

The Indirect Aim

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Part of the genius of a Montessori education is the concept of “The Indirect Aim.” When your Montessori teachers were in training they were introduced to the dual concept of direct/indirect aim in the exercises of the classroom.

The direct aim - what are you achieving? What are you hitting? The indirect aim - and what are you also achieving?

Here are three examples of negative indirect aim from modern society:

You take medicine that has side effects, so you take another pill to counter those side effects.

Government passes a law to produce a good for society. The law also produces unintended consequences that are often harmful. Much like the medicine above.

In military terms you have an objective but there is “collateral damage” in achieving your goal.

Uniquely, Montessori education in achieving its “direct aims” also, and with intention achieves positive “indirect aims” as well. The irony is that the indirect aim is often more significant than the direct aim.

A chief example is dish washing, an exercise “hated” by fathers all over the world. In Latin America it is not macho, in North America it is not academic. The direct aim is fairly obvious – wash the dishes! But, the indirect aims of this, not so simple exercise, are extraordinarily complex.

1. It is a multi-step exercise requiring memory development.
2. The multi-steps require sequencing skills.
3. The preparation calls for large muscle (gross motor) development carrying heavy water buckets and pouring water (without spilling any.) These are muscles also involved in the writing process.
4. The dish washing procedure starts from the left and proceeds to the right which is a continued reinforcement of the writing and reading protocol – from left to right.
5. The washing of the dishes is accomplished with motions that use the same muscles that are involved in handwriting.
6. When the exercise is finished the dishwater is poured out of the dish washing containers into a bucket, holding the container over the bucket until the last drops have fallen. This is an exercise of self-control and patience.
7. All the tools of the exercise are dried, one by one. This is an attention to detail.
8. Everything is returned to its original place. This is an element of order.
9. Everything is restored so the exercise is ready for the next child. This is a concern for environment and community.

Numerous exercises of the Montessori classroom exhibit this same significant “indirect aims.” Clothes pins on a bowl exercise the muscles needed for writing – long before the child’s hand is prepared for effective control of a pencil. The exercises of the metal insets, the botany cabinet, the geometry cabinet and many others while achieving their direct aim of factual information are preparing the child for success in writing and reading by building the muscular control needed long before they are ready for writing. All of this is accomplished by an “Indirect aim.” Long live dishwashing!