writer said and what the reader thinks are not the same. It is up to us to water the tree of knowledge with truth.

### **Enjoying the process of learning**

Entertainment is easy for the mind. It is fun. It seems to capture the child's attention. It is often predictable and quickly accessed. The pleasure it generates is initially exciting and is often held by a group of individuals. However, after a while this kind of easy entertainment tires the mind. Usually it poses no challenge. We see often it rapidly turns into boredom. We cannot seek to entertain children. As parents, as teachers we must try to help the children towards engagement, towards a deep connection with the activity at hand. Even though this means hard work it transforms the mind.

Montessori insisted that humans were born to work and that they find joy in challenge and in difficulty. Education, engagement and enjoyment are all unified in the activity of a child who has the power of logic and reason. So regardless of whether children are working online or offline, in front of a screen or with pen and paper, whether they are doing household work or academic work, the work of the hand and the work of the mind cannot be separated. Doing hard work is necessary to build the child's sense of responsibility and commitment. It is this pleasurable work that helps the child to build himself. It is when they stretch themselves, body, heart and soul that they feel true satisfaction. Such work does not tire them out, it builds their inner motivation, inspires them to new challenges.

## **Speed**

We have become used to thinking that 'slow' is boring. But life even when we are very busy cannot be paced like an advertisement or a video game. Research tells us how many images flash, per minute, per second into our vulnerable minds from the screens we are surrounded by. Listening to the news is an attack on the senses. The focus and attention that our mind tries to direct towards a topic of interest is fractured and splintered by warring images, text tickers, flashes and lights. Research warns us that when we play video games, the speed factor and the increased (hyper) focus that it calls forth which engages us till we do not even blink, leads to the production of stress hormones. In the long run scientists warn us that these will drain our brain's capital instead of building it. Scientists are beginning to confirm that when we flood the brain with stress hormones we drive away logic and push the brain into addictive behaviour, the highs and lows of depression, aggression and stress. Frontal lobe activity in the brain occurs through real life problem solving using our hands and our reason.

We must fight against speed. Our children's education is not a race to be run. It is the journey. They must enjoy every step and appreciate all the experiences along the way.

So we must face the fact that 'slow' creative activity using our hands and minds together counteract the ill effects of fast paced modern urban living. Practical work at home, sweeping, mopping, changing the bed linen, washing dishes teaches children reasoning, logic and responsibility. The activities take time. They allow us to recharge our energy. It builds our inner and outer strength. This rich experience of life lays the practical foundations for all intellectual exercise.

## **Reinventing the wheel**

Talking to Montessori teachers at both 3-6 and 6-12 levels from many cities around the country I hear them talk about creating resources. Some of them are recording presentations on videos; some of them are singing songs, reading stories. Some of them are creating elaborate animations and Power points and worksheets which reflect the Montessori materials that the children cannot be with in this situation. Many of them say that it gives them a sense of connection with the children. They feel that parents are pleased to receive school work from the teachers. They are responding to the pandemic situation and they are trying to reach out in all possible ways to the children and parents in their community. Let us ask ourselves two questions:

1. Does a homemade video of a Montessori teacher singing a song, telling a story, or presenting an activity fill the gap that has been created at this time?
2. Is the best option that we can present to the children on their screens which their parents must play to them on their laptop, or phone or tab?

The answer to the first question is clear to my mind. While these efforts give us a sense of connection, we cannot replace an educational approach based on multisensory work in a socially collaborative community with these videos. We cannot think that as the children are not there in person we can compensate or reach out halfway by sending them presentations as a recording. The impact on a child who is thus engaged for a limited time of every day or every week could not be lasting. There are more questions. Is the video aimed at the child? How many times will the child watch it? Will the parents play it to them? When? Is there choice? To whose needs does it respond? All the answers are problematic.

