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Ideas for Practice



Claus-Dieter Kaul

Montessori concrete

Manual for a holistic way of learning
within elementary education

Volume 1 **Practical Life Exercises
and Sensory Training**

Kindergarten

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Bestellnummer: 090DL
ISBN 978-3-95660-090-6 (Druckausgabe)

www.brigg-verlag.de



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and Sensory Training

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Thank you

We would like to thank the many children that we have met in the last 30 years and have given us the opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of the statements of Maria and Mario Montessori. In this open and honest dialogue with the children, we could learn to trust them unconditionally, to accompany them with respect and help them and ourselves to develop a sense of self-esteem.

We would like to thank Am Sternenwinkel Preschool for their support in this project and Lina Gössing for her photographic work.

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Layout/Satz: PrePress-Salumae.com, Kaisheim

Photos: Am Sternenwinkel, München and Christine Wagner, München

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Foreword

Dear reader!

With this series of books we would like to invite and guide you to get to know Maria Montessori's comprehensive, pioneering pedagogy in concrete terms and to learn to apply it „step by step“. This enables you to create a supportive atmosphere in kindergarten and at home, as well as learning situations in which your children can also develop well and optimally according to new standards.

In recent years, the call for a new culture of education has been growing louder. Last but not least, various studies such as PISA or TIMS make us all aware that there is a lot to change in our education system. Certainly, one conclusion is the appearance of new educational plans for the elementary sector. The requirements here are intended to show educators a way to prepare children for the living conditions of today. In many conversations with course participants, we find again and again that many adults have few concrete ideas about how they can adapt to these challenges. They are still imprisoned with the expectations from their most diverse - in some cases long past - training, as well as with their own, not yet processed „parenting experiences“ from their childhood.

It can be observed that Montessori-Pedagogy - in relation to the present time - offers many of these people great help in reflecting on a new job. Why is Montessori-Pedagogy particularly useful? Certainly, this is because this „pedagogy“ emerged from the child's observation, which was carried out by a doctor. So, Maria Montessori did not develop a method of education, but as a doctor observed how the child learns and drew her own conclusions from it. This justifies its topicality in today's time. When creating the learning environment for children, today great importance is attached to incorporating knowledge from neurophysiology and modern psychology. This is completely in line with Maria Montessori's knowledge, especially with regard to didactic structure. Thus, her method, which is based on the material she developed, has not lost its appeal.

From today's point of view, what has to be examined in particular is the role of the educator. Our experience has shown that the implementation of Montessori-Pedagogy requires a large amount of self-reflection and ultimately results in a genuinely new educational culture which - as Jesper Juul describes - gives us the opportunity to assume responsibility from obedience.

We both had to find out that this was a very intensive process of our own, because even in our training courses on Montessori-Pedagogy we still experienced that in theory there was talk of personal responsibility and self-activity - but the way of dealing with us adults was still predominantly characterized by a culture of obedience.

Thus it is not a surprise for us that in many Montessori facilities where all Montessori materials are to hand, the attitude of the educators however is still strongly characterized by the „old educational culture“.

It is therefore an urgent concern for us to use these manuals¹ to offer educators in the elementary area an opportunity to reflect on their work on a daily basis and to develop the three competencies mentioned by Søs Bayer:

- The competence to enter into relationships with children
- The competence to take an important place in the life of children, even if one is not a parent
- The competence to endure that educational reality is like life²

An important concern of this series is to show a concrete guide to how the thematic focal points of the “Educational Plan for Elementary Pedagogy” (BEP) are specifically reflected in Montessori Pedagogy.

¹ We chose the term „educator“ as the name for the accompanying persons of the children, in order to integrate the gender-specific term on the one hand and on the other hand to make it clear that for us this word contains the professional relationship competence, which is characterized by a personal authority and not by role-related authority.

² Jesper Juul, „Vom Gehorsam zur Verantwortung“, Page 163

Practical life exercises

The meaning of the practical life exercises

The practical life exercises do not only have a practical goal, therefore the emphasis should not be on “practical” but on “life”.

