

MONTESSORI ACTIVITIES FOR TODDLERS

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MONTESSORI ACTIVITIES FOR THE WHOLE CHILD

Often the easiest way to begin with Montessori at home is to start with activities.

Montessori activities are based on developing the whole child. We begin by looking at the child to see what their needs are. We then set up activities to meet those needs.

Toddlers' needs consist of using their hands in various ways (working on their grasp, the ability to reach across the middle of their body, hand-to-hand transfer, carrying objects, using two hands together); practicing gross-motor movement; self-expression; and communication.

Montessori activities for toddlers fall into five main areas:

1. eye-hand coordination
2. music and movement
3. practical life (activities of daily life)
4. arts and crafts
5. language

There is a list of Montessori activities for toddlers in the appendix of this book. Ages are given as an indication only. Be sure to follow the child and see which activities keep their attention, removing those that are too hard or too easy.



WHAT MAKES AN ACTIVITY MONTESSORI?

Montessori activities usually **target one skill**. For example, putting a ball into a box through a small hole allows the child to master this one skill. This differs from many traditional plastic toys that target multiple skills at the same time, with one part for pushing, one part where a ball drops, another part that makes a noise, and so on.

We also prefer to use **natural materials**. Toddlers explore with all their senses. Natural materials like wood are lovely to touch and generally safe for putting in their mouths, and the weight of the object is more likely to be directly related to its size. Although they are sometimes more expensive, wooden toys are often more durable and can be found secondhand and then passed on once the child has finished with them. Storing activities in containers made of natural materials, like woven baskets, incorporates handmade elements and beauty into the space, too.

Many Montessori activities have a **beginning, middle, and end**. The child may begin with a small part of the sequence and, as they develop, will be able to complete the full *work cycle*, including replacing the activity on the shelf. They experience peace while they are practicing the activity—and satisfaction once they complete it. For example, when arranging flowers, at first a child may show interest only in pouring water and using the sponge to wipe it up. Gradually they will learn all the steps and complete the work cycle, filling small vases with water, arranging all the flowers, putting away the materials at the end, and cleaning up any water that was spilled.

Montessori activities are **complete**. Completing an activity is important for their sense of mastery. A child can become frustrated if, for example, a piece of a puzzle is missing. If any pieces are missing, we remove the whole activity.

Activities are often organized in individual **trays and baskets**. Within each tray or basket is everything the child needs to complete the task by themselves. For example, if the activity involves water, we may want to include a sponge or hand mitt to clean up any spills.

Children gain mastery of an activity through **repetition**. The activity should be exactly at their level—challenging enough that it is not too easy yet not so difficult that they give up. I love seeing a row of clothespins along the top of a painting on the drying rack—a sign that a child has been busy working to master pinning up their paintings to dry.

They may focus on and repeat just one part of the activity. For example, they may practice squeezing a sponge or filling a jug with water from a tap. We observe and allow them to repeat and repeat the section they are trying to master. They will eventually add steps to the process or move on to another activity.

A child has the **freedom to choose** an activity. Our spaces are set up to encourage this freedom of choice by displaying a limited number of activities that they are working to master.

“The task of teaching becomes easy, since we do not need to choose what we shall teach, but should place all before him for the satisfaction of his mental appetite. He must have absolute freedom of choice, and then he requires nothing but repeated experiences which will become increasingly marked by interest and serious attention, during his acquisition of some desired knowledge.”

—Dr. Maria Montessori, *To Educate the Human Potential*

HOW TO SHOW THE CHILD AN ACTIVITY

In Montessori teacher training, we learn to show children how to do each activity in the classroom by giving them “a presentation.” In a presentation, each activity is broken into little steps, from taking the tray to the table, to presenting the activity step by step, to returning the tray to the shelf. We practice the presentation for each activity over and over. Then, if the child needs help in class, we know the activity so well from practicing that we can improvise and step in to give them just as much help as they need.

We can use the same approach at home. We can set up an activity, do it ourselves first, break the activity into little steps, and practice to see how our child might manage.

Let them choose the activity they are interested in and try it for as long as they can without interfering. Even if they drop something, we can sit on our hands to see if they will react and pick it up themselves. When we see that they are struggling and getting frustrated, we can step in and say, “Watch,” and then show them, slowly, for example, how to turn the lid of the jar. Then we can step back again to see how they manage.

