Focus on the family as we go back to school

What if we enlisted families as guides?

BY AVIZE SABATER AND JENNIFER SHIELDS

As the back-to-school period is upon many and this pandemic continues, it seems like an opportune time to revisit the home-school dynamic as it relates to learning. ample research discusses the topic of schools and family engagement. In fact, thanks to the important work of Dr. Joyce Epstein and many others, the pivotal factor of "families engaged in learning" was codified in 2012’s No Child Left Behind Law.

Researchers have shown how schools and families engage with each other around student learning. We suggest the use of "family engagement" as an expansion on the term "parental involvement," given that grandparents, siblings, cousins, aunts, guardians, and others within the family unit can be significantly engaged in student learning.

As this pandemic continues, many families and schools have engaged in innovative collaborative activities designed to benefit student learning. It is our hope that researchers will design studies to explore none of these exciting efforts.

During COVID, schools have been forced to make significant alterations to their instructional paradigms. Yet, it is important to note that with or without COVID, student learning continues in many ways. Dr. Montessori posited that "the inner teacher, instead of the conventional schooling process," does it (the child's natural learning) at the right time.

Now, given the forced instructional shift which many schools have made over the past year, what if school leaders8 instead of making children more collaborative ways to work with families? What if we more deliberately shifted our resources to supporting families, now that many students are being more time outside of the school building?

Let us envision some creative ways families can incorporate Montessori-style activities into their homes

- Playing with sounds as "in tongue twisters"
- Reading aloud (look out for books that reflect the family culture, affirming identity, as well as reality-based books, books with beautiful vocabulary, life affirming stories, and books with a variety of beautiful illustrations)
- Listening to children and respond-
- ing to what the child is interested in. Tune in to the child's focus rather than imposing an adults' interest or focus at all times. See Thirty Million Words, Building a Child's Brain.
- Adults can write in front of their child, using pencil and paper. A small chalkboard (or chalkboard paint on the wall) can be a springboard for modeling literacy. Jennifer used to write a "word of the day" or small phrase in cursive on a slate in her kitchen. Her children as early readers were curious to know what it said each day, e.g. "can you guess?"

Let us imagine an educational system which intentionally allocated resources to support the exchange of information for families to be more effective collaborators with the educators, with or without the pandemic. This year, more families are engaged in "place-based" or "at-home learning," in more ways than any of us ever imagined. What if we innovated our current educational system’s funding to equip families to be the adults to do it? Montessori said "the scientific knowledge of the student's development...to be collaborative with that student's nature which is creating him."

In Montessori circles, we emphasize the preparation of the adult who then prepares an "in-school" environment for a community of students at a particular plane or phase of development within a particular cultural context. And this preparation of adult and environment is generally thought of as located within a school. It may be time to consider an intentional shift, to the "place" where more learning is occurring due to COVID, to focus on the prepared adult and prepared environment of the home. What would it look like if we shifted re-

Can you address the envelope?

- Sensory exploration is a huge need for young children. Families can once again find this sensitive period by making much of the home accessible and safe for their child to experiment and experience with. What smells are in the home: soaps, flowers in the garden, spices in the pantry, hair oil in the bathroom, incense on the family altar, etc.
- What tastes can the child experience? Children need many, many opportunities to learn to like a new taste, up to 15 times, before it is not new to them, so families can continue to offer tiny small bites of healthy, interesting foods to their child. If a child can participate in preparation of the food and get fas-

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Montessori schools and teachers can share approaches, language, and techniques with families, who can adapt them to their own lives. We are not calling for all family members to take Montessori courses (although that might not hurt), nor advocating for homes to become Montessori schools. No, instead of the limiting concept of the role of school, let us stretch out to consider a more expansive and participatory educational construct, that intentionally seeks to share "power with" the home, so that families receive more Montessori human development information and children have one more place they can thrive and flourish.

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References and further reading:


