Introduction to Practical Life

The area of Practical Life is the “keystone” to the prepared environment. Like a keystone, Practical Life holds everything in the prepared environment in place with balance and harmony, and without it, the entire classroom structure is weakened. The child too, depends on the activities of practical life. They are among the first lessons the young child will receive and they will continue to capture her interest the entire time she is in the Casa. For within these lessons of buttoning, scrubbing, walking on a line, and learning to greet a guest, children find the means to independently take care of themselves and their classroom, gain command over their muscles and will, and create a harmonious social community. Even more importantly, these exercises facilitate focused attention, self-discipline, logical thinking, and the joy that comes from being the master of one’s own body and mind.

Within these deceptively simple activities hides the key to unlocking the formative powers within the child. They attract the child by their beauty and interest, but in the directed movements of performing the task, the child’s attention is captured and held fast. The child is particularly drawn to these activities because of the power of the sensitive periods for movement and order. The constructive nature of the child’s absorbent mind and the urge towards independence has already led the child to learn to speak and to walk by himself. But this taste of freedom of independent movement, and freedom to express himself only whets the child’s appetite for more. “How does he achieve this independence? By means of a continuous activity. How does he become free? By means of constant effort....The child’s first instinct is to carry out his actions by himself, without anyone helping him.” (Montessori, The Absorbent Mind, “The Child’s Conquest of Independence,” p.92, Kalakshetra, 9th edition)

This seems counterintuitive to our adult mind; to us, freedom and independence often means freedom from work and effort – a vacation. But for the child it means constant activity and maximum effort. And how does the child wish to exert himself? He wants to do what he has seen others do. He wants to dress himself, feed himself, and walk by himself. He wants to participate in the life and culture of his family. The first sentence my older son said was, “Baby do it!” This was usually spoken imperiously and accompanied by a pointing finger.

The child has witnessed the culture around him and absorbed a great deal from his environment, but it is not enough to be a mere observer. Once the child is able to act consciously in a constructive manner, he must use his hands in order to “grasp” these impressions of life around him. He must make these impressions his own through his own activity with his hands. He must be
able to do what he has seen. It is through movement - conscious, purposeful movement - that a child builds his intelligence. The child’s direct experiences translate into neural activity in the brain, and effect how the brain will be permanently “wired” for certain activities. (Lise Eliot, NAMTA Journal, “A New Life, a New Brain,” Winter 2001, p.68) If children do not make these connections themselves, they lose the ability to do so.

But adults, meaning to be helpful, often do too many things for the child. In our misguided attempts to help, we actually prevent the child from following his inner laws of development – much to his dissatisfaction. We can all picture a child protesting loudly when an adult is trying to do something for him that he wants to do himself. There are other obstacles in the child’s path because the world around him is made for adults. Materials and tools are too large for his small hands; activities are done too fast for him to really see and learn, and all around him, adults are telling him, “Don’t touch!” “Be still.” “Hurry up.”

When we offer the child the lessons in Practical Life, we carefully and thoughtfully remove these obstacles and allow the child the opportunity to “grasp the world.” We give him the freedom to develop naturally - that is, to follow the inner guidance of the sensitive periods. We provide the means for the child to integrate his mind and his body, and to actually build up the pathways in his brain that create intelligent function. The result, as you will see, is harmony between body and mind, and concentration born of the freedom to choose purposeful activity.

History
Dr. Montessori did not begin by structuring a method of education; she began by observing children to see how they developed naturally. The first group of “typically developing” children she observed were the children of San Lorenzo, in what would become the first Casa dei Bambini. They were children of the working poor and were left home alone to their own devices while their parents worked long hours. The children were dirty and disheveled, frightened and shy. The building manager’s intention was merely to keep them from destroying the building and therefore keep maintenance costs down, not to give them a “school.” This freed Dr. Montessori from educational prejudices of the day and instead allowed her the opportunity to observe what typically developing children might do with some of the ideas she learned from her earlier work with the children in the asylum. (Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, “The First Children,” p.122, Carter trans.)