„The way to enlightenment and salvation follows from exercising mindfulness. One must go with patience and perseverance and preferably under the guidance of an experienced master. You should practice meditation when walking, standing still, sitting and working, when washing your hands, washing up, sweeping and drinking tea, when talking with friends and with everything that you do. You must do each action with mindfulness. Each action is a ritual. Does the word ritual sound too solemn to you? I use it, in order to make it clear, once and for all, that awareness, consciousness is a matter of life and death“.¹

It is the vital urge for self-realisation, which works in children during the execution of these activities. Practical life activities include both the care of the environment and the care of self.

The activities must speak for themselves. It should not be the case that the children practice because we do, or in the way we do it and definitely not because we want the work to be done. The exercises practiced by the child should be original work and an expression of self-unfolding life. The educator shows the children the exercise - but then leaves it to the child to implement it in their own way. In a lecture, which Maria Montessori held in London, she expressed it as follows: *„insegnare insegnando - non corrigendo“* (teach by teaching, not correcting!)²



¹ Thich Nathan, Lächle deinem eigenen Herzen zu, Freiburg-Breisgau, 1995, P. 35, 45

² E.M. Standing, Maria Montessori - Leben und Werk, Finkverlag Oberursel P. 128

This is a statement from the former Secretary of Education for Brandenburg, Steffen Reiche: „A good kindergarten shows itself exactly like a good school, a good university, or a good professional training, that is, a good life by possessing the necessary serenity to learn from the mistakes we make over and over again. Thus, if a kindergarten makes it possible to develop skills to strengthen competence, but especially also to allow errors, which one or others can make, to use as a reason for situational learning processes and self education processes, then the requirement and formation of education in kindergartens is fulfilled“³

If we correct the child, it feels suppressed and develops feelings of inferiority. The child's feeling of self-esteem will increase if left to discover mistakes for themselves by the self-checks in-built in the materials of the Montessori environment.

³ Kindergarten Heute, 1/2005, page 24

Care of self

Hand washing



On a small table stands a jug and a bowl made of porcelain or metal, on their left lay two folded guest towels and on the right a small dish with a piece of soap and a small dish with hand cream in it. Next to the table is a bucket and a washing up brush sitting on an unfolded cleaning cloth. Here one should pay particular attention to the aesthetics: All the items should be colour coordinated and look inviting.



First the jug is filled with water and put on the table. Some of the water is poured into the bowl. Special attention is given to the last drop, which remains hanging on the jug. This is carefully removed with the cloth.



Now wet the hands and arms with water and rub them firmly with soap. The soap is then quickly dipped into the water and when it is clean, put back in its dish.

When soaping the hands and arms one takes ones time, in order to evoke different images, e.g. lip-smacking pigs going barefoot in the mud. Each and every finger is paid attention to when soaping them.



Now the hands and arms are rinsed in the water in the bowl until they are free of soap. After taking your hands out of the bowl shake the drops of water off before drying them on a towel. The wet towel is hung up for drying and the dirty water from the bowl is poured into the bucket.



The rest of the water from the jug is now emptied into the bowl. The washing up brush is used with a circular action to clean the bowl.



The washing-up brush is put back on the cloth, and the remaining water emptied into the bucket.



The bowl is dried using the second hand-towel and also any drops of water that might have fallen on the table. This towel is also hung up to dry.



To end this ritual, the arms, hands and each finger are lovingly creamed with the hand cream from the dish.

This ritual includes the following themes:

- Perception of your own body.
- By massaging each individual finger contact is made with the internal organs (Acupressure, Meridians).
- Noises, which bring us into contact with different natural experiences.
- Smells, which evoke memories, e.g. by soaping, rinsing and creaming sensory impressions from early childhood are experienced.
- The coloured co-ordinated objects train a feeling for aesthetics.
- Spatial perception perceived by the position of the objects.
- Set up an understanding of volume by estimating the amount of water needed and also the amount of soap and hand cream required for each finger
- To recognize the natural sciences by conscious dealings with water. Experiencing a chemical reaction: Water and soap make a white film when rubbed together (friction) – the action of the air makes this disappear and through rubbing reappear.
- First exercises for the movements of writing through holding the brush (firm hand) and the circular action of cleaning the bowl with the brush and a drying the bowl with a towel (relaxed hand).
- Conscious doing becomes a meditative action, which becomes a genuine religious experience. (Rituals of this kind exist in each religion and also build the possibilities of an intercultural meeting).