Here are some tips for showing an activity to the child:

- Make precise, slow hand movements so the child can observe clearly. For example, break down all the tiny steps we take to open a button, and slowly show them each one.
- Avoid talking as we demonstrate—otherwise the child won't know whether to look at us while we talk or watch our hands.
- Try to show them the same way each time to make it easier for them to pick up any steps they may be missing.
- Handle the objects in a way that the child can manage, for example, using two hands to carry a tray, a glass, and so on.
- If they don't want us to help, they may be open to a verbal cue, like "Push, push." Or we can let them keep trying by themselves until they master the task. Or they may walk away and try again at another time.

S LOW

H ANDS

O MIT

W ORDS

I first heard the acronym *SHOW* from my Montessori friend Jeanne-Marie Paynel. It is a useful reminder to adults to use slow hands and omit words when we are showing our children something new.

This helps the child pick things up more easily. Our movements are slow and easy to follow. If we explain with words at the same time, our toddler isn't sure whether to listen to us or watch us—so we stay quiet so they can focus on our movements without words.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES TO KEEP IN MIND

1. Let the child lead

Follow the child's pace and interests. Let them take the time to choose for themselves rather than suggesting or leading the play. Let them pick from activities they are working to master—nothing too easy or too difficult. Something challenging but not so hard that they give up.

2. Let them work with the activity as long as they like

As the child is mastering an activity, we do not want to rush them to finish—even if a sibling is waiting. Once they have finished the activity, ask if they would like to do it again. This encourages repetition and gives them the chance to repeat, practice, master the activity, and increase their concentration.

Ideally, we don't interrupt our child's deep focus. A simple comment from us can distract them from whatever they are working to master, and they may abandon the activity completely. Wait until they look to us for feedback, step in to offer help when they are frustrated, or see that they have finished before we make a request like coming to the table to eat dinner.

3. Avoid quizzing the child

We may not realize we are doing it, but we are constantly quizzing our children. “What color is this?” “How many apples am I holding?” “Can you show Grandma how you can walk?”

I did it too when my son was small. Often I'd ask him to demonstrate some new skill or perform some new trick on cue. Maybe to show off in some way. Or maybe to push him to learn a little faster.

Now I see that this prompting is a kind of test for a child. And there is generally only one correct answer, so if the answer they give is wrong, we have no other option than to say, “No, that flower is yellow, not blue.” Not exactly great for building a child's confidence.

Instead we can continue to name things, ask questions to arouse curiosity, and use observation to see what the child has mastered and what they are still practicing.

Now, the only time I will quiz a child is if I am 100 percent sure they know the answer and will be excited to tell me. For example, if they have been identifying blue objects all by themselves, I could point to something blue and ask, “What color is this?” They will be delighted to shriek, “Blue!” This usually starts when they are about 3 years old.

4. Put the activity away when finished

When the child is finished with an activity, we can encourage them to return it to its place on the shelf. This routine emphasizes that there is a beginning, middle, and end to a task.

And putting things back in their special place on the shelf gives order and calm to the space.

With young toddlers, we can first model where things belong and introduce putting things back as the last part of the activity. We can then start to work together with our child to bring things back to the shelf—they might carry one part and we carry the other. Then we can scaffold onto this base by encouraging them to put it back by themselves, for example, tapping the shelf where it belongs. Gradually we will see them put things away more and more by themselves.

They may not do this every day, just as we do not feel like cooking every day. Instead of insisting that they do, we could say, “You want me to do it? Okay, I’ll carry this one and you carry that one.”

Even older children may need some help breaking the task into manageable parts. “Let’s first put the blocks back, and then we’ll work on the books.”

If they have moved on to the next activity, I do not generally break their concentration. Instead I put away the activity myself, modeling for the child what to do the next time. They may not actually see us do it, but they may see us from the corner of their eye or unconsciously absorb what we are doing.

5. Model, model, model

Our child learns a lot from observing us and other people around them. So we can think how a young child could be successful and model that—for example, push in our chair with two hands, avoid sitting on a low table or shelf, and carry just one thing at a time.

6. Allow any use of the materials, but stop when they’re used inappropriately

A child will explore activities in different ways (and often in ways we weren’t expecting). We do not want to limit their creativity by stepping in to correct them. If they are not harming the materials, themselves, or someone else, then there is no need to interrupt them. We could perhaps make a mental note to show them its purpose at another time. For example, if a child is using a watering can to fill a bucket, we could show them at another neutral moment how to use the watering can to water some plants.

However, if the child is using the objects inappropriately, we may gently step in. For example, “I can’t let you bang that glass on the window.” We could then show them that the glasses are for drinking or show them an activity that allows them to use that skill, for example, banging a drum or doing a small hammer-and-nail activity.

7. Modify to meet their level

We may be able to modify an activity to make it easier or more difficult. For example, if our child is struggling with putting shapes into a shape sorter, we can keep the easier shapes (like a cylinder) and remove the more difficult shapes. Then we can build up slowly, adding in a few more shapes as our child gains more skill.

