

Adolescents Need Challenge

Paula Lillard Preschlack

In the adult world, hard work is necessary for both personal and professional success. And yet, as a Montessori parent recently told me, “Many young people in my office at the bank come completely unprepared to put in effort.” She shook her head in amazement, “They expect us to throw confetti each time they complete a job.” We talked about this contrast to the Montessori graduates we knew. I reflected on what we are doing in our adolescent Montessori programmes that prepares them to be hardworking adults.

In our larger society, adolescents are rarely welcomed into the adult working world. They are more commonly given no responsibilities outside of their own needs and are seen wandering in packs at the mall with their ipods and cell phones. They are neither children nor adults, with little sense of purpose. They need substantial experiences with which to build themselves.

In the first plane of development, the practical life exercises appeal to the children in part because they integrate their minds and bodies by involving simultaneous thought and movement. In the third plane of development, the adolescent goes through physical and mental changes to build an adult mind and body, so they again crave integrating experiences. Now, rather than the challenge of carrying a pitcher of water without spilling, adolescents need to build a farm fence, clear a forest of buckthorn, or do other such “big work” that is valued in the adult world in order to develop confidence, self esteem and a sense of purpose.

To be effective, such work cannot be artificial. It must involve real risk in order to demand their full concentration and be worthy of their maximum effort. For instance, I watched a group of non-Montessori students raking the woods to prepare for a prairie burn. The burning was the job of the adults present. The adolescents stopped raking to talk as often as they could. The work given was too easy for them.

A few weeks later, I watched a group of Montessori adolescents figure out how to engineer and build an outdoor wooden amphitheater in ten days. They chose this task, and worked together to measure, saw, move and place huge logs. They worked through the hard labor non-stop every day, and completed their goal with an attitude of quiet triumph.



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This second task was far more difficult and demanded much greater effort. The students used potentially dangerous equipment, took on the higher stakes of being relied upon by adults to complete the project, and responded to a real need. It was very hard work, and it challenged each one of them at times to the core. It was this very fact that engaged them.

Montessori parents further our successful approach when they ask our adolescents to actively work at home as well. The most successful match is work that is adult-like and extends into the adult world. The perfect example is the 13-year-old working at the cash register of her grandfather’s store. She is given a “grown-up” job, but has adults around to support her so that she doesn’t make serious mistakes. If such real-world opportunities are not readily available to adolescents, parents can ask them to plan and prepare a family meal regularly, help to plan a family trip, or encourage them to start a small neighborhood business with friends, such as washing cars or mowing lawns.

A Montessori programme that recognizes that adolescents biologically crave risk and challenge, actively involves them in healthy, real-life work that requires them to think, act, and contribute. While working together to accomplish difficult physical work, Montessori adolescents develop a healthy appetite for challenge. This prepares them well for the adult working world.

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