Through such activities a harmony arises between body, soul and spirit, and thus the personal responsibility that Jesper Juul describes as the most important component in children's education and social cohesion:

*"In our opinion the development of personal responsibility is the most fruitful alternative to suppression and degradation, an essential quality in relationships and the reliable guarantor for responsible communities"*⁴

This becomes very clear by the following photographs.



⁴ Jesper Juul, Vom Gehorsam zur Verantwortung, page 91/92

Dressing frames

The great importance of the **dressing frames** becomes understandable, as we describe the two important principles of Montessori pedagogy: „materialised abstraction“ and „the isolation of difficulty“ as follows:

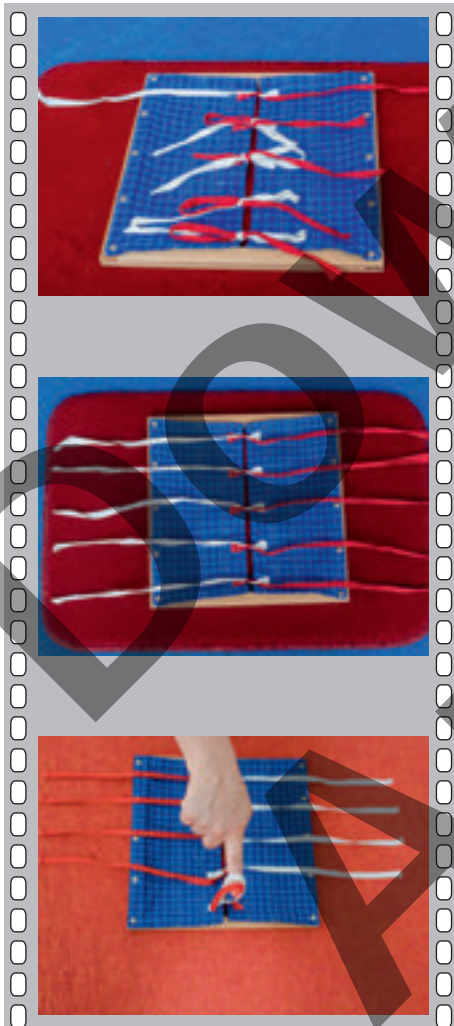
Materialised Abstraction

So that the child can concentrate completely on the procedure of the movement, Maria Montessori has developed these life-practical activity materials, which are consciously not taken from everyday objects, but were brought into a relatively abstract form. She observed that the child while working had enough possibilities to repeat the exercises. Here it is of great importance that concentration is directed toward the action (process oriented) and not on the result.

Isolation of difficulties

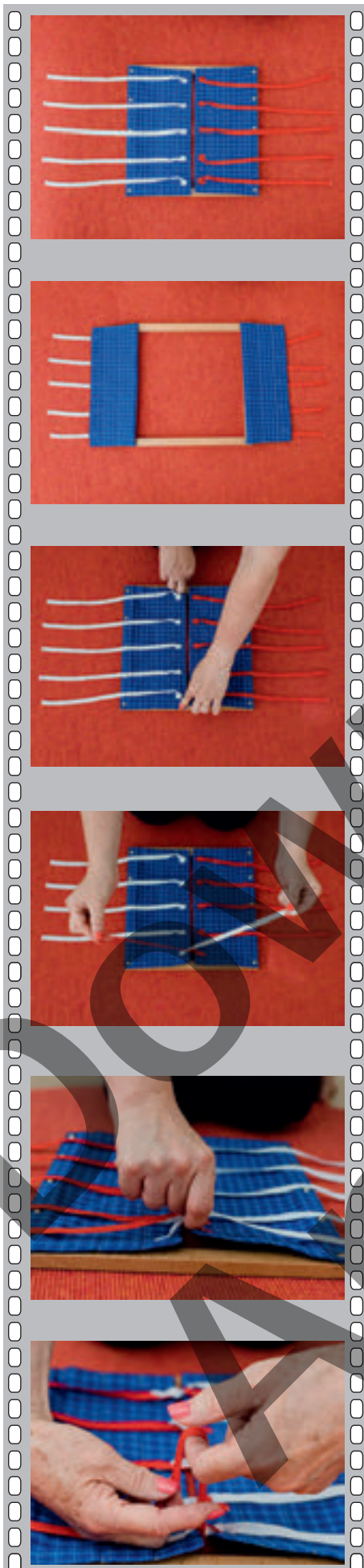
The course of action is divided into many small indexing steps („analysis of the movement “), so that the child has sufficient time during the presentation to capture the processes in their complexity. Thus we can also deal with the differing development needs of the children.