This first environment did not look like our beautiful, cheerful classrooms today, nor was the female caretaker a trained teacher. But Montessori did have small, lightweight tables made, and little chairs that fit the children’s bodies. She also provided small wash stations. Being a medical doctor, Montessori recognized the value of physical hygiene for overall health. One day, watching their dirty hands at work, she showed them how they could wash their hands. (Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, “What They Showed Me,” p.125, Carter trans.) But upon providing the materials for
washing up, she found that the children had quite a different motive in mind. They did not stop when their hands were clean; rather, they kept on scrubbing over and over, guided by some powerful inner urge that was much different than an adult’s motivation. Most adults would have stopped the children, telling them, “That’s enough now, your hands are clean.” But Montessori knew she could learn from the children and she did not stop them, she watched them. Clearly, these activities met some inner need that was unique to children.

Montessori saw, time and time again, that children spontaneously repeated particular activities. She also noticed that this “special characteristic” of repetition was enhanced when the children were shown how to do the activity very carefully and accurately. (Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, “What They Showed Me,” p.125-6, Carter trans.)

In these early days, it was the teacher who brought the children their materials and then put them back in their places. But the children kept following the teacher back to the cupboard, and Montessori wondered if they wished to put things back themselves, and so she left them to do so. The children seemed to delight in knowing where things were kept and how to put them away neatly. “Thus, a kind of new life began for them; to put things tidy, to tidy up any disorder became an enthralling occupation.” (Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, “What They Showed Me,” p.126, Carter trans.) This love of order was apparent in the children’s desire to perfect their movements and take great care of the beautiful and fragile objects around them.

Another simple incident revealed an important characteristic of the child’s work. One day, the teacher was late to school. The children got into the cupboard where all of the materials were kept and began to work with them on their own. Instead of rebuking the children, Montessori saw that when they chose their own activities, a lively dynamic ensued in which different children chose their own special favorite activities and could chose those occupations that satisfied them at that particular moment.

Montessori observed spontaneous repetition of movements, love of order, and the importance of free choice time and time again in her early work with children. Her observations led to what we now consider fundamental principles in guiding the child’s work of self-construction. The harmony that ensues when a child can willfully coordinate and control his movements not only reinforces the mental connections in his mind, but also provides a sense of deep accomplishment. This sense of accomplishment does not come from merely completing a chosen task, but because he has acted in accordance with deep inner developmental laws. “An external purpose, simple and clear, is required to bring about the satisfaction of this desire.” (Montessori, “The Child,” p.13, AMI pamphlet, 2003 revision)
Children want to work. Montessori found this time and time again, all over the world. When children can freely choose an activity, and work with it as long as they wish, they achieve a calm, joyous state of mind that Montessori believed was the natural, normal state of childhood. Work with the hands, accompanied by concentration, brings “normalization.” This, Montessori said, “is the most important single result of our whole work.” (Montessori, The Absorbent Mind, “The Child’s Contribution to Society,” pp.201-204, Kalakshetra, 9th edition)

With the activities of Practical Life, the children are given the external means to satisfy their developmental hunger. They acquire the skills necessary to take care of themselves, and later, joyfully extend that care to others and the environment around them. Children desire to perfect and control their movements so that they can interact graciously with the world around them. They find great satisfaction in the effort of will necessary to perform activities that challenge their physical coordination and control.

**Overview of the Practical Life Area**
The exercises of Practical Life can be organized into five sections: Preliminary Exercises, Care of Self, Care of the Environment, Control and Coordination of Movement, and Grace and Courtesy. These sections will be introduced briefly here, and more thoroughly discussed when the presentations in that area are given.

The lessons in Practical Life begin the first day the child enters the Casa because they are activities the child is most familiar with, and because they are key to developing concentration, control and coordination of movement, and independence. These early lessons show the child that he may choose his work, and there are limits that accompany his choices. These lessons should continue throughout the entire time the child is with the community. Practical Life activities should be available at all times during the day to all children. The lessons in each section are presented concurrently, although the age, ability, and interest of the child should always be considered.