Sometimes for a younger child, when there are fewer items in a set, the child's concentration increases. For example, in my classroom we usually have five to eight animals in our wooden barn, which gets used all the time. We can make more items available as the child grows.

8. Arrange the activities on shelves from easiest to hardest

By putting the activities on the shelf in increasing difficulty from left to right, we help the child move from easier to more difficult activities. If they find an activity too difficult, they can move back to the earlier activity.

9. Use what is available

There is no need to buy all the materials featured in this book. They are meant only to give an idea of the types of activities that will interest toddlers. Similar ones can be made from things we already have lying around the house.

Here are some examples:

- If our child is interested in how coins go into a slot, rather than buying a coin box, cut a narrow slot into a shoe box and offer some large buttons for the child to put through the hole.
- If our child is interested in threading, they can thread dried penne pasta onto a shoe lace with a large knot at the end.
- If our child is interested in opening and closing, collect old jars and rinse them out so our child can practice taking the lids on and off. Use old wallets or purses with different clasps. Hide some fun things inside for them to discover.

10. Be careful with small parts and sharp objects

Montessori activities often involve objects with small parts, or may involve knives or scissors. These activities should always be supervised. We don't need to hover—yet we keep observing in a calm way to make sure they are using the items in a safe way.

HOW TO SET UP AN ACTIVITY



Toddlers generally choose what to play with according to what looks interesting to them in the moment.

So, instead of simply placing an activity on the shelf, I recommend taking a couple of minutes to set it up in a way that makes it even more engaging for our child.

1. **Display it on a shelf.** Rather than storing activities in a toy box, it is much easier for a toddler to see what is available when we set a few things out on a shelf.
2. **Make it attractive.** Putting an activity into a basket or tray can make it more appealing to a child. If the child does not seem interested in the activity anymore, sometimes changing the tray can make it more appealing.
3. **Show what belongs together.** A tray or basket keeps all the necessary items together. For example, with a play-dough tray we can include a container of play dough; implements they can use to mold, cut, and make patterns; and a mat to protect the table.
4. **Prepare everything so our child can help themselves.** In a painting area, we can have the apron hanging on a hook off one side of the easel and a damp cloth hanging off the other side at the ready for spills, to wipe their hands, or to clean the easel at the end. There could be a basket of fresh paper so they can help themselves and a folding clothesline with clothespins so they can hang their paintings to dry by themselves. Younger children will need some help with these steps, but gradually they will be able to take on more and more themselves.
5. **Undo the activity.** A completed activity is less attractive to a toddler than one that has been left undone. Disassemble the activity before returning it to the shelf. Place the pieces in a bowl to the left (say, puzzle pieces) and the activity to the right (the empty puzzle base). Tracking the movement from left to right is indirect preparation for reading.

HOW TO SET UP AN ACTIVITY

EXAMPLES



ELEMENTS

- tray
- undone
- left to right
- easiest to hardest along shelf
- at child's height
- beautiful to attract child's interest
- challenging to child—not too easy, not too difficult
- everything at the ready
- items the child can manage themselves



Nº1 WATERCOLOR

On a tray:

- watercolor brush
- small jar with small amount of water
- watercolor tablet (begin with one color if you can find the colors separately, so the colors aren't mixed together)

Also provide:

- an underlay to protect the table
- watercolor paper (a little thicker than regular paper)
- a cloth for small spills

Nº2 SETTING TABLE

We can show our child how to set the table, providing the following:

- a real glass, small enough for a toddler to manage
- bowl or plate
- small fork, spoon (knife if your child is using one)

Also provide:

- a place mat with markings for fork, spoon, knife, bowl, and glass

03 / PRACTICAL LIFE

ACTIVITIES OF DAILY LIFE AROUND THE HOME



Most parents notice that toddlers love to help around the home, participating in activities that have to do with looking after ourselves and our environment. These activities might be chores to us, but young children love them. And I should mention that they are great for calming active children.

Dr. Montessori discovered quickly that the children in her school wanted to help care for the classroom, themselves, their classmates, and the environment. So she introduced child-sized tools to help them succeed.

These activities are great for learning a sequence, like retrieving and putting on an apron all the way through washing and drying the dishes.

The task will go more slowly and require supervision when the child helps. We'll need to lower our expectations about the final product—the banana slices may be a bit mashed and the beans may have some ends that were missed. However, once they have mastered the skills, our child will become more and more independent. My children have grown up baking and cooking. Now that they are teenagers, they bake a lot and sometimes offer to cook dinner as well.

