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The Art of Observation

by Mary Caroline Parker

The art of observation: for most parents, it's not about how to do something for your child, or how to do something to your child.

Almost everything grown-ups do with children is about monitoring them. If we think about our interactions with children in terms of what the purpose is, we are almost always directing them, reminding them, correcting them, protecting them, or even lecturing them about something. We often try to take advantage of every possible opportunity to teach them something.

Stan Ferguson, therapist, counselor, and author of *What Parents Need to Know About Children*, estimates that about 99.9% of all adult communication with children is basically this kind of monitoring. Many parents might argue that this type of interaction is the responsibility of parenting. That's what we signed up for – to love our children, nurture them, protect them, and show them the way.

It would be so interesting if someone could follow us around with a little notepad just for one day and write down everything we say to our child. It might come out something like this: Sweetie, it's time to get up! Come on, sleepyhead, get a move on! You know you can't wear that to school, so don't even go there. What do you mean, you can't find your socks? Hurry up, it's time for breakfast. Quit playing with your cereal. Leave your brother alone. Did you brush your teeth? You're going to be late for car pool. Don't forget your lunch. Would you two quit bickering? No playing

around after school or we'll be late to your dentist appointment. Yes, you have to go to the dentist. Because I said so, that's why.

Does this sound familiar? And all this before we ever leave the house in the morning!

The truth is that we're just not used to spending time with our children without interacting with them. Lots of times we're trying to make sure they don't do something wrong. Or, if we're not fast enough, we're correcting them after they've already done something wrong. And if we're not correcting them for doing something we don't like, then we're praising them for doing something we do like.

It's really kind of exhausting, always being on duty, isn't it? It's probably pretty exhausting for the children, too.

What would it be like to be with our children without directing and controlling? What would it be like to just be present with that child, and what would it be like for the child? Ferguson calls this state of just being with your child "noticing" the child. Maria Montessori called it "observing" the child.

Susanne Short is a psychoanalyst who is also a Montessori teacher. Over 20 years ago she wrote an article about Montessori education from the viewpoint of analytical psychology. She wrote, "By being observed somehow the psyche knows that it is being seen. To be seen is to feel that the observer knows who one is. ... To observe is to be with someone. What is important for anyone is to be seen as one truly is. It is the only thing that really matters."

Isn't that the essence of human relationships? Not to talk to someone, or to teach someone something, or to tell someone what to do. But just to be with someone. Every parent has already had this experience in its purest form. Maybe the ultimate example of just being with someone is what we experience when we look into the eyes of a newborn baby.

You have probably noticed that in Montessori schools we talk a lot about "observation" and "observing the child." In most schools, parents are invited to come and observe in the classroom. The experience of observing in the classroom gives us a framework to talk about observation. However, the ideas and techniques discussed are not only relevant to observing in Montessori classrooms. They're things you can think about and try at home, too. When you come to observe in the classroom, you're not going to be interacting with your child. You won't be directing her or telling her what to do; you won't be correcting her or anything she does; and you won't even be "monitoring" her. You'll just be sitting quietly in a chair watching. So right there is a huge difference in your experience of your child.

There's an old saying, "Looking at the world through rose-colored glasses." As a parent, you bring so much with you to your observation that you are looking as if through colored glasses. They may be rose-colored glasses, they may be dark glasses, or they may be a thick screen that keeps you from seeing anything except the screen itself. What are some of the things that color what we see?

Internal obstacles that we bring with us

Distractions, such as worries and anxieties about being too busy, running late, scheduling, phone calls, or other responsibilities: anything that takes us outside of our current situation. How you are feeling physically is also an internal obstacle. Are your allergies bothering you? Are you comfortable in that chair? What is your mood like? Are you upset because of an argument you had with your husband this morning? Are you irritated because you ran into traffic on your commute today? Sometimes you're too distracted, or just too busy, or too worried or anxious to be able to look and see.

Most parents don't have a lot of time to spend with their children, and often the few precious minutes you do have must be shared with the demands of daily life. You have to run errands, you have to get the groceries, you have to get the dishes in the dishwasher, you have to answer the telephone (you do, don't you? No matter what else is happening when it rings!), you have to do whatever is next on the list. We cheat ourselves of some of the deepest joy that we can experience in being with our children, because other things seem so important at the time.

When you pick up your child at school, for example, take a moment to get down on her level and look in her eyes. Tell her you are happy to see her. Walk slowly by her side, at her pace, to the car. Notice her. Listen to what she wants to share with you about her day.

What you see is colored by . . .

- When you come to observe at school, how do you expect your child to behave in the classroom?
- What do you think your child will be doing?
- Will you be disappointed if you don't see your child choosing work?
- Will you be disappointed if you see your child choosing work that seems easy to you?

Past experience and knowledge

When you observe at school, you're bringing your memories of your own childhood and your school experience. What was your school like? How did you feel about being in school all day?

You're also bringing all your past experiences with your child, beginning with the day she was born, and all your feelings about her personality based on your knowledge of her. Do you think your child is "active," "shy," "bright," "clumsy," etc.? If you think she is an "active" child, will you be surprised if you see her sitting quietly alone? Will you be worried that something is wrong? If you think she's independent," will you be disappointed if she wants to stick close to you and starts to cry when you leave?

When we label our children, even in our minds, we're creating a very limited picture of them. Value judgments, or our own ideas and judgments about what's good and what's bad, can also color those glasses.

Given our history of experience with our child, and our strong emotional ties to our child, we probably just have to accept the fact that none of us will ever be able to see our own child in a completely objective light. I don't think it would ever be possible for a parent to observe his or her own child in the same way that someone who is not the child's parent would observe. And we wouldn't want to, really, would we? A relationship with a parent is special for that very reason. It's a wonderful thing to know that there's someone in the world who always sees you with the eyes of love.