**Preliminary Exercises** are designed for two purposes: to help orient the child to the new environment of the classroom, and to provide practice with specific skills needed to complete more complex tasks. The life in the classroom may be very different than the life the child has experienced at home or in other childcare environments. If a child has had a normalized home experience or been in a Montessori toddler community, he may not need as many preliminary activities. It is important to observe the child’s individual capacities and determine how much help he needs. We help the child to find his way in this new environment by showing him how to roll and unroll a rug, how to walk around a rug once it is laid out, how to carry a fragile object, how to open and close the door so that it doesn’t bang, and any other little lessons that will make his adaptation to this new community more successful. We also give the child short lessons that isolate a skill necessary for a later exercise, such as opening and closing containers, or pouring water from one
container to another. Some of these presentations are done in small groups, and some are given as individual presentations with material on the shelves.

Lessons in **Grace and Courtesy** are also among the first lessons given to the children, as they too aid in adaptation. These lessons do not have a place on the shelf, but are presented as short “plays” designed give the children the words and gestures necessary to help the children interact respectfully and appropriately. Examples of these lessons might be how to greet each other in the morning, how to cover the mouth when coughing, or how to wait for the teacher’s attention. Through practicing these lessons, the children gain the skills and confidence needed to interact in any social setting.

All of the exercises of Practical Life help the child gain **Control and Coordination of Movement**, but there are two specific activities that focus specifically on control and coordination: Walking on the Line and the Silence Game. Walking on the Line assists the child in perfecting balance and equilibrium, and the Silence Game provides the ultimate challenge - that of creating absolute stillness and quiet. The activities of Walking on the Line may be presented to even the very young child, as she is still intensely interested in refining and controlling her movements. The Silence Game is generally given later, because it requires more individual self-control and also the cooperation of the entire group of children.

The lessons included in **Care of Self** offer functional independence to the child and contribute to the beginnings of social responsibility. These lessons give practice in such skills as buttoning, zipping, tying bows, polishing shoes, handwashing, and combing one’s hair. Once the child has mastered these skills for himself, he delights in helping others. These lessons contribute to the personal dignity of each child because dignity is born of independence.

**Caring for the Environment** is a natural extension of caring for one’s self. The children are drawn to activities of dishwashing, arranging flowers, polishing, and scrubbing cloths because they are necessary and meaningful, and they allow the child to contribute in a real way to the functioning of the classroom community. There are activities for both the indoor and the outdoor environment.

**Characteristics of Practical Life Exercises**
The activities of Practical Life should call out to the children the moment they enter the classroom. You might see one child busily scrubbing away at a table, another happily arranging flowers to place around the room, and a little one may be standing in front of a small wash basin rubbing her hands over and over with fresh-smelling soap.

Although it is now common to see housekeeping activities in any early childhood setting, generally these are for “pretend play,” and you will see plastic food, pretend carpet sweepers, and dress up
areas that *imitate* real life. Many adults are surprised that Montessori classrooms contain *real* brushes, glass pitchers, and buckets full of water, for that would be too dangerous or messy. Some parents regard activities of washing, polishing, and dressing oneself to be too simplistic and not at all what is traditionally thought of as “education.” But Dr. Montessori tells us that education should prepare a child for life – and what could be more fascinating to the young child than the life he sees around him. Montessori wrote,

> It is the tendency of the child actually to live by means of the things around him; he would like to use a washstand of his own, to dress himself, really to comb the hair on a living head, to sweep the floor himself...What he desires is to work himself, to aim at some intelligent object, to have comfort in his own life. (Montessori, *Advanced Montessori Method*, “A Survey of the Child’s Life,” p.16, Clio, 2004)

In order for the child “actually to live by means of the things around him,” the materials we give him must be *real, functional, and scaled in size for a child*. We have brooms with small handles, smaller pitchers that are not too heavy for a child to lift comfortably, small scrub brushes that fit in a child’s hand, knives that actually cut, and graters that actually grate. These real items make it possible for a child to “**accomplish an activity with purpose and clarity of mind.**” (Montessori, “The Child,” p.13, AMI pamphlet, 2003 revision) instead of just pretending. Working with “intelligent objects,” rather than performing aimless or futile tasks is much less fatiguing to children and adults alike. Think about digging a garden plot with a dull or flimsy shovel, and how much more satisfying the work is when the handle is strong and the blade is sharp.

