Montessori Parenting

An Idea Whose Time Has Come

By Sonnie McFarland and Jim McFarland, PhD

Since Dr. Maria Montessori’s discovery of the true nature of childhood over a century ago, children around the globe have benefited from Montessori education. However, even parents who have children enrolled in Montessori schools could derive further benefits through the implementation of Montessori principles and practices in the home.

Children reap the rewards when, at home, both parents are consistent in their expectations and styles of parenting. Similarly, children thrive when there is consistency between the home and the school. Helping parents create a child-friendly environment in the home is a beginning; however, we can go much deeper. We can bring greater definition to best practices of Montessori parenting, so parents can better understand and appreciate why children blossom in Montessori classrooms and how they can implement Montessori principles and practices in the home.

Recognizing Children’s Authentic Nature

First, we must help parents recognize the authentic nature of each of their children. Without this understanding, it is difficult to put Montessori principles into practice. To know who the child is is to know how to be with the child. Montessori saw children as endowed with a spiritual embryo that serves as a fulcrum around which each child’s mental and spiritual life is organized.

If the work of man on the earth is related to his spirit, to his creative intelligence, then his spirit and his intelligence must be the fulcrum of his existence, and of all the workings of his body. About this fulcrum his behavior is organized and even his physical economy. The whole man develops within a kind of spiritual halo. (Montessori, 1988, p. 56)

This spiritual halo can be seen as the nurturing emotional, social, and spiritual milieu where children are respected because of their inherent worth. Montessori recognized that children are endowed with capacities to fulfill their potentials. When parents and teachers recognize children’s intrinsic goodness, and reflect it back to them, children naturally develop healthy self-images and positive patterns of growth. A self-fulfilling prophecy is created and children are empowered to follow their natural developmental processes toward self-actualization.

The Map of the Mind and Spirit visually (next page) clarifies the various functions of mind and its relationship to the spirit or authentic self. No one aspect of mind can stand alone as there is a holistic, dynamic interconnection between them. (McFarland, 2011, pp. 50–51)

Sensory-Motor: The function of this aspect of mind is to bring the external world into awareness through the five senses. These sensorial impressions automatically embed themselves in
the subconscious area of the memory bank, where engrams and associations are created. The sensory-motor part of the mind coordinates motor activity within the external environment.

Memory Bank: The subconscious mind, or mneme, that houses the engrams and associations, racial memories, and potentials, is located at the base of the memory bank. "Memory" (that which we consciously remember) is located above the subconscious mind on the map.

One of the most startling discoveries that Montessori made was to come to a clearer understanding of how a child learns and matures. She observed that there are dynamic forces determining the development of his personality, intelligence, and talents that are hidden within his memory bank or unconscious mind. . . . She came to understand how these inner forces worked together and how each contributed to the growth of the child. (McFarland, 2011, p. 55)

It is not an accumulation of memories that is left in the mneme, but a power to recall experiences to the conscious memory. . . . Thus it is not

the experiences in themselves, but the traces of them left behind in the mneme, which makes a mind powerful; such traces being known as engrams. (Montessori, 1989, p. 13)

As engrams form, they spontaneously seek to organize by connecting to other engrams to create associations based on such things as commonalities and contrasts.

When a child’s interest is aroused through sensory stimulation and the impressions enter the unconscious mind, the mind spontaneously calls forth all those related memory traces or engrams to form a new or expanded idea. This is how the intellect grows. (McFarland, 2011, p. 57)

One additional function of the subconscious mind is to spontaneously release hidden impressions or mindsets onto the sensory-motor screen. Because the sensory-motor aspect is unable to make decisions as to what to do with this released material, it is up to the ego or inner guide to respond.

Ego: This function of mind is where the sense of separation or “I-ness” is located. It has the power to make decisions from incoming sensorial impressions as well as thoughts coming from the subconscious mind. These decisions are often limited in scope because they are made from the perspective of “How will this affect me personally?” While it is important to know who we are as individual personalities, it is equally important to ground the ego in the greater wisdom of our inner guide.

