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## Owner's Manual for a Child

by Donna Bryant Goertz | Montessori Blog

48 Comments

Dear Parent,

I want to be like you. I want to be just like you, but I want to become like you in my own way, in my own time, and by my own efforts. I want to watch you and imitate you. I do not want to listen to you except for a few words at a time, unless you don't know I'm listening. I want to struggle, to make a grand effort with something very difficult, something I cannot master immediately. I want you to clear the way for my efforts, to give me the materials and supplies that will allow success to follow initial difficulty. I want you to observe me and see if I need a better tool, an instrument more my size, a taller, safer stepladder, a lower table, a container I can open by myself, a lower shelf, or a clearer demonstration of the process. I don't want you to do it for me or rush me or feel sorry for me or praise me. Just be quiet and show me how to do it slowly, very slowly.

I will demand to do an entire project by myself all at once just because I see you doing it, but that's not what will work for me. Be firm and draw the line for me here. I need for you to give me just one small part of the whole project and let me repeat it over and over until I perfect it. You break down the project into parts that will be very difficult but possible for me to master through much effort, following many repetitions, and after long concentration.

I want to think like you, behave like you, and hold your values. I want to do all this through my own efforts by imitating you. Slow down when speak. Let your words be few and wise. Slow down your movements. Perform your tasks in slow motion so I can absorb and imitate them. If you trust and respect me by preparing my home environment and giving me freedom within it, I will discipline myself and cooperate with you more often and more readily. The more you discipline yourself, the more I will discipline myself. The more you obey the laws of my development the, more I will obey you.



We are both so fortunate that within me I have a secret plan for my own way of being like you. I am driven by my secret plan. I am safe and happy following it. It is irresistible to me. If you interfere with my work of unfolding myself according to my secret plan and try to force me to be like you in your own way, in your own time, by your own efforts, I will forget to work on my secret plan and begin to struggle against you. I will decide to wage a war against you and everything you stand for. That's my nature. It's my way of protecting myself. You could call it integrity.

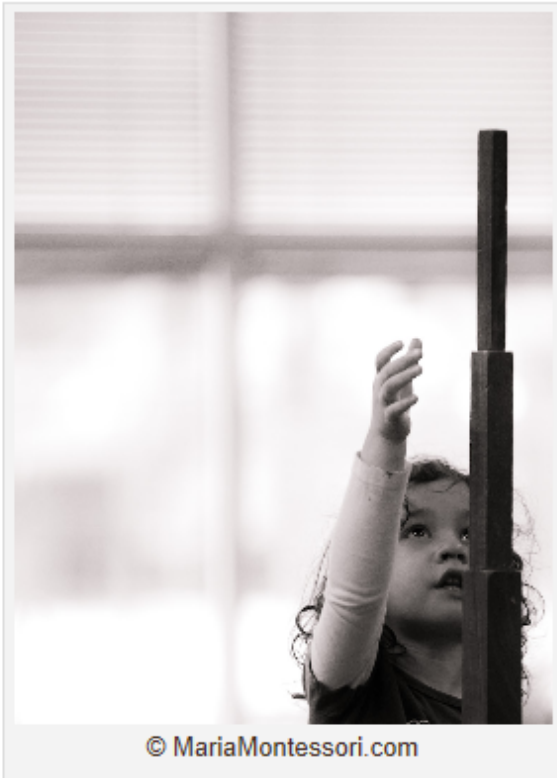
Depending on my personality, I will wage the war more openly or more covertly; I will fight you more aggressively or more passively. A great deal of my incredible energy, talent, and intelligence will be wasted. You will probably win in the end, but I will be only a weak version, a poor substitute, a forgery of what I am capable of being, and you will be exhausted. Please take the pressure off both of us by preparing my home environment so I can do my work of creating a human being and you can stick to your work of bringing one up. I'll do what I do best and you do what you do best.

I am capable of being the finest example of your best attributes and values expressed in my very own way. If you will prepare a home environment carefully and thoroughly for me, keep my materials and tools in order and good repair, set the limits clearly and firmly, give me long slow periods of time to work on my secret plan, I will do the work of developing a new human being, me! Did I mention that I need materials to be set out in every room of the house? I need to have materials available for quick and easy access wherever I happen to be in the house and wherever you are. I need to have the option of working and playing close to you. Most of the time, I need to use activities close to the shelf where they belong in order to form the habit of putting away.

My secret plan for developing myself is carried out entirely by hand, hands that is, my own two, to be precise. I am a fine artist, a master craftsman, and require the finest tools and supplies. Don't give me a lot of junk, just a few fine materials that are complete and in good repair. Excess is worse than unnecessary; it's distracting. It disturbs my creative process. It makes me irritable and uncooperative. I know it's hard to believe that through my chosen activities carried out independently and in a state of deep concentration I am developing my character, but it's true. I can't make fine character out of a lot of junk in a big mess.

My home is my studio and my workshop, so be sure it is quiet and peaceful. Play soft, soothing music while I am awake. Watch TV only after I am in bed. While I'm up, I will make all the noise we need. Oh, and I need everything to be kept in order. I can't do my best work in a mess. I don't know how to make order for myself but I crave it, so I will need you to do it for me at least three times a day. If you make order for me in a practical and esthetically pleasing way that makes sense to my logical mind, I will gradually begin to imitate you more and more.