The objects should be made of *natural materials*, such as wood, glass, ceramic, brass, cloth, and metal. These objects connect with reality, and give real feedback to the child by how they are handled. A metal bucket will clang if it is set down too abruptly and a ceramic vase may break if it is allowed to fall. Plastic or Rubbermaid containers never break, no matter how roughly or carelessly a child handles them. **Beautiful, fragile** objects wordlessly remind the children to take care, control their movements and restore their clean, shiny beauty.

To help the child order and organize her mind, and to facilitate her functional independence, we **color-code** items in an activity that go together. The apron and mat for brass polishing are the same color and match the small cloths that are used with it. The cloths for silver polishing are of a different color and match the exercise prepared for polishing silver. All of the materials for scrubbing a table are color-coded, and the drying cloths for table scrubbing are different from the drying cloths for hand washing. Alternately, there can be communal aprons and mats all of one color or pattern used for any activity that needs them. This helps the child create an internal order, and to be independent in her work; she doesn’t need to ask the adult which cloth to get, she can just go to the supply shelf and look for the one that matches the one she just used.
All of the *units of work* are prepared and ready to be taken off of the shelf. The aesthetic quality of the objects calls out to the child, and everything is ready for the child to begin the activity. Because the will and the attention of the young child are still fragile, we want the child to be able to begin the activity right away, as she may be easily distracted by fetching too many materials before she has even begun the activity. Later, in the elementary, this is different; the older child’s reasoning mind needs to be able to think about what materials are needed and where to get them. In the Children’s House, everything is already collected and just waiting for the child to take it to a table and lay it out according to the sequence of the activity. The materials in the exercise guide the child through the steps of the activity, and remind the child of what needs to be done next. The sponge is there to clean up drips, the cotton ball is for applying the polish, and the cloth is there to remove it. Then, when the child is finished, we show how to “make it ready for the next person.” Everything is clean, complete, and ready to be used again.

Unlike other areas of the classroom, in Practical Life we may have *multiple sets* of related activities. This happens out of necessity, as several children may each need dusting cloths if they are all to work together cleaning the classroom one day. The younger children do not yet have the patience to wait for a material to become available, nor do they have as many different lessons at their disposal from which to choose. There may be wood polishing and brass polishing. There may be activities for scrubbing a table and scrubbing a chair. There may be a dressing frame with large buttons, and one with small buttons. The number of multiple sets should be limited and changed throughout the year as the needs and interests of the children dictate.

It is important that the exercise of Practical Life be *culturally relevant*. The exercises should reflect experiences the child has had in her own life. Not necessarily the most modern, but those that show the steps in a clear, logical way. In the United States, we use clothespins to clip wet clothes to a line, but in China, washed clothes are strung through bamboo poles and hung on racks to dry. In some cultures, people sit on chairs and in others, on the floor. In different cultures people eat with chopsticks, forks, or pieces of bread. Begin with the activities that are relevant to the child’s own culture, and later introduce to the older child how these needs are met by people living in different places. Activities should also be relevant to your classroom culture. If your classroom environment does not have any silver items in it, you would not have silver polishing on the shelf. If your classroom has low windows, you might include window washing as an activity.

Every activity, every piece of material, every component must be *attractive, unbroken, and impeccably clean*. It is the beauty of the material that *calls out* to the child, but the *function* of it that captivates the child and holds his interest. If the material is not attractive, the children won’t choose it. If part of the material is broken or doesn’t work perfectly, the children will not continue to use it. It is as if the materials call to child and say,
‘Come, beautiful little hands. Dive into the water and take the soap!’ From everywhere the bright objects call to the child; they almost begin to form part of his disposition, of his being, of his very nature, and there is no longer a need for the teacher to say: ‘Charles, clean the room’ or ‘John, wash your hands’ (Montessori, “The Child,” p.11, AMI pamphlet, 2003 revision)

The materials are not pretty merely for beauty’s sake, but so that they attract the child to their function. It is the function that leads the child to independence and autonomy.