Inner Guide: The inner guide is the power of discrimination that observes and evaluates incoming sensorial and memory impressions, helps balance the ego, and makes decisions as to what action to take. This aspect is directly connected to the authentic self/spirit and the vital life force. It is the source of wisdom and the seat for self-observation. When we say that we trust the child to make decisions as to his work choices, it is because we trust the child’s inner guide. Montessori recognized the bridge between the conscious and unconscious mind and saw the inner guide as a mysterious power that guides, oversees, and directs the child’s fulfillment. It is through quieting the lower mind that the inner guide is accessed.

Vital Life Force: Montessori recognized the presence of the vital life force and referred to it as “horme.” She observed that children were naturally motivated to learn and develop their individual potentials. “A vital force is active within him, and this guides his efforts towards their goal. . . .” (Montessori, 1988, p. 76). This invisible force of life propels the child toward self-fulfillment.

Authentic Self/Spirit: This aspect is nothing less than humanity’s true nature of divine love and light—the personal expression of cosmic consciousness. The authentic self is the source of all positive virtues, such as joy, faith, courage, honesty, and com-
passion. It is what brings peace and purpose to life. When we witness these qualities in children, we know they are manifesting their spirit, or authentic self.

**Cosmic Consciousness:** This is the source of all life and love. It is a dynamic energy that touches all that is. All aspects of the mind and spirit are connected to form a dynamic whole that includes the cosmic consciousness. It is reassuring to know that the spiritual embryo of the child is connected to cosmic consciousness and that we can trust that there is a natural path prepared for children to unveil their authentic self and fulfill their cosmic tasks. (McFarland, 2011, p. 64)

When parents see their children as divine beings striving to develop their human potentials, rather than willful children purposely annoying them, they can learn to approach them from an entirely different perspective. Montessori parenting begins with recognition, acceptance, and respect for the child’s authentic self.

> When we understand the inner nature of the child, we trust the child and become selflessly centered on the child and less on ourselves. . . . Our first teacher, therefore, will be the child himself, or rather the vital urge with the cosmic laws that lead him unconsciously. (Montessori, 1991, p. 20)

**Unveiling the Authentic Child**

Children come to earth as pure spiritual beings, endowed with many gifts; however, at birth an invisible veil is drawn over their awareness of who they really are. Fortunately, each child’s authentic self, inner guide, and vital life force retain the knowledge of the child’s true identity and cosmic task. Within the sanctity of Montessori classrooms, children systematically
enter into continual cycles of unveiling their Authentic Selves and discovering their interests and capabilities. To bring greater clarity to this process, we have designed a model we call The VEIL Model.

The VEIL Model has four interacting phases that continually repeat themselves as children interact with their environments and master new concepts. The four phases are: Volition, Engagement, Integration, and Love.

Each time children are motivated to engage in an appropriate activity (Volition), receive sensory stimulation (Engagement), and assimilate and master the information (Integration), they catch a glimpse of who they are and what they are capable of understanding (Love). Each time children exercise Volition and choose to engage in a new activity, they enter another learning cycle that takes them through the phases of Engagement and Integration. Each time they master an activity, they enter into the Love phase. In this phase, children experience joy and confidence that propels them to begin a new cycle of learning. “The more this Unveiling Cycle is repeated, the greater is the child’s ability to recognize his authenticity and realize his potentials. He enters into an upward cycling spiral toward self-actualization” (Mcfarland, 2011, p. 71).

Within each of the four phases of the Unveiling Cycle, we identify four principles or practices that are essential keys to the implementation of Montessori’s work.

**The Volition Phase**
Volition is the first phase of the VEIL Model and focuses on four qualities that are embedded within children’s spiritual embryo. The qualities that naturally motivate children toward self-actualization and fulfillment are: 1) Need Fulfillment; 2) Quest for Self-Mastery; 3) Sensitive Periods; and 4) Compelling Interests.

