Why Montessori education celebrates the Fourth of July

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There is an old joke that asks if they have a fourth of July in England. If they don’t what comes between the 3rd and the 5th?” The fourth of July is a teen agers favorite holiday. “I want to be FREE.” So what does Montessori have to do with the Fourth of July? Maybe this can be explained by another old joke. “Grandpa, how old do you have to be before you can do anything you want? “I don’t know because nobody has ever lived that long.”

Montessori education makes the concept of independence very clear. When we signed the Declaration of Independence our purpose was not “to do anything we wanted” but to have the ability to be “self-governed.” People new to Montessori education tend to confuse these two concepts (a lot like teen agers) because they see children “doing anything they want.” Dr. Montessori said that children have unlimited freedom - to do right. Could that “freedom” be the basis of their independence? The Montessori environment is structured physically and philosophically to lead children to independence. They learn to button and tie and snap as they become independent of someone taking care of them. They know where the broom and the mop are. They know where the sponges are, the towels, the cleaning cloths. They don’t need someone to get them. They are able to operate their classroom because everything is their size and within their reach.

They learn grace and courtesy as a means of governing themselves in relation to the world around them. They learn to wait their turn (there is only one Pink Tower.) They learn to consider others because independence/self-governing teaches them not to push to the front of the line – even if you want to.

Learning to be independent is a long process. Doing what you want is easy and often selfish. In one sense, all the choices in the environment are not “free.” There are times when there is an obligation to accomplish a goal or do some action. These obligation arise as the child begins to understand what is involved in true independence. Parenthetically, you can tell when a teenager has matured – when they begin to eat for health instead of just taste – salad here we come. (Oops, that may refer to us adults as well.) Having the independence to become self-governed is to begin to be responsible for the choices we make. Being self-governed is the beginning of making wise choices – which is the foundation of meaningful success in life.

Independence has to be practiced in order to be “perfected.” Real independence comes to the Montessori child through trial and error. Traditional schools (and, sadly, some parents) withhold this practice until a child goes off to college and then falls off the rails because they do not know how to responsibly handle independence. To be able to be self-governing is a great gift given by wise parents and great Montessori environments.

The fireworks of real independence is beautiful and breathtaking. There is no better celebration that you can give your children as a lifetime skill than for them to know how to successfully navigate their independence.