It is worth noting that some of these activities may seem “old fashioned” or “quaint.” After all, we don’t scrub cloths on a washboard anymore; we put them in a washing machine. These activities are not chosen out of a sense of history or tradition. They are part of the Practical Life area because time and time again these were the activities chosen most frequently by children all over the world. The children are drawn to them because they offer the means for perfecting movements, creating order, and gaining independence. The young child is irresistibly drawn to these activities because nature guides her to do what is best for her development.

The speed of modern life and the reliance on technology removes the child from participating in even the most basic functions of life. A child cannot see dishes being washed, because in many homes, dirty dishes are put in a box which is closed up, turned on, and after about an hour the box is opened up and the dishes are clean. We present to the child a lesson on dishwashing that makes all of the steps needed to clean a dish visible and attainable. Putting a bowl in the dishwasher may get the bowl clean, but it does nothing for the child’s mental development. We show the child how to wash a bowl in such a way that she can focus her attention on each detail, evaluate her own level of success, order her mind to the logical sequence of necessary steps, choose the activity whenever she wants to, and repeat it as long as it is of interest to her.

**Analysis of Movement**

When we present any lesson to the child, we practice what is called “analysis of movement.” Analysis of movement means that we break down the steps of a complex action into clear, concise, individual movements. This technique allows the child to clearly see what movements are necessary for the successful completion of an action. Think for a moment about how many steps it takes to pour a glass of water from a pitcher... Typically, adults hurriedly blend one action right into another - we have poured water so many times that we don’t even think about it - but the child is just learning, and in order to refine and perfect the necessary movements, she must be able to see each and every step.
Points of Interest
To further help the child refine her movements and focus her attention, we offer “points of interest.” These little “points” bring the child’s attention to certain details that will aid her in the process of self-perfection. They might be introduced in the initial presentation, such as waiting for the very last drop of water to fall from the lip of the pitcher when pouring water, or added later as a further challenge, such as “I wonder if you can scrub this table without any little drips of water coming over the edges?” We offer points of interest for the developmental purpose of connecting the child with a particular aspect of movement. Refining movement engages the child’s interest more than anything else, more than verbal instructions and more than a visual stimulus, because the action of coordinated movement channels the child’s creative energy and pulls her into a state of deeper concentration.

The Two Psychological Stages of Work
There are two psychological stages to the child’s work in Practical Life. In the beginning, the child works for himself, for his own self-construction. He is guided by his sensitive periods for order and refining movement. This work is largely unconscious; the child does not know why he chooses a particular activity, he is just drawn to do so. The satisfaction he feels upon gaining independence and freedom to do things by himself becomes a motivation unto itself.

As he becomes more skilled and his will becomes more directed, the task itself no longer has the challenge necessary to engage his concentration, and he begins to turn outward in his work. His will comes into play, and he chooses an activity more consciously; he decides to act. He may decide to scrub his boots because they are caked with mud. He may notice that a table has dried polish on it and therefore needs to be washed so that it is clean and ready for someone’s work. He may see that the dusting cloths are all dirty and need to be washed. He may decide it would be fun to cut banana slices so that everyone in his class could have a special treat at the snack table. The child has the ability and the desire, or will, to respond to the needs of the environment. His activity is directed outward. This builds social cohesion in the community and forms the beginnings of social responsibility.

Summary of the Purposes of Practical Life
We have said that the activities of Practical Life are more than merely opportunities to be clean and tidy; there is a much deeper purpose to these seemingly simple exercises. The over-arching purpose of all of the activities in practical life is to provide the means for the child’s self-construction by responding to the natural human tendencies and making use of the sensitive periods. Practical Life is essential to the overall development of the child because it provides a motive and a means for the child to interact purposefully and deliberately with his environment. The activities, demonstrated in a clear, consistent way, lead the child to behave in a certain way, which brings his
mind and body into harmony. This harmony becomes the natural, normal state of the child, and enables him to enter into all life experiences and learning with joy and confidence.

