

Optimising the Child's Experiences

By Hemalatha Rangarajan

What do we mean by the word experience?

Experience is procedural knowledge. The Miriam Webster dictionary defines experience as a process of doing and seeing things happen, the skill or knowledge gained by doing, doing through active participation with involvement.

These definitions of the word experience help us to think deeply about the nature of experience. We all constantly speak about experience. We speak of good experiences and bad ones. What do we really mean by experience, by procedural knowledge? When we speak of experience why do we speak of active participation and knowing by doing, instead of merely seeing or hearing? We know that repetitive experiences enable us to gain skill and ultimately skill becomes knowledge. Skill and knowledge gained through our own experience stays with us. It becomes a part of us

The Value of Experience

All of us understand the value of experience. To seek advice or find solutions to problems we approach people who are experienced.

When we look for a doctor we do not seek out a doctor fresh out of college even if he is a gold medallist. We try to find one who has had a lot of experience. Though we may value the young professional's academic achievements we value experience over qualification. A qualification may be the beginning. However experience, repetitive experience over a length of time adds a great value to the qualification. Experts are people with study and academic qualifications behind them who have also had rich experience in the field. . We can relate experience with many common activities. Even to travel on a metro train or using an escalator requires experience.

We can say that a person who can drive car effortlessly is an expert. The skills of the driver is gained through practice, the repetitive experience of driving the car. However for the beginner just learning to drive, there are many challenges – how to press the accelerator and release the clutch smoothly at the same time, when and how to change the gear, to apply the brake and with an eye on the road at the same time. After some repetitive

experiences the new driver learns all the skills required. This is a second stage of learning. The third stage is the knowledge that is gained through continued experience. An expert driver can share knowledge with a beginner to overcome all the initial challenges.

This is how our experiences become knowledge. What we gain stays with us. We do not have to retain it in our memory because we hold it as deep understanding.

Children and their Experiences

Let us think of young children and their experiences. The life of young children is full of experience. As part of their daily routine children gather their experiences of life. With a routine they know what to expect, they are aware of what will happen, they anticipate what they are going to experience every day. The routine will thus give them the necessary preparation to face those experiences. Eventually this repeated experience gives them knowledge about all aspects of their life

Today, a child's life is filled with activities that are mostly done by the adults for the child. A child's life is full of experience some new or occasional and some repeated. Brushing, bathing, eating are all the repetitive experiences children have on daily basis. These activities are the foundation of life itself. Going for a wedding or having a visitor, are experiences which may be occasional and sometimes new to children.

If we are aware of the value of these experiences we can help our children to optimise them, and draw from them all the fundamental knowledge about the world which they offer. We are the providers of experience to children so it is our responsibility to consciously create opportunities, and widen their scope to help children derive the benefit of their experiences in every possible way. If we do so children will gain the knowledge about life. This is a way to support their development and to help children towards a good life

Preparation for a New Experience

In order for any experience to be meaningful to them, we need to prepare our children for the experience. This preparation is usually offered through language. We can talk to our children about all the experience that they are about to have. This may be a story or a conversation. We think of bathing the child as a part of our routine. We may ask why should we tell the child what is going to happen? Does the child not know? Why should we prepare a child for having a bath? We must remember that for our young children

these experiences are new. They are still in the process of understanding the activity, its sequence, beginning middle and end. They are in the process of figuring out their role in such a situation. So preparation will help them to understand the expectations of the adult who is supporting them and to face these experiences with confidence and comfort. . We can say to the child: "This time when you have your bath, I am going to help you. We are going to fill the bucket with warm water. You can use the jug and pour water on yourself. See the soap is ready on this stool. We will use this green towel after you have finished. You can dry yourself! Let us put the clothes you are going to wear today after your bath here on the bed."

It is vital to prepare our children as much as we can for all these experiences of daily life. This preparation is not a lesson! We certainly do not know how much children will remember of what we say! However we are sure about one thing. This preparation will help children to have a wonderful experience. This is a way to add value the children's experiences. This preparation is not complete if we tell the children only once! These preparations must be done often enough so that they are ready to face them and eventually carry out parts of the experience on their own. We can prepare our children for every experience through language. We know very well that children are happy and in fact eager to interact with adults. We must enjoy this interaction, and observe how it helps the children to gain confidence.

If this is what we need to do to support children while having a bath, imagine the kind of preparation we need to offer them for a wedding! We can talk to the children about our relationship with families and to the various relatives, the decorations, the clothing, the customs, the details of the ceremony, the greetings, the food...the possibilities for conversation and activity are endless.

For children to benefit from their experience they need to be part of the experience, they need to be included in all aspects of it. By being receivers of the action or passive observers they do not make significant gain. So in all the experiences that children have in their daily life we must make sure to collaborate with them, without dominating them. After preparing the children, if we do not let the children participate then their experience becomes meaningless. Our goal should be to help the children become active people. Bathing is an experience for the children and the children gain immeasurably through repetition. They learn the skill of checking the temperature of the water, the skill of pouring water on themselves, using a jug, the skill of holding on to the soap which easily slips way, the skill of

drying themselves thoroughly with a towel. All these become the children's knowledge. By being participants in the activity, the children they become capable and begin to understand how to judge, to calculate, to be exact. The children lay down the foundations through many practical lessons in chemistry and physics. This is only possible when they are allowed to participate.

When we allow the children to participate we see their joy in the activity. They love helping themselves and others in the community. We do things for our children. However out of our ignorance of their needs we do not let our children optimise their experiences. We do not realise that every experience will add to the child's repository of knowledge.