Here are some ways children can help around the home:

- **Plant care**—watering the plants, dusting the leaves, planting seeds, arranging flowers in small vases (using a small funnel and small pitcher to fill the vase with water)
- **Food preparation**—washing vegetables, beating eggs, scooping their own cereal out of a small container and adding milk from a small jug
- **Snack time**—helping themselves to food from an accessible snack area (which we restock daily with the help of our child, putting out only as much as we are happy for them to eat), peeling and slicing fruit, spreading topping on crackers, squeezing orange juice, pouring water to drink from a small jug
- **Mealtimes**—setting and clearing the table, washing dishes
- **Baking**—taking turns, measuring ingredients, helping to add ingredients, stirring
- **Cleaning**—sweeping, dusting, wiping spills, cleaning windows, polishing mirrors
- **Caring for pets**—feeding the pet, helping to walk the dog, filling up a water bowl

- **Learning to care for themselves**—blowing nose, brushing hair and teeth, washing hands
- **Dressing themselves**—taking socks on and off, fastening Velcro shoes, putting on a T-shirt, pulling trousers up and down, putting on a coat (see page 140 to learn the coat flip), practicing opening and closing zippers/snaps/buttons/shoelaces
- **Helping with the laundry**—bringing dirty clothes to the laundry basket, putting clothes in and taking them out of the washing machine, adding soap, sorting the clean clothes
- **Getting ready for overnight visitors**—making the beds, putting out a clean towel for the guests, putting away toys
- **Trips to the supermarket**—making a list with pictures, getting things from the shelves, helping to push the shopping cart, passing things to us to put on the checkout counter, carrying bags of groceries, putting groceries away at home
- **Volunteer work**—It's never too early to set the example of helping others. When my children were young, one of our weekly outings was to a local nursing home where we would visit the same residents each week. Seeing a young toddler and baby was the highlight of their week, and it taught my children at an early age that it feels lovely to help others.

Tips for practical life activities at home

Most of all, remember that it is meant to be fun. Stop before becoming overwhelmed. And keep practicing!

- Put out only as much as we want to clean up, be it water, dish soap, or a travel-sized bottle of shampoo.
- Have cleaning supplies at the ready: a hand mitt on the table to wipe up small spills, a child-sized broom and mop for larger spills.
- When children are younger than 2 years old, activities will likely have only 1 or 2 steps. As they gain mastery, add more steps (for example, put on an apron, wipe up at the end, take wet cloths to the laundry, and so on).
- Focus on the process, not the result. When the child helps, the task will take longer and the result may not look perfect, but the child is learning to master these skills and will become a lifelong helper at home.
- Look for ways the child can help. When they are younger, keep it simple (an 18-month-old can help carry the T-shirt while we carry the pants to the laundry basket and/or rinse some salad leaves for dinner); as they get to 2+ years, they can help out with even more.

- Look for baskets, trays, and simple caddies to arrange items for them to help, for example, to keep all the window-cleaning items together at the ready.
- We don't have to spend a lot of money. Keep it budget friendly by creating activities with things around the home. And look out for a few nice things like a wooden broom or a larger item like a learning tower to add to a list for birthdays and other special occasions.

Benefits of practical life activities at home

Beyond the simple pleasure young children take from these practical life activities, they are valuable in more ways than one:

- The child is learning to take responsibility in the home.
- We are working together to create, practice, and master the activities.
- Collaboration creates connection.
- These skills require repetition to gain mastery, which is great for building concentration.
- Our child enjoys feeling like a part of the family and being able to contribute.
- These activities involve sequences. As our child's concentration grows, we can increase the number of steps in the activity.
- These activities involve a lot of movement, great for refining fine-motor and gross-motor skills (for example, pouring water without spilling, using a sponge).
- There are many language opportunities around these activities: talking about what we're doing together and giving vocabulary for kitchen implements, food, tools for cleaning, and so on.
- The child learns new skills, independence, and a feeling of self-reliance.

I always say it is good to start young to lay a strong foundation while they are willing. These practical life skills help children learn to care for themselves, care for others (pets, for example), and care for their environment.

SOME AT-HOME PRACTICAL LIFE ACTIVITIES BY AGE

Wondering how to include your child around the home? Here are some ideas for various ages.

You can see how we scaffold their skills with these simple one-step activities for children from 12 to 18 months. Then, in addition to these activities, we offer activities of increasing difficulty for children from 18 months to 3 years. The child from 3 to 4 years old can begin longer, more complex tasks, in addition to those activities from earlier age groups.