By doing it themselves the child has the possibility to find their personal rhythm and take sufficient time for themselves in order to store the procedures over „the muscle memory“ in the brain.



Together with the child or the children the bow-tying frame is taken from its place and put on the already out rolled carpet. The children sit at the side of the educator, in order to be able to observe the procedure. The first step is to hold the ends of the bands with both hands and pull them apart.

The index finger is put under the still linked bands and undoes it by lifting them up. At the same time it ensures that the bands lie parallel at the side. A „cross-over movement“ automatically becomes clear.



By opening the two sides of the material, the framework becomes open.

The material is put back, one side after another using both hands

When the material is pulled back, the bands automatically become parallel.

In a „over cross movement“ the bands are taken with the index finger from both hands and put over the middle of the opposite sides of the frame.

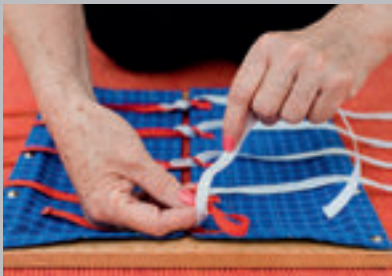
With index finger and thumb from one hand the bands are raised to form a door, while the index finger of the other hand grasps the band that is hanging down behind and brings it forward.



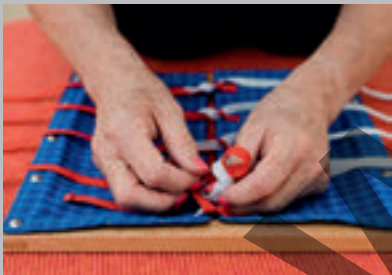
Now both hands knot the bands.



The left hand goes to the middle seam of the right-hand side piece of cloth and the index finger and thumb lift the band and bring it to the middle. The index finger and thumb from the right hand take the band and bring it to the middle of the other piece, so that it forms a loop that is held in the right hand. (Left-handed children should be observed, in order to decide whether it is necessary to give a presentation with the left hand as the leading hand).



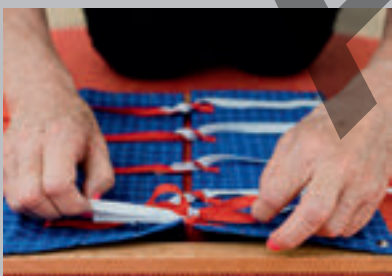
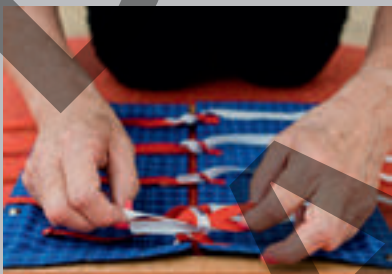
The left hand takes the white band from the middle line of the material on the left side and moves it forward in a circular movement around the red loop.



Using the index finger from the left hand the white band is pushed from the front between the two red bands and grasped with the index finger and thumb of the right hand. The left hand grasps the red loop.



Now both hands have a loop each, so you only have to pull them apart and the bow is ready!



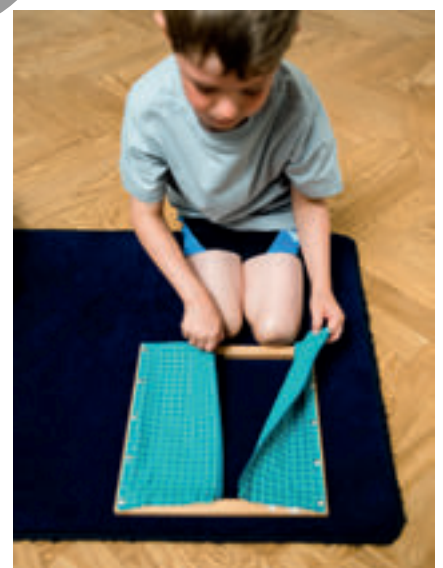
Afterwards the children have the possibility of trying this exercise in their own way and at their own speed. They often only create the first individual steps at the beginning and need a longer time, before they arrive at completing the bow.

