

Freedom and discipline

Montessori concepts with special meaning for African-Americans



BY **DAWN BRADLEY**

Freedom and discipline are key elements in the Montessori method: every Montessori program practiced with fidelity allows for freedom. When I observed a Montessori classroom for the first time, I was struck by the children's freedom of movement and choice. I wondered how the teacher maintained order if the children were allowed to do whatever they chose? In my training, I learned that the child is given freedom only after he has garnered the discipline to treat the materials respectfully. Students are able to move through the classroom because the guide has given extensive control of movement lessons. The child is only allowed to choose a material after he/she has had a lesson. Freedom and discipline walk hand in hand in Montessori pedagogy. Montessori said that children showed her "freedom and discipline are two faces of the same medal, because scientific freedom leads to discipline."

But freedom and discipline are loaded words in the African-American household. Coming from the perspective of an enslaved people in a so-called "free world", and literally being chained and treated as beasts of burden, freedom is seen through a cracked lens. Enslaved Africans were beaten and denigrated to force their submission to their masters. Having been exposed to no other way, beatings became the standard of discipline for



The only true discipline is self-discipline

None of us felt abused—in fact, we felt wrapped in love within our southern, two-parent, middle-class community. But being hit did make me feel disrespected. It chipped at my dignity, and self-confidence. Still, I know my parents simply adhered to the adage, "spare the rod and spoil the child." They did what they thought was best.

Black parents have often issued corporal punishment to keep children "in line" and more importantly to maintain their safety. When I was a girl, my grandmother would relive the days when her five boys and two girls were children. The stories I enjoyed the most were about my mischievous uncles and how she sometimes had to "go out back and grab her switch." After one story in which two of my uncles caused an exceptional ruckus she said "I had to beat those boys...if I didn't, the world would."

As I reflect on this as a parent I can't help but feel the irony of her intent. In order to ensure her boys' freedom in society she felt she had to beat them to

carefully choose their words and measure their movements when talking with police during routine traffic stops. Daily freedoms that white children are afforded can get a Black child shot and killed. Black parents try to protect their children by taking away freedoms and administering discipline.

Unfortunately, the consequences of consistent corporal punishment may be a contributing factor to a number of the ills that plague Black society. Studies show that children who are consistently spanked have increased anti-social behavior, aggression, mental health problems, and cognitive difficulties. In my own urban public Montessori classroom I see the downfalls of corporal punishment. For example, during the beginning of the school year children accidentally drop and break materials. Through grace and courtesy they learn that mistakes happen and it's OK when something accidentally breaks. However, it takes time to build a culture

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where the child knows that mistakes are always forgiven. Often at the start of the year when something breaks the children are terrified. Sometimes they cry, afraid of what, “the teacher is going to do to them.” I’ve also seen children raise their hands in defense when I or my assistant come to clean up the glass—a practiced motion to guard against a swift blow. Upon observation those same children are shy, and reluctant to play with others. On the other hand, I have had children who are overly aggressive. They hit, shove, and push their peers at the slightest provocation. Those children carry around anger like a shield.

Thankfully, Maria Montessori created an effective method that assists children in becoming intrinsically disciplined. If more African-American parents adopt Montessori principles in their lives we can eliminate harsh

the child is shown how to handle materials carefully. Then, if an accident happens, they are empowered to clean things up. Children can learn self-discipline and self-control without fear of harsh reprisals.

Another element is lessons in social interactions. Children are given grace and courtesy lessons to help them navigate through any social situation, freeing them to express themselves wherever they are in society. Children are given opportunities to practice resolving conflicts through role play. They are given words and a safe space to show others who they are or tell them how they feel without the fear of judgement.

The Montessori method reverses the concept of freedom and discipline that has been ingrained in us as a people generation after generation and gives us the blueprint for a way out. I’ve

We can learn from our mistakes. We can create a different path. We can follow a method that has been tried and tested for over 100 years. A method that encourages freedom of thought, inner discipline, love of all living things, and above all else respect. As Pythagoras said: No person is free who is not master of himself. Through the Montessori method we can finally free our children to reach new heights instead of fettering them to the fears and insecurities of our fathers.

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extrinsic disciplinary methods. We all want to proactively teach our children self-control, and self-discipline, especially because racism often paints a jaundiced picture of our kids. Maria Montessori provided a way to teach our kids to be disciplined without repeating the mistakes of our parents. We don’t have to beat our children before the world does if we give them the tools to effectively navigate through it.

One element of Montessori that supports self-discipline is the prepared environment. A Montessori environment is filled with beautiful delicate materials that call to the child. However, if he lacks self-control he might break the work, a natural consequence of disorder. In a Montessori classroom

heard many African-Americans say that Montessori is not for “our kids”—that our kids need harsh parameters to behave. But those harsh parameters are failing our kids on every level. A 2017 report by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights showed that African American children represented 18 percent of public preschool enrollment, but 48 percent of preschoolers receiving multiple out-of-school suspensions. The practice of suspending preschool aged children has been identified as the first step in the school to prison pipeline. The statistics worsen as children progress through school. If we want to create change for future generations then we have to change our practices right now.

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