12 to 18 months

KITCHEN

- Pour glass of water or milk using small jug—use small amount of liquid to avoid large spills
- Add milk to cereal
- Scoop cereal into bowl
- Wipe up spills with hand mitt
- Take plate to kitchen
- Drink from a glass

BATHROOM

- Brush hair
- Brush teeth with assistance
- Wash hands
- Pack away bath toys
- Fetch and hang up towel

BEDROOM

- Fetch diaper/underwear
- Put dirty clothes in laundry basket
- Open curtains
- Choose between two options for clothing
- Get dressed with assistance
- Take off socks

OTHER

- Help put toys away
- Fetch shoes
- Help the parent (for example, “Can you bring me the watering can, please?”)
- Turn light switch on/off

18 months to 3 years

KITCHEN

- Prepare a snack/sandwich
- Peel and slice a banana
- Peel a mandarin orange
- Peel and cut an apple with assistance
- Wash fruits and vegetables
- Make orange juice
- Set the table/clear the table
- Wipe the table
- Sweep the floor—use a dustpan and brush
- Make coffee for parent (push buttons on coffee machine/fetch cup and saucer)

BATHROOM

- Blow nose
- Brush teeth
- Wash body—use small travel-sized soap bottles to minimize waste
- Clean face

BEDROOM

- Help to make bed by pulling up cover
- Choose clothes
- Get dressed with little help

OTHER

- Arrange flowers in small vases
- Pack and carry bag/backpack
- Put on coat
- Put on shoes with Velcro closure
- Water plants
- Put toys into baskets and return them to shelf
- Clean windows
- Load/unload washing machine and dryer
- Sort socks and clothing by color
- Fetch products in supermarket/push cart/help unpack groceries
- Dust
- Put leash on dog and brush dog

3 to 4 years

KITCHEN

- Unload dishwasher
- Measure and mix ingredients for baking
- Scrub and peel vegetables, such as potatoes and carrots
- Assist with cooking (for example, making lasagna)

BATHROOM

- Use toilet/flush toilet/close toilet seat
- Place wet clothing in laundry area
- Wipe with assistance after using toilet
- Wash hair—use travel-sized bottles to minimize waste

BEDROOM

- Make bed—pull up duvet
- Pack clothes into drawers/closet

OTHER

- Feed pets
- Help with recycling
- Fold laundry
- Fold socks
- Vacuum
- Open car door with remote

03 / PRACTICAL LIFE

Nº1 CARE OF SELF

There are many opportunities for our child to learn how to look after themselves as we gradually scaffold their skills so they can do more and more for themselves. They love to master these tasks, including brushing their hair and their teeth, blowing their nose, and washing their hands. From 15 months.

Nº2 FOOD PREPARATION

Toddlers love to make their own snack or help with meal preparation. Look for tools that are suited to small hands so they can succeed. At first the child will need some assistance. For example, first we can show them how to peel the apple. Then we can hold the apple on a board while they peel from top to bottom, putting the peel into a bowl to take to the compost bin afterward. We show them how to place their hands safely on the apple cutter. We can slice the apple across the middle so the child can easily push the apple cutter through the fruit. Apple cutting from 2 years.

Nº3 TABLE SETTING

Use a low cupboard to provide toddlers access to their bowl, cutlery, and glass so they can set the table following a marked place mat as a guide.

Nº4 BAKING

Toddlers can help to add ingredients that we have measured, mix ingredients with a wooden spoon, knead dough, use cookie cutters, and decorate baked goods. And yes, they also can help us with tasting the finished product. From 12 months.

Nº5 WINDOW CLEANING

It is amazing how toddlers are able to manage squeezing a spray bottle to clean the windows—the repeated movement is great for their hand strength. Then they can wipe the windows from top to bottom with a squeegee and use a cloth to dry them. We can use water or add some vinegar to make the windows sparkle. From 18 months.

Nº6 FLOWER ARRANGING

Flower arranging is a multistep process that allows the toddler to refine their fine-motor skills and practice carrying and pouring water with control—all while adding beauty to the home. First, they can fill a very small jug with water from the tap and place it on a tray to catch any water that might spill. Using a small funnel, they can pour the water into the vase. Then they can place a flower in the vase and place the vase on a doily (which is a nice extra step, good for developing concentration). Have a sponge at the ready for small spills. From 18 months.

Nº7 CLEANING

Having small cleaning tools at the ready—for example, a broom, a mop, a dustpan and brush, hand mitts, and sponges—allows the toddler to learn to care for the home. Most toddlers love to help sweep, mop, and dust. This small dustpan and brush are useful for sweeping up crumbs and provide great practice for working with two hands together. From 12 months.

