Freedom and Discipline

If children are bored and frustrated from having their inner needs rejected and frustrated, they will behave restlessly and their energy will be used for destructive activities.

Dr. Montessori found that if children were offered an environment with many opportunities to satisfy their spontaneous needs and they were offered the freedom to choose and to use these opportunities as they need to, then they will be able to direct their energies in a calm constructive manner.

Freedom and discipline are “two sides of the same coin”

When children are given freedom to choose, they have opportunities to practice making choices. This develops their will and so they develop inner self-discipline. Self-discipline is far more effective than discipline imposed by an adult.

We have seen how freedom develops discipline but let us now look at how discipline supports freedom. We have rules in a Montessori class which prohibit interfering with others, damaging the materials and so on. But we try to make it possible for the child to control himself when he breaks rules. The teacher only interferes when the child is out of control or simply does not understand the rule.

The Montessori method works from the basis that a child will not behave badly on purpose if his or her other needs are being satisfied. However, he or she will make mistakes. Dr. Montessori said that we should develop a “friendly attitude towards error” We must allow the environment to give feedback.

A Montessori environment is carefully structured in an orderly manner so that it is clear where the boundaries are and the child is able to control his own mistakes. The Montessori materials have an inbuilt control of error which is central to their design. It is easy for the child to see what he ought to do and to see his mistakes and correct them in a natural manner. His natural reaction is always to do it right next time or to repeat the exercise again until perfect!!!

Dr. Montessori disapproved of rewards and punishments. They make the child work for somebody else’s motivation. Montessori believed that the joy and satisfaction of work was sufficient for the child to become self-motivated. If we force the child to focus on a reward or a punishment we will divert that motivation. What will happen when we remove the rewards and punishments? There will be no motivation!

Montessori teachers are trained to show children how to do things correctly the first time and then to interfere as little as possible. By observing the children carefully they will know when it is necessary to offer help or to occasionally impose discipline. Not only do we manage to have a room of well-behaved children by using this system, but more importantly the children preserve their self-esteem and develop an inner discipline. These are character traits which will last them throughout their lives and so we can say we offered a true “education for life”.

Recommend Reading: Basic Ideas of Montessori’s Educational Theory by, Maria Montessori - Pages 13 to 17.