Practical Life integrates the child’s personality through adaptation, self-confidence, and independence and leads him to normalization. Practical Life also creates capacities within the child that will be applied to every other area of the classroom: functional independence, orientation, control of movement, attention span/concentration, logical thinking, and memory. Every Practical Life material the child works with must lead him to these goals.

In addition to specific purposes contained within each activity, every exercise of Practical Life will aid the child in developing concentration, order, coordination of movement, and independence.

Interest is the first step in concentration. When the child is interested, her natural human tendencies of repetition, exactness and self-perfection will lead her to continue the activity. The 3-6 year old child practices the habit of concentration particularly through fixed attention on the work of the hands. The materials in Practical Life are deliberately designed to attract the interest of the child, and support the work of the hands. Interest in the materials and their purposeful function encourages repetition of the activity, which leads to concentration. It is the process of fixed attention, or concentration, which develops the mind and leads to normalization. We can observe this in the child when we see her extraneous movements quieted, her body relaxed, and her focus limited to the work in front of her - seemingly oblivious to activity around her.

Concentration is related to order and control of movement because it comes through focusing on the details of coordinated movements. It is not by chance that the child is in the sensitive periods for order and movement. Without order, there can be no coordination of movement, for it takes order to coordinate the series of tiny, individual movements that make up any larger movement or activity. The entire organization of Practical Life supports order – from the sequential order of the materials on the shelves to the order of steps within an exercise. Practical Life helps the child develop an internal sense of order. For example, we offer activities that gradually build up to a complex sequence of steps, requiring logical thinking and memory training. Features such as color-coding and the manner of presentation offer an external support of order. Nature gives the child sensitive periods of order and refining movements to aid the development of the neural pathways in her brain, but the human tendencies of exploration, exactness, and self-perfection keep her working towards this goal.

It is not just any movement, or random movements that are beneficial to the child, but clear specific movements that focus the child’s attention. It is through this type of organized movement that the child builds her intellect. Montessori writes in The Absorbent Mind, “Movement has great importance in mental development itself, provided that the action which occurs is
connected with the mental activity going on... Watching a child makes it obvious that the development of his mind comes about through his movements.” (Montessori, The Absorbent Mind, “Movement in General Development,” p.142, Kalakshetra, 9th edition)

But remember that it is the movement that is interesting to the child, not the stopping. The child is interested in pouring the water; the sound of the watering trickling, the sight of the glass filling - so much so that often the child keeps pouring long after the glass is filled and the water is streaming over the top! It is the pouring that so captures the child, but it is the development of the will that enables the child to stop pouring. The thrill of independent movement, balanced by the inhibition of movement, helps the child develop self-discipline and will. Self-discipline is necessary for true freedom, for freedom is not license to do whatever one pleases; freedom is the right to choose a reasoned path. Freedom to perfect the movements necessary to pour without spilling, to walk around a rug without disturbing it, to button one’s own sweater, or to serve a guest a cup of tea, gives the child true independence.

Remember that the child asks us to “Help me do it by myself.” Knowing how to handle any kind of situation that arises, from helping a little one clean up a spill properly, to welcoming a guest, to brushing the dried mud off of her boots fills the child with confidence, dignity, and a quiet sense of competence that will remain with her forever.

The child has a body that grows and a mind that develops...He does not grow because he is fed or because he breathes. He grows because his potentialities for life are actualized...because his life is developing according to its natural destiny. (Montessori, The Discovery of the Child, “Freedom to Develop,” p. 61)

When we examine the purposes of Practical Life, we see how central these “simple activities of housekeeping” really are to the child’s development. We recognize their value because we are able to look beyond the surface and see how they provide the means for the child to fully develop his body and his mind. “When the child is given the means with which to act, and the freedom to act, he reveals the highest qualities that his soul possesses.” (Montessori, Creative Development in the Child – Volume I, “The Need to Work,” p. 61, Kalakshetra, 1994) It is our responsibility to help the child realize his glorious potential. One of the most important ways we can do this is by giving every child the activities of Practical Life – the “keystone” of the prepared environment.
References