But, it is an interesting exercise just to try to realize that yes, we all have our glasses on when we look at our children. And, just for the moment, we can challenge ourselves to try to step back even a little bit – suspend our assumptions and our judgments – and just see what's there.

These are ways we can work on temporarily removing these glasses in order to get closer to the root of being present at the observation of our children. These are precious moments between a parent and a child, and this opportunity doesn't last forever.

If you are the parent of a teenager, you know the time comes very soon when your child doesn't need you to pick her up, when maybe you're not the most important person in her life, when you're not the person she is eagerly waiting to see after school.

I did my Montessori teacher training 35 years ago, and I still think very often of something my trainer said about how important it is to be fully present with the children at every moment. She used to say the guide must enter the classroom each day "clean, clear, and empty." Ready to see with new eyes, each child as a new child, each day as a new day, each moment as a new moment.

There are all kinds of little techniques you might call on to bring yourself back to the present moment. You could do it any time; a wonderful time would be when you pick your child up at school.

So, in observation, what we want to do is see more and act less. If we act less, we can see more.

A mom at my school, East Dallas Community School in Texas, was talking to me one day about observing her four-month-old baby. She was talking about just stepping back and watching her baby, instead of constantly talking to him and tending to him. She said, "I trust him more, and I just feel more grounded in being able to figure out what he needs. And so it makes parenting very gratifying, relaxing, and easy – and I have a 4-month-old baby! I pay attention to him – not smother him with attention – but just watch him. He'll show me what he needs."

Most of the time our children need less help from us than we think. And if we take the time to watch, they will usually show us what they need.

When we have visitors who come to the school to observe in a classroom, I always tell them that to observe in the classroom, you want to be quiet and unobtrusive. You want to be a fly on the wall. You want to see what would be happening if you weren't there.

This is your time to be observing – this may be your only time to see things in the classroom that will be very interesting to you, so of course you want to make the most of it. Here are a few ideas of things you can do to help you enjoy your observation in your child's classroom.

1. Prepare your child: Tell her you're going to come to visit. Tell her you'll be watching from the visitor's chair. Tell her you'll stay a short time, and then you'll be leaving. Tell her you'll be coming back to get her after school.
 2. Try to come without expectations: Don't say, "Show me what you can do." This can be overwhelming for the small child. There are many things she does in the classroom all day long, and this type of instruction is way too vague and abstract to be meaningful for her. You can say, "I'm here to watch the children work, and I'll watch you, too."
 3. Try to observe without judging: You're not there to see how your child is doing. You're not there to pass judgment on whether she is "doing well," or "progressing," or "learning fast enough." You're there to see what types of activities happen in the classroom, how the children are relating to each other, how they relate to the adults and to the work. You're there to appreciate your child and just share with her for a short time the experience she has at school.
 4. Observe the other children: Their mothers are not here. They will be more or less going about their "normal" or "typical" activities. What you see them doing may well be what your child would be doing if you weren't there watching her.
2. Be grateful: Be thankful that you are being granted the rare privilege of observing the great work of nature – your child is creating herself through her own activity in the world and her interactions with others.

It's also important when you come to observe in the classroom to know what it is you are looking for.

In 1918 Maria Montessori gave teachers what she called a "Guide to Psychological Observation." It was a list of some of the things she thought would be important for the teacher to observe about every child.

Her list included the following:

- When does the child begin to work for any length of time on a task?

- Is she able to go back to her work after being distracted?
- When does she begin to obey eagerly and joyously?
- When does she begin to take part in the work of others with an intelligent effort?
- Does she show periods of serenity? Manifestations of affection? Do you hear cries of joy?

You may see some of these qualities when you observe in the classroom, and certainly there are lots of opportunities at home to see these things. Remember that mother at my school who was so tuned in to observing her baby? One day we were talking about what she had learned just from being with her baby and watching him. She said, "It seems like I've learned even more deeply through observing him that there is something universal about my child, and it's very interesting. It makes me appreciate him so much more, his development, and just human nature and development through him."

There actually are universal qualities Jennifer could see in her child that you can see in your child and that we can see in all children. These are tendencies that all human beings share – no matter what historical time they live in, no matter what country they're born in, no matter what language they speak.

Maria Montessori discovered this through her own experience observing children not only in her first children's house in Rome, but as she observed children all over the world for nearly 50 years – in Europe, America, South America, and Asia. In every country, with children of every race, every cultural background, and every language, she observed the very same things:

- Children love to work.
- Children are driven to explore what they find in their environment.
- Very young children have a love of order.
- Children have a desire to handle and manipulate objects.
- Children have an urge to repeat activities again and again, and to strive for precision.

Children naturally correct themselves. The experience of making a mistake, or getting feed-

back that tells them something is not right, will lead them to start over, try again, and keep working until they get it right. In Montessori we call this control of error, and it is built into many of the Montessori materials. The materials themselves guide the child and encourage her to try again.

- They have a burning desire for independence.
- They have a need to communicate and to express love.

All of these qualities are innate in children. They must be expressed. Children cannot not do these things. I hope you have the chance to use some of these ideas and experiment with them when you spend time with your child at home, and of course also when you go to observe in your child's classroom.

Mary Caroline Parker holds the AMI primary diploma from the Centro de Estudios de Educación in Mexico City, along with a B.A. in Latin American Studies from Smith College, an M.Ed. in Montessori Integrative Learning from Endicott College, and a J.D. from American University in Washington, D.C. A member of the board of AMI, Mary Caroline is also a board member of the Montessori Institute of North Texas (MINT).

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