**Need Fulfillment:** The desire to have their basic needs met is one of the most powerful motivating forces embedded within children. When these needs are not met, their behavior is directly affected. Abraham Maslow (1971) identified the basic human needs as: 1) physiological needs; 2) safety needs; 3) love and belonging needs; 4) esteem needs; and 5) self-actualization needs. His research indicates that need fulfillment begins with the most basic physiological needs and moves sequentially up the pyramid as each need is fulfilled, culminating in the fulfillment of the self-actualization needs.

It is important for parents to know that children’s behavior is directly related to these basic needs. When children’s needs are met, they are content; however, when one of the need levels is not met, children demonstrate challenging behavior. Parents benefit from knowing that the needs of children often fluctuate depending on the situation and circumstance. For example, a child may be happily involved in an activity, operating at the esteem need level, when he is frightened by something and falls back to the safety need level, where he now requires comfort and reassurance. If he receives it, he can move to the next level of love and belonging. If this need is satisfied, the child can again enjoy being at the esteem level. Encouraging parents to view children’s challenging behavior as a call for a need to be met can help them remember to focus on what need
requires attention and what they might do to restore balance to the child.

**Quest for Self-Mastery:** Children are wired for success. They come equipped with the vital life force that propels them toward self-actualization and an inner guide to wisely direct this energy. When children have the opportunity to engage in environments designed to meet their interests, and the adults encourage their independent exploration, children naturally move toward self-mastery. According to Montessori,

> We must clearly understand that when we give the child freedom and independence, we are giving freedom to the worker already braced for action, who cannot live without working and being active. This he has in common with all other forms of life, and to curb it makes him degenerate. (1988, p. 83)

When parents do for their children what the children want to do for themselves, children receive the message that they are incapable and weak. As parents understand that children are naturally programmed for self-mastery and benefit from prepared environments, at home and school, it will be easier for them to encourage children’s independence and let go of the need to do too much for their children.

**Sensitive Periods:** As we know, children pass through specific periods of sensitivity that last for months or years. A few of these periods relate to the acquisition of language, a need for order and precision, mastery of movement, and social relationships. When a child’s physical body and mental capacity are prepared, the vital force and the inner guide motivate sensitive periods. During these periods of sensitivity, children’s attention is intently focused on self-mastery, sometimes to
the exclusion of other things. Helping parents understand what these sensitive periods are and how they can support the children through them is vital.

**Compelling Interests:** Children's interests are internally motivated by a combination of a deep love for life, the vital force, inner potentials, and previous positive experiences registered in the memory bank. These internal factors compel children to spontaneously engage in and learn from their environments. “The environment must be rich in motives which lend interest to activity and invite the child to conduct his own experiences” (Montessori, 1988, p. 84).

**The Engagement Phase**

Engagement, the second phase of the VEIL Model, is the process that allows children to take in stimuli from their environments. The four qualities that naturally facilitate the Engagement Phase are: 1) Absorbent Mind to Inquiring Mind; 2) Meaningful Work; 3) Movement; and 4) Freedom of Choice.

**Absorbent Mind to Inquiring Mind:** The minds of young children, between birth and age 6, are uniquely designed to absorb the sensorial stimulation around them and automatically embed these impressions into their subconscious mind. These impressions form engrams that join together to create associations that forever become part of the child’s soul.

Around the age of 6, the absorbent mind of the child becomes an inquiring mind. Children now have the ability to reason as well as to consciously select and remember what they are learning. This is a time when they want to know the why and how of things and demonstrate the power of their imaginations. It is this inquiring mind, guided by the vital life force and the inner guide, which naturally propels children to engage with their environments.

** Meaningful Work:** One of the secrets of engaging children is to provide them with meaningful work. For work to be “meaningful” it must capture the child’s attention and engage her concentration. This level of engagement reflects the real work of self-construction, motivated by the vital life force and the inner guide.