It is amazing, with which the intensity and patience the children try out such a complex procedure time and time again, in order to do it to their own satisfaction.

The following topics are emphasised here:

- Learn by movement - particularly in the sense of kinesiology and the Edu Kinetik, a learning method, which is relaxed and easy on the brain.
- The feeling of rhythm developed by the repetitive sequence of motion.
- Training hand eye co-ordination with the two different coloured bands.
- Mathematical education by the constant active consideration of spatial awareness: the length of the respective bands by observing the different steps, as well as the middle point of the pieces of material; indirect experience with division and geometry, for example parallels.
- Understanding of language: indirect preparation for formulating texts (e.g. description of procedure) through the conscious realisation of a succession of steps, which give an end result.
- Training writing motoric skills by using the index fingers of both hands with at the same time a loose relaxed hand guidance.
- The conscious action of doing becomes a meditative action, which simultaneously becomes a genuine religious experience.
- With this activity a particularly strong self-esteem can develop, which again means a basic condition for comprehensive social authority.

We observe in today's, fast moving times that we have tried to replace complex operations such as tying laces by simpler Velcro fasteners, which do not always result in self satisfaction. It is all the more interesting to observe children who take the time to enjoy such activities, and thereby experience more autonomy and appreciation.



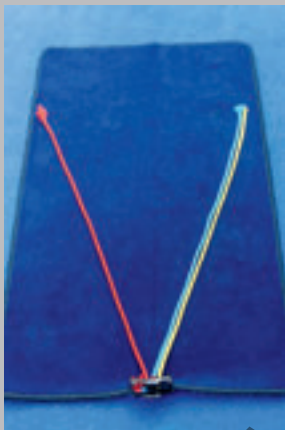
The other dressing frameworks are introduced in a similar way, and are shown here in picture form:



Plaiting



A carpet is unrolled and a hair clip-comb is used to clip three different coloured cords (here it is recommended to use the three primary colours) parallel to each other at the middle of the top edge of the carpet.



Two cords (blue and yellow) are moved to the left edge of the carpet - the other one (red) to the right-hand edge of the carpet, making an open triangle.

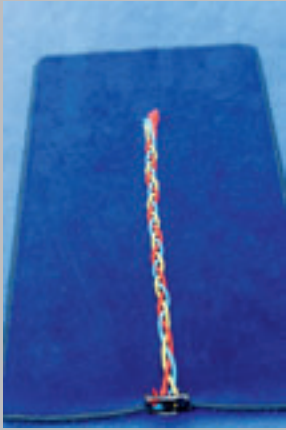


The left hand holds the yellow cord, while the right hand moves over the middle to the left to get the blue cord and place this parallel on the inside of the red cord and holds it.



The left hand grasps the red cord and takes it to the left side, to lay it parallel to the yellow cord.

The right hand crosses the centre to the yellow cord, is lifted up over the red cord and goes to the right-hand side, in order to lay on the inside of the blue cord.



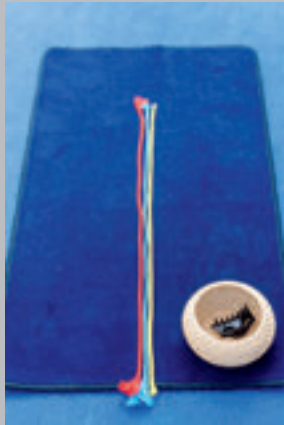
In the same way the cords change this way and then the other, until at the end a plait lays in the middle of the carpet.



To undo the plait, the left hand holds the ends of the cords tightly, while the right hand goes over the centre to the left, and then takes the other cord (blue) to the right.



Using the same rhythm and cross-over action, the plait is "un-plaited" until all three cords lie parallel together in the centre of the carpet.



The hair clip with the cords is loosened from the edge of the carpet, put back in the corresponding basket and brought back to the shelf.

The following topics are emphasised here:

- For mathematical education the focus is on spatial awareness, as well as a pictorial introduction to geometry: triangle, parallels, vertical lines and their relationship to each other.
- The regular back and forth movement of the arms leads automatically to a conscious inhaling and exhaling which leads to a general relaxation of the body.
- The sense of Edu Kinestetik comes from the „cross-over movements“ that activates both brain halves and develops a feeling of rhythm.
- The feeling of rhythm supports the development of speech in special ways, where it provides the children with joy to accompany these motion sequences with small rhythmic verses.
- For the children it is interesting to transfer into other areas: baking, craftwork, kneading, role play and also more complex activities, such as macramé.