Dr. Montessori says that there are two types of children. There are 'rich poor' children, the children who have lot of experiences and have optimised them to gain knowledge. Though they may not be from wealthy families and therefore poor in those terms, through their rich life experience they become capable children. So they are 'rich poor' children! On the contrary some children are from well-to-do families but without much life experience – they are 'poor rich' children. They are impoverished due to lack of experience, which has led to incapability, they have not the richness comes from life experience.

We must create an environment for our children to optimise their experiences. We must aim at helping the children to become 'rich rich' children, rich in experience and opportunity. This is possible only by empowering them through participation in life.

Outcome

Optimising experience will help the children to gain confidence. Our education gave us all qualifications. It was only the beginning. We need experience to enhance our qualifications. For our children life experiences become their education. The knowledge that they gain through experiences will stay with them. It will prepare children to face similar experiences with confidence. This is education through experience.

Aid to Life

We as adults in the children's life should be the providers of experiences and support them to optimise their experiences. A child not only can manage his life but also will be capable of sharing his knowledge gained through his experiences with the people in his community. Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, focussed on the need for self-reliance at

the time of our country's independence and social renewal. Let us start working towards this great goal by optimising the child's experience. This is the beginning of self-esteem and confidence on all levels.

“Let us say the child must acquire his independent personality through a series of personal efforts, personal exercises and experiences. We must help him to carry out those experiences. If he is going to be a man, he must be a being who must work and function for himself. Let us encourage the child to work. The child instinctively works under suitable conditions. It is our duty to prepare an environment suitable to the child, to offer him conditions in which he may exercise himself through his own experiences, to furnish him with the means of activities and to leave him to accrue his natural potential. We will then see the child seek exactness, seek minute work which is very detailed. We will see that he repeats the exercises again and again, and that he begins to become the master of the action which he carries out. “

Maria Montessori ~Creative Development in the Child,



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Hemalatha holds a Masters in Psychology. She is interested in helping teachers and has been involved in mentoring schools. She is committed to widening the scope of Montessori education through research.

This article is based on a webinar organised by the Indian Montessori Foundation presented by Hemalatha Rangarajan on Saturday, May 23, 2020. Below are answers provided by the author to some of the questions raised by participants.

Question: As we continue to interact online with children in the current scenario of lockdown how can we as teachers give the child an experience of a festival?

Answer: The current situation is unusual. To prepare a child for a festival at home is not the role of a teacher. Perhaps you could discuss the need to prepare the children for a simple festival experience at home. Even in this situation the adults in a home can prepare the children for all a festival. The preparation can be in the form of story or a song around the festival. The parents must make sure that the child is included in the festival celebration

by offering the child some real responsibility – to clean the altar, to string the flowers or decorations, to prepare the sweet. Listen to the parents as they share with you how they involved the children instead of rushing to give them suggestions.

Question: How do you prepare an elementary child to be aware of time on the days they need to be at school? How do you collaborate with them to get the morning routine done in time for school?

Answer: An elementary child needs a reason for everything we expect the child to do. Preparation must be thought off long before the actual day. We must involve the child in planning his time in the morning. He must come up with a plan. We can help him think through if it is workable and adequate time allowance has been made for all the activities of the morning. Once the plan is ready it is the child's responsibility to carry out the plan. The creation of this plan also becomes the child's experience. We also need to talk to the child about natural consequences if the plan is not followed through. The child needs to face those consequences even if it leads to being disappointed. These will surely help the child to optimise his experience of being on time. Children behave differently when they are given responsibilities. So talking to them and making them part of the decision making process will definitely help them to realise the importance of time rather than us constantly giving instructions.

Question: How do you deal with the frustration that comes with an experience?

Answer: Frustration could be because of many reasons. I just want go back to my talk .Preparation and collaboration are vital for the child to enjoy the experience. Collaboration needs to be based on the child's capabilities. If we expect our children to collaborate beyond their capabilities that will also lead to frustration, preparation and collaborating with the child in an appropriate way might reduce the frustration.

Question: When the children experience everything a couple of times they become bored and they drop those things. How can we make a child enjoy a repetitive process? Do they not get tired when the process is predictable?

Answer: We can assure you children are never bored with repetition. On the contrary! Children below the age of six naturally love to repeat over and over again. This cannot be forced. Observe carefully when a child choses an activity spontaneously. The difficulty comes when the adult chooses the

activity and wants the child to be interested and repeat it as many times as the adult wants. We see repetition only if the activity meets the child's capability and offers sufficient challenge.

Question: Sometimes we want to give a child certain experiences, but the apprehensions of the older generation doesn't make the experience a good one for the child. Can we do something to help the child get over his fear?

Answer: Preparing the child well in advance and supporting the child through the experience will gradually help the child to come out of fears.

Question: How do we look for signs of readiness during preparation before offering the actual experience?

Answer: Though the child may not be able to tell us, though there may be no outward sign to tell us that a child is ready, the way children participate and enjoy the experience act as indicators.

Question: How can we prepare them for a change when we are not aware of the change in advance?

Answer: Sometimes life is such that it may not be possible to prepare the children but if we have prepared the children at all times other than these unexpected situations, they gain the skill of coping with such situations.

Question: Is there a thin line between self-experience and self-realisation?

Answer: Let us say instead that for the child it about self-confidence and self-esteem. Self-confidence comes from knowing our capabilities. It stems from the feeling 'I can do it'. When children are able to do things on their own slowly they also realise their self-worth which leads to self-esteem.