> If the child lacks the external means to adapt, he has no way to utilize the great energy that is his. Moreover, he is impelled instinctively towards activity that utilizes all his energies because in this way he can perfect his faculties. Everything depends on this. (Montessori, 1991, p. 47)

Parents will appreciate knowing that when they provide meaningful work opportunities in the home, their children will engage themselves at deeper levels of concentration, which will most likely result in children being calm and happy.

**Movement:** From the moment of birth, children engage environment through movement. This movement adds to their developing intelligence by bringing sensorial impressions into the subconscious mind. In addition, children’s movements develop both their muscular as well as their neurological structures.

For children’s optimal intellectual development, it is essential for parents to give their children the freedom to move about and engage themselves in the exploration of their surroundings as much as possible. Movement within the environment increases children’s ability to experience their environments in a multisensory manner.

**Freedom of Choice:** Children are more likely to engage in meaningful work when they have freedom to choose what to do. It is easier to trust that children will make appropriate choices
when we remember that their inner guide is there to assist them in their choices. It is important to note that children are most successful in accessing their inner guide when their lower mind is calm. Deep breathing, silence, and working alone enhance children’s ability to listen to their inner guide.

“The child must learn by his own individual activity, being given a mental freedom to take what he needs, and not be questioned in his choice” (Montessori, 1989, p. 5). When adults make unnecessary choices, children forget how to access their inner knowledge and their ability to relate to their authenticity becomes unstable. Instead of learning self-reliance, children learn to rely on others to make their decisions.

**The Integration Phase**

Integration, the third phase of the VEIL Model, focuses on how children assimilate and process the information they receive from their environments. The four qualities are: 1) Concentration; 2) Repetition; 3) Emotional Safety; and 4) Meaningful Context.

**Concentration:** Concentration is the bridge to the inner guide and authentic self. To reach this state, children must ignore the distractions of sensorial sensations, memories, fantasies, and general wanderings of the mind. Achieving this state of concentration occurs when children find an activity that captures their deepest attention. Montessori recognized the relationship between integration and concentration:

> He is agitated until he seeks something within the depths of his mind that he has not yet found for himself. It must hold his entire attention; he must concentrate and consecrate his entire being; he must be free from everything that goes on around him. This is what we call the great work. (1991, p. 63)

It is important that parents and teachers are sensitive to this delicate state of concentration and seek to protect it. When children are concentrating, it is best to leave them alone. If it is imperative to disturb a child in deep concentration, do so gently. Another unintentional disturbance of a child’s concentration is to say “Good job!” while the child is working. This breaks her flow of concentration.

**Repetition:** Children’s ability to integrate, assimilate, and remember what they are learning is enhanced by repetition. As children repeat activities, they strengthen the neural pathways of the brain, the power of their memory increases, and constructive habits are formed.

When parents understand the importance of repetition they are more able to be patient when their children repeat the same work over and over again.

**Emotional Safety:** When children experience negative emotional feelings, ranging from low-level anxiety to extreme fear, their capacity to integrate new concepts and remember what they have learned is deeply affected. According to Daniel Goleman, “When emotions overwhelm concentration, what is being swamped is the mental capacity cognitive scientists call ‘working memory,’ the ability to hold in mind all information relevant to the task at hand” (1995, p. 79).

Emotional safety for children is best achieved when parents and caregivers demonstrate respect and offer encouragement to children. When children experience positive regard, they develop self-confidence and the courage to attempt new things.

**Meaningful Context:** Children integrate and assimilate information more effectively when what they learn is related to concepts previously learned.
and/or presented in the context of the greater whole. This is possible because of the existing engrams and associations in their subconscious mind. In addition, children’s ability to learn is greater when they view the work as meaningful.

Parents who are more aware of what their children have experienced can provide new input that is connected to former concepts.

The Love Phase

Love is the culmination phase of the VEIL Model; it is where children experience the joy of mastering a concept. This spontaneous joy embeds itself in their subconscious memory and becomes the seed of motivation. The successful completion of an Unveiling Cycle motivates children to reach out and learn more. They confidently enter another cycle of learning, creating a spiral effect that continues to unveil their authentic self. The four elements of the Love Phase are: 1) Normalization; 2) Authenticity and Self-Actualization; 3) Creativity; and 4) Self-Discipline.