We all know that excellent educational online resources around fact and fiction are available now in multiple media. These resources are created by professionals in the field. We need to explore these resources extensively. If we take the time to search – poetry and song, dance and drama jostles for space with lectures on birds and marine life, science experiments, plant life, wildlife, features of the earth, on a variety of platforms. There is already more there than we can watch. What if teachers explored the internet and put down all their favourite online resources and shared it with parents? What if they created some discussion groups with the parents on how such resources could be used? There are also worksheets aplenty online, and colouring and craft work too! Why are we creating these resources when there are excellent resources online? Why are we reinventing the wheel?

### **Reality-based Understanding**

Montessori set out clearly the role of the imagination in development. She said simply that the imagination, which is a great power of the human mind, must be rooted in reality. Abstract ideas are extrapolations of the essence of experiences. Through repeated experience of reality the child creates concepts that are named and stored in the mind for easy retrieval. So we need to balance the real world of the child with the virtual world that represents reality. Children between the ages of 3 and 6 and children between the ages of 6 and 12 are the same species but they are completely different from one another at these different stages of growth. So, if we are

offering children activity we have to find a way to match the needs of their age. We know that intelligence is not divided. It is a unified whole. To be creative thinkers, children need life experience. When we offer children content from the internet we need to offer them the balance of reality. The internet resource must not become an end in itself. If it must serve to open the way to learning then watching a cookery show must lead to real life cooking, a documentary on birds must lead to an observation of the pigeons and the crows, the poem about flowers must lead to the stringing of flowers. The content that we find for the children must draw them into activity, activity that they choose freely of their own accord that will help them to grow. So all resources must ground the children in the world and lead to work. We must communicate with parents and help them to understand that work with its attendant responsibility is the goal of community based education.

### **Language and Communication**

At any age, whether children are at home or at school, whether children are online or reading a book we must pay deep attention to the emerging language and communication that is created around the child's activity. This is on two levels. Language prepares children for an experience. If the child is going to watch a documentary about animals we can talk about the animals that he may see, the child may want to know about the presenter of the show. We can tell the child how long it will be before it begins. We can ask him to prepare the physical environment – get the right chair, find a cushion, draw the curtains. All this is communication and collaboration that makes an experience meaningful. Language helps the child after the experience to discuss what he experienced. We can share with the child our own joy in the experience, using delicious words to describe it. Most importantly we need to listen to the child share his experience and his point of view. We must speak to the child both before and after their experience.

Sometimes we should stop and listen to ourselves! Any activity of the child is the focus of adult attention. The adult never observes the child or the child's effort. The activity of the child is constantly accompanied by adult instructions during the experience. The pace of the activity is not guided by the child's movement of the body, guided by the mind. The inner flow of the child's activity is interrupted by the goal-oriented adult who is trying to help to speed up the activity by telling the child what to do. This dramatically slows the speed of the child's activity. It usually kills rather than sustains interest.

Lastly communication does not have to be in words. There is a lot to be said about non-verbal communication in these times when we are deprived of company and when contact with the community is restricted. Having the tab in front of the child as he sits on an adult's lap, putting an arm around the child as he watches television, to sit with a child and watch his expression as he watches something and sharing a smile when something is mutually enjoyed, these are important facets of experience. They represent a communication of the emotions. Screens are very isolating and they pull the child away from society. A warm human reminder of the love and care that the child enjoys in the home is an essential but mostly forgotten aspect of online experience.

### The Questions to Ask

Many questions are being asked about education during this pandemic. How do we schedule online classes effectively? How many hours are reasonable? How do we use technology to reach Montessori education to the single child at home? From colouring snake games, to cardboard decimals, to animated pink towers we are doing our best to reach out at a time of crisis. The questions which are not being asked are to me the most important of all. Is this the only way to bridge lost time with social distance? Will some of these practices insidiously remain with us after the pandemic and continue to obscure our understanding of childhood?



