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A Montessori Model for Conflict Resolution

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Mario Montessori, in his book *Education for Human Development*, writes about children as agents of change: "Children have the urge not only to adapt to the environment, but to change it as they go along and as their needs and their imaginations (or lack of it) dictate." This is what Maria Montessori called their cosmic task. All children have the power to create fantastic new possibilities; however, they need our guidance. Humans do not have instincts as do the animals. Children must construct themselves through conscious effort.

Our society desperately needs people who will use their power to change things constructively. Your children can do this with adult help. We must provide them with a model for conflict resolution that will not only help them to solve problems but also to appreciate themselves and others in the process. The following is a quote from *To Educate the Human Potential* in which Maria Montessori talks about the elementary-aged child: "...education at this age concerns the child's exploration of the moral field, discrimination between good and evil. He no longer is receptive, absorbing impressions with ease, but wants to understand for himself, not content with accepting mere facts." As moral activity develops, he wants to use his own judgment, which often will be quite different from that of his teachers (or parents). There is nothing more difficult than to teach moral values to a child of this

age; he gives an immediate retort to everything that we say, having become a rebel. (Parents) often feel hurt because their children, formerly all love and affection, have become impertinent and rudely domineering. An inner change has taken place, but nature is quite logical in arousing now, in the child, not only a hunger for knowledge and understanding, but a claim to mental independence, a desire to distinguish good from evil by his own powers, and to resent limitation by arbitrary authority. In the field of morality, the child now stands in need of his own inner light.

One of the ways our Montessori-trained professionals help your children to develop their "own inner light" is through the resolution of conflicts in a cooperative way. The directresses do not expect the children to agree on everything. For this reason a cooperative framework for dealing with disagreement is critical. Conflict, per se, is not harmful. Children know that disagreement exists; to force them to agree is to ask them to deny reality and it is to deprive them of a real education both at home and at school.

It is no coincidence that the word challenge means 1) to require one to use his or her full range of abilities; and 2) to call something into question. Genuine learning does not take place after a conflict when feelings are soothed or issues are smoothed over. The same is true of effective problem solving: a rigid demand for agreement and/or apolo-

gies means that your children will effectively be prevented from contributing their wisdom to the problem at hand.

It's important to remember: What makes disagreement destructive is not the fact of conflict itself but the addition of competition. In a debate (as opposed to a discussion or dialogue), the point is to win rather than to reach the best solution or arrive at a compromise with which everyone is satisfied.

"A cooperative process leads to the defining of conflicting interests as a mutual problem to be solved by collaborative effort. It facilitates the recognition of the legitimacy of each other's interests and of the necessity of searching for a solution that is responsive to the needs of all. It tends to limit rather than expand the scope of conflicting interests. In contrast, a competitive process stimulates the view that the solution of conflict can only be one that is imposed by one side on the other... through superior force, deceptions, or cleverness... The enhancement of one's own power and the minimization of the legitimacy of the other side's interests in the situation become objectives."

Try to take every opportunity to model for your children the kind of behavior that is consistent with Montessori philosophy. How adults resolve conflicts is an area of utmost importance. Children watch how we relate to one another. Our actions indeed speak louder than our words.

The following are some general strategies that are inspired by author Alfie Kohn. They are consistent with the principles and practices used in Montessori classrooms. Here they have been adapted for use in your home environment.

- Do things with your children, not to them. Give them respect, a sense of autonomy, and some responsibility for making decisions about chores and privileges.
- Make your home a safe, warm place partly by being a safe, warm person to whom they can turn – a guide and ally, not someone to be feared or pleased.
- Demonstrate how caring people act, think and feel by the way you treat others and by how you talk about events outside the home.
- Maximize opportunities to work with each other to make decisions and to handle problems.
- Avoid having your children work against each other. Conflict handled carefully can be useful, but competition teaches that siblings (and friends) are potential obstacles to one's own success.
- Encourage your children to be generous and responsible without the fear of punishment or the promise of rewards.
- Point out the effects of their actions on others. Help them to see the way their behavior – and everything else – looks from other people's perspectives.
- Attribute to them the best possible motive consistent with the facts. Assuming that mischief can be explained by lack of skills or guidance – rather than by a sinister desire to cause trouble – can set an “auspicious circle” into motion.
- Keep their ages and abilities in mind. Measure all your explanations, activities, instructions, assumptions and limits against their cognitive, social and moral capacities.

To help children act on their capacity to care, we must help them to become part of a caring community – that is, a community where care and trust are emphasized above

restrictions and threats, where unity and pride (of accomplishment and in purpose) replace winning and losing, and where each person is asked, helped, and inspired to live up to such ideals and values as kindness, fairness, and responsibility. (Such) a community seeks to meet each child's need to feel competent, connected to others, and autonomous... Students are not only exposed to basic human values, they also have many opportunities to think about, discuss, and act on those values, while gaining experiences that promote empathy and understanding of others.

School and home must work together to provide a cohesive framework for children to grow and develop in peace and harmony with one another.

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