Normalization: When children are encouraged to live and work in harmony with the natural laws of child development, they manifest positive psychological characteristics, such as enthusiasm, thoughtfulness, and joy. Montessori saw this state of equilibrium as the normal state of healthy children and called it “normalization.” She also recognized that when children are unable to organize their personality with the natural developmental principles, they often manifested negative behaviors. Montessori described this state of negativity as being a deviation from the norm.

But when the attractions of the new environment exert their spell, offering motives for constructive activity, then all these energies combine and the deviations can be dispersed. A unique type of child appears, a “new child”, but really it is the child’s true “personality” allowed to construct itself normally. (Montessori, 1988, p. 185)

Authenticity and Self-Actualization: As children naturally move through their Unveiling Cycles and connect with their authenticity, they begin to manifest the same qualities that Abraham Maslow (1971, pp. 45–49) identified as the qualities of Self-Actualization:

1) Experiencing fully, vividly, selflessly with full concentration and total absorption
2) Making growth choices rather than fear choices
3) Allowing Self to emerge
4) Being honest and taking responsibility for one’s own actions
5) Listening to one’s own inner voice
6) Actualizing one’s potentials
7) Being surprised by joy—“peak experiences” or transient moments of self-actualization
8) Opening up to one’s authentic self and letting go of defenses

Self-actualization is not a permanent state of being but rather a gradual process of becoming more connected to the authentic self and acting from authenticity. The more adults model this behavior, the easier it is for children to do the same.

Creativity: Each time children reach the Love Phase of the Unveiling Cycle, they experience self-confidence, enthusiasm, trust, and determination, the qualities at the heart of the creative process. In addition to being ready to master a new concept, children often want to be creative with what they already know. “Whether on the outer or inner plane, there is a tiny light in the unconscious of mankind, which guides it toward better things” (Montessori, 1988, p. 191).

Self-Discipline: As children engage themselves in the Unveiling Spiral, they develop the power of will, the root of inner discipline. A partnership between the vital life force and the inner guide develops:

The vital force is the energy of impulse and the inner guide is the voice of discrimination or inhibition. Impulse by itself leads to erratic and meaningless activity. Inhibition by itself leads to timidity and dependence on others... As they [children] are allowed to follow their internal laws of development they naturally find the balance between the two and the will is formed. (Mcfarland, 2011, p. 112)

Montessori witnessed three stages of will:

1) Attention and Attraction to the Environment: Children are attracted to specific activities and unconsciously eliminate other activities. This is the beginning of inner discipline.
2) Conscious Self-Discipline: During the second stage, children move from unconscious will development to conscious self-discipline. Realizing the inner satisfaction of being involved with constructive work, children continue to make constructive decisions.
3) Obedience: At this stage, children, being filled with love for self, others, and the environment, willingly take direction from caring adults. This is possible because they are primarily operating from their authentic self and their egos are not threatened by others giving directions.
Life's greatest creation is the inner-directed process that children experience as they unveil their authentic self. The more educators and parents work together and honor children's natural process of development, the more children will be able to manifest their greatest potentials and lead us to a brighter future. Maria Montessori saw this possibility over a century ago.

When prejudice is vanquished by knowledge, then there will appear in the world a "superior child" with his marvelous powers which today remain hidden. Then there will appear the child who is destined to form a humanity capable of understanding and controlling our present civilization. (Montessori, 1991, p. 16)

References


SONNIE MCFARLAND and JIM MCFARLAND, PhD, are co-authors of Montessori Parenting: Unveiling the Authentic Self. Sonnie is the AMS 2011 Living Legacy and is AMS-credentialed (Early Childhood). She is the chair of the AMS Peace Committee. Contact Sonnie at sonnie@shiningmountainspress.com and Jim at jim@shiningmountainspress.com.