*Rukmini Ramachandran, is the Director of Supraja Montessori Study Centre (formerly Navadisha Montessori Foundation), Chennai. Rukmini holds an AMI Montessori diploma at all the three age levels, 3-6, 6-12 and 0-3 years.*

*She has a Masters in English. She came into Montessori education with a background in journalism, having started her career as Assistant Editor of a children's monthly. She edited the 1939 Montessori lectures in Chennai into a book titled Creative Development in the Child in two volumes. Her most particular interest lies in publishing for children. She currently serves as the Managing Trustee of the Indian Montessori Foundation.*

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**Question:** I have a 4-year-old. I have been trying to include him in my household but he gets bored and he wants screen time. What can I do?

**Answer:** To change established behaviour is difficult. When we go on a diet, how difficult do we find it to change our eating habits? Only sustained and consistent effort can make it happen. Prepare the child ahead of time.

Talk to him about time spent on the screen. Tell him about the chores in which you expect him to participate every day; every day at the same time. Work with him to complete the chores, the same ones every day at the same time. Allow the child to make reasonable choices. Ask the child what programmes he would like to watch in the reasonable number of hours you have allocated in the week. Watch with the child for a few weeks. Let the child operate the remote control and invite the child to turn it off once the programme is over. Discuss the programme with the child after the screen is switched off. Let the child lead the discussion. Expect it to take time but in the long run you will help the child.

**Question:** I am wondering if it is really possible in today's world for people to live without electronic devices. People get into a panic if their phone is out of power. How should we rebuild this habit?

**Answer:** Is it necessary to live without them? Devices are non-living objects created from human intelligence. A mobile phone is only an object. It is infused with life due to our relationship with it. If used effectively, wisely with integrity they can make our lives better. How could we have had such interesting interactions through the IMF webinars without devices? The difficulty seems to lie within us, with our character. What should we rebuild? We must confront our inability to control ourselves from overusing devices to a point of misuse. By becoming aware of ourselves we can learn self-control.

**Question:** As working parents, it is difficult to continuously guide the resources used online as the children slip into playing games on the device when they get bored. Your suggestions please!

**Answer:** The internet is a public space, an open jungle. It is very important for us to remember this. It is wise that as the children are growing up with access to the internet that we are aware of their interests and their activities just as we would be if they went out on the streets. The answer to your question depends upon the age of your child. With children under the age of 6 it is best not to leave them alone with the internet regardless of whether they are accessing 'useful' resources or 'useless' games. Unrestricted access is not a good idea. It is best to access the internet with your child so that you know what they have experienced and then restrict access. You can ask the child to do another more reality based activity when you are at work or otherwise occupied.

**Question:** What do you think about the manipulative Montessori materials which are available online? Of course, the children can't feel it but they can just see and manipulate it!

**Answer:** Manipulation implies the use of the hand. This is integral to the Montessori view of education. You cannot have manipulative material which is not to be handled by the child. Please give the child vegetables to cut and allow him to bathe and dress. There are many purposeful and meaningful manipulative experiences in buttoning clothes, soaping the body, stirring hot milk on the stove.

**Question:** I know some online Montessori Mathematics lessons and videos showing how to use materials, what is your opinion about this kind of lesson?

**Answer:** I think such videos are made by people trying to help the children. However there is no understanding of the context in which Montessori materials are used. The teacher in a Montessori environment shows a particular child how to use a piece of material. This is followed by the opportunity to choose the material, to work with it independently, using their hands, repeating freely, and making many mistakes without interference from a watchful teacher. There is no intervention in the experience of the child. There is only one piece of material in a class of 30 odd children. They wait for the materials to be free before they choose to work with it. How can such character development opportunity be provided with a video about addition? There are many opportunities to lay the foundation of Mathematics at home. How many pillow cases are needed from the cupboard to change all the pillows? How many carrots have to be grated for salad? How many days must we wait before the next water can is ordered? How long will it be before daddy comes home? How many toys would you like to put away in the cupboard and how many would you like to leave out on the shelf? Discussing these things with your child will help them be practical problem solvers. This ability to think in a logical way is the foundation of human intelligence.