Eventually you will be able to require that I put away for myself, when I'm six or so, providing you always remember to check in with me about it three times a day until I'm nine. I can't cope with an entire day's accumulation of things to put away, much less an entire week's worth. I will certainly never be able to cope with a month's worth of mess. If you get distracted and forget to help me put away during the day and the mess builds up, you will have to put it away yourself every night.



I hate to be so demanding, but I need to have all my supplies organized and displayed in complete sets within my reach so I can get them for myself. If I have to ask you for what I need all the time, I will begin to feel like either a commanding general or a whining invalid. Stop and think, I could really get into one or the other of those roles. Neither of us wants that. I need independence like I need oxygen. It brings out the best in me. The time you spend setting up my environment will be time you save by not dealing with my petulant, obstreperous, recalcitrant side.

Television is a big interruption in my development. Sorry! I know you don't want to hear this, I need hands on activities and I need lots of processing time. TV distracts me from more important activities and fills my head with more than I have time to process. Read to me every day because

reading goes slowly, allowing for processing along the way. TV packs more in than I know what to do with, so I shut down and either become passive or frenetic. I know you might think some shows are good for me, and I know you might think you deserve the break TV provides, but we both pay a heavy price for every half-hour I watch.

I can't resist the TV, but that's okay because every three-to-six-year-old has a parent, and that's what parents are for. TV makes me distracted, irritable, and uncooperative. The more I watch, the more I want to watch, so it creates issues between us. If you can't say no to a daily TV viewing habit for me now, where is my example for developing the strength to say no to other bad habits later? Besides, the more I watch TV, the less I want to be like you. Remember, I imitate what I watch. Oh, yes, nix also to the video and computer games I beg for and all my friends have. Come on, I know you can do it.

I will usually be so consumed with my work and play that I won't hear you when you speak to me. Don't make it worse by speaking from a distance or repeating yourself. Just get down on my level within a foot of my face, get my attention, and look into my eyes before you speak. Then let your words be few, firm, and respectful. You will save both of us a lot of senseless suffering if you can remember to do that. I know it will not be easy for you to remember, but if you work hard you can train yourself to make it a habit. After all, if you don't do what you're supposed to do, how can you expect me to do what I'm supposed to do?

If you don't have the time or energy or, I hate to say it, self discipline to follow through on what you say, just don't say it. Idle threats and empty promises make me despise you. You look foolish, arbitrary, and weak. I know I act like I want to run the universe myself, but that's just a show of bravado. I really need a parent to run my world. When I can't depend on you to mean what you say, I can't trust you. That causes me to feel deeply insecure and go to extremes. It's frightening to me because I love you so much. I need to respect you and trust you to say what you mean and mean what you say. You are the most important part of my home environment.

You'll be glad to hear that part of my secret plan calls for helping you around the house and yard. No, it can't be when you have time or are in the mood, or even when it would really be helpful to you. It has to go by my interest. Sorry, I can't be flexible about that. After all, I'm the one who's creating a human being. You're just bringing one up. Well, I guess it won't really be a help to you at all, not immediately or directly. It'll really be a big hindrance. I have to be given the right size equipment, careful demonstrations, and lots of time and patience.

Just when I master a certain skill and become capable of making a real contribution, I'll tire of it and choose not to do it again. Then I'll want to learn a new job requiring far more skill and expertise and you will have start all over again. This will happen about once a week for the next six years and take up a lot of your valuable and scarce time. In the long run it really will be a big help, though, because I'll feel so invested in our home and family that I'll be a lot more reasonable and cooperative about our family's values and rules. I'll also be so skilled, capable, independent, and self-disciplined by the time I'm nine years old that it will be reasonable to expect me to do my share around the house and yard. I will have developed obedience.

I know my needs are great and many. I know I'm asking a lot of you, but you are all I've really got. I love you and I know you love me beyond reason or measure. If I can't count on you, who can I count on? But let's not kid each other. It doesn't have to be perfect. I'm tough and resilient. I'll survive and make the best of it. Just thought you might want to have the chapter on the Primary Montessori Home Environment from the Owner's Manual for a Montessori Primary Child. You could make the next three years a lot more fun for both of us by taking care of me according to my needs. Hey, can we just shoot for meeting 50% of my needs? Okay, okay, I'll settle for 25%.

Love, hugs, and kisses,

Your Three-to-Six-Year-Old



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P.S. I know I'm very lucky. Not many children have parents that will really listen and pay attention to their needs instead of just giving in to their whines and tantrums. Maybe they're scared their kids will stop loving them. Maybe they're scared their kids won't be popular. I'll save that subject for Chapter Six.

The more TV I watch the more I will complain of boredom because I will gradually lose my natural bent for following my Sensitive Periods—you know, those drives for certain activities during certain stages of development. Without interference of TV, a restless sense of creative dissatisfaction prompts me to explore my environment and fix my attention on an activity, concentration on it, and repeat it. Under the influence of TV, that same restless sense becomes a pouty monster called boredom that tyrannizes you and me both, wears on our relationship, and compromises my best development.



Donna Bryant Goertz, founder of [Austin Montessori School](#) in Austin, Texas, acts as a resource to schools around the world. Donna's book, *[Children Who Are Not Yet Peaceful: Preventing Exclusion in the Early Elementary Classroom](#)* draws on her thirty years of experience guiding a community of thirty-five six-to-nine year-olds. She received her Montessori elementary diploma from the [Fondazione Centro Internazionale Studi Montessoriani](#) in Bergamo, Italy, and her assistants to infancy diploma from [The Montessori Institute of Denver, Colorado](#).