Cleaning Shoes



A basket that contains all the necessary items is taken to a table or an unrolled carpet.



A washable cloth or mat is spread out and the items put in their places.



In a vertical direction the dirt from the shoe is brushed with a hard brush onto a piece of newspaper.

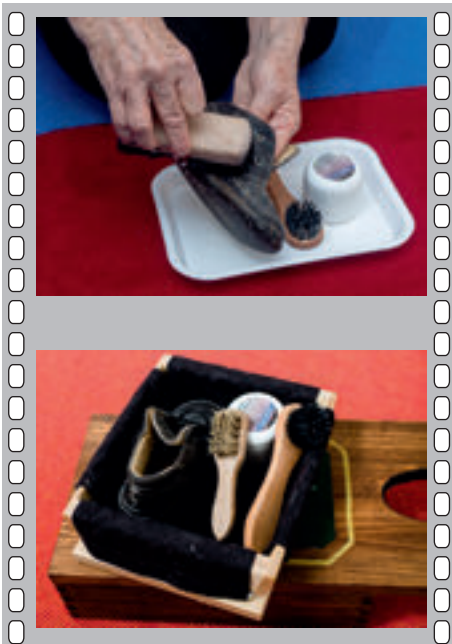


The newspaper is folded up with the dirt inside and the brush placed on the side.



The polish is applied to the shoe with the help of a small handled brush. Here special attention is paid to the different movements used: circular, zigzag and arcing movements.





The lid is replaced on the tin of shoe polish and the brush placed to the side. The shoe is polished with a large soft brush using different movements.

At the end all items are put back into the basket, with the waterproof mat on the top and the newsprint containing the dirt thrown into the rubbish bin.

The following topics are emphasised here:

- Mathematical understanding is supported particularly regarding spatial awareness, by the placing of the different items on the mat and also being able to predict how much shoe polish is required for a shoe.
- The different movements used prepare the hands for writing and also train the hands to be both „relaxed“ and „firm“.
- Through the conscious use of the polish and „the dirt“ the child experiences an interaction to nature in which the responsibility of the child becomes visible.
- Taking responsibility for the use of various cleaners for different shoes – which is also a conscious action in the ordering of colours (training the aesthetic sensibilities).
- Through an awakening interest in shoes there is also often the possibility to experience how „shoe culture“ has changed through the history of time.

Care of the environment

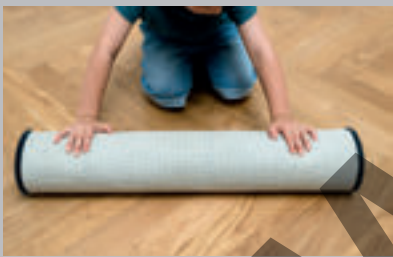
Rolling and Unrolling Carpets

This activity is of special importance, since for many children within elementary education the carpet represents an important workplace. Working on the floor gives the children a much bigger working space than working at a table.

The size of the carpet means that there is sufficient space for the work to be carried out and for the children themselves. It offers the working child an important „protected space“. Through the understanding of gracefulness and politeness in the context of the Montessori work it is an important „unwritten rule“ that one may not walk, let alone run, over the carpet of another child without the child's permission.



Together with the child or the children the educator goes to the carpet stand, to get a carpet out. The child carries it in a vertical hold to the respective workplace, guaranteeing that no other child is affected by the passage of the carpet on its way through the room (social competence!).



The carpet is slowly rolled out with both hands while kneeling. The child leans over the carpet until the carpet is completely rolled out.



The child strokes the whole carpet with both hands, including around the complete edge of the carpet.





Now the child walks around the whole edge of the carpet heel-to-toe. We have observed that this difficulty of heel-to-toe movement awakes a special interest in the children.



When the “work” is finished, the next step is to roll up the carpet.



During the process of rolling up the carpet the child checks, with a look to the left and right, if the carpet has been rolled with the edges parallel.



The child carries the carpet, holding it vertically, back to its place in the carpet stand.