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A Parent's Role: How it Differs from That of a Guide

by Donna Bryant Goertz | Montessori Blog

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At Home

Since leaving the classroom recently, after thirty-some years in the delightful company of children, I have spent a considerable portion of my time leading the development of the parent education programs for our school. It has given me a new and different joy, and a great appreciation for parents. It is an honor to work so closely with parents who are the primary educators of our children, who are the children's models, their supporters, and their greatest source of love and admiration.

I hold the parents in awe and respect them for many reasons and on many levels. They pick up their children at noon, three o'clock, or the end of the day when everyone is tired and hungry and needy; and do their best to practice the skills that will help this major transition go well while neither catering to nor imposing on their children. Parents deserve support and sympathy, respect and solidarity for their efforts. They get up in the night with children who are frightened or sick, doing their best to give just the right comfort. They get children up in the morning who are sleepy or out of sorts. They connect with temperaments that are either too different from or too much like their own. Parents face an onslaught of issues that confound and concern them and do their best make the best moment by moment responses they can.

Parents have the truly world-shaking responsibility of providing an ethical framework, a moral ambiance, and a practical environment that provides for exploration, self-education, and self-development for their children. All this they must provide in an emotionally safe environment and in a firm and cheerful manner.

Unlike the guides at school, the parent lives with a child who changes over a twenty-four year period of time, and changes almost too fast to keep up with. A guide at school gets to practice and perfect supporting children in the same three-year developmental period endlessly. That's why their advice can be so helpful. It's almost as if a parent spends today trying to figure out yesterday while the child has gone on to tomorrow. It's a challenge. And it just speeds up; it simply won't slow down. That's why parents need the school's and the guide's help and advice.

At School

It's easy for the guides to say "NO" at school. There's a large community of children living and learning in an established, clearly defined and cohesively developed culture where everyone belongs and participates. The "NO" is expected and accepted by the community of children. At home, the child is a bigger presence and a much stronger force within a changing and developing family culture. And the emotional connection between parent and child can be both mobilizing and paralyzing. Is it any wonder that the parents need a supportive community to help them decide when and why and how to say "NO" and how and why to stick to it? Is it any wonder that they turn to the school and the guides for help to clarify and sort out issues before they make their decisions?



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At school, the guide has been confronted with a vast variety of situations, issues, and personalities over many years. The guide knows how to postpone answering questions to buy time to think through the implications, how to consider each aspect of the issue and weigh the implications and how to slowly consider situations and their consequences. The guide has learned through a goodly number of errors! Additionally, the guide knows how to approach a great variety child personalities and temperaments as well as how to bear up graciously and effectively under their responses—or reactions. For the parent at home, however, it's always an unending series of "learn as you go" and "learn through your mistakes."

The Family and the School

And then there's the family's entry into the school community. Often, a parent's life is temporarily made further complicated before it is made easier by the school's philosophy of child development and parent education programs. At first it may seem that the school is taking away from the parents all their familiar methods and means of traditional parenting and leaving them bereft. Then it seems the school is offering an entirely new set of skills, a suspect set of skills that have to be practiced with a mindfulness and constant awareness in order to become effective. Confusion can often reign in the family as parents work to break old habits and make new ones. In the midst of this confusion, anarchy could set in. The parents, temporarily weakened by the changes they are making, can become paralyzed into inaction or rushed into poorly understood practices. In the meantime, the children could take over, resulting in anxiety, insecurity, and bravado.

During this period of confusion, parents might offer their children choices that are not appropriate or even counterproductive. They might give them independence for which they have not adequately prepared their child. Parents could operate out of doubt and fear. Trusting the Montessori community of families too far, parents might allow their children to do things they should not be doing simply because they say other children are doing them or because some other children really are doing them. Parents are sometimes afraid their children will stop loving them if they say "No." They may be afraid their children won't be popular or well liked. Parents may be intimidated by their children's anger or frightened by their outbursts.

Without a strong community, enough contact, and without dependable support from the guides, parents can easily get in over their heads while their children are very young and by the time they reach early adolescence the family's daily lives may have become problematic. By the time the child is sixteen and in possession of car keys, their lives can become out of control and dangerous.

Support For Knowing How and When to Say "No," How and Why to Mean It

When we parents learn to say "No" to a five year-old, we will be more likely to be able to say "No" effectively and appropriately to a nine or a thirteen year-old. When we parents develop and sustain a meaningful family culture within which to live and according to which to weigh and measure details of daily living when the child is four, we will be more likely to do sustain it through later years. A part of saying "No" is learning positive ways of saying it. Another part of saying "No" is establishing and maintaining a relationship with distinct and appropriate roles for parent and child.

Distinct and Appropriate Roles for the Parent and the Child

I am the Parent, You are the Child

It is not always easy for Montessori parents to distinguish and clarify their own roles as parents from those of their empowered, independent, and capable Montessori children. One child stunned his mother by telling her to step away into the next room until she was ready to calm down and cooperate with what he was asking of her. The mother was being calm—and she was being reasonable, and what she was asking was appropriate within her role and appropriate within the child's role, reasonable for his cooperation.

Of course, our empowered, independent, and capable Montessori children are going to try stepping out of their roles as children and into our role as parent, of course! And we parents have to be well prepared to be clear about defining those distinct roles. We have to clarify to the child what exactly our role is and where exactly the limits of his own role of child lie.

As for the confused mother in our story, the rest of the day didn't go so well. The next day, after much thought and a good night's sleep, however, she was ready to distinguish the two roles, that of parent and that of child. The mother chose a pleasant moment for a conversation, the first of many she would have with her child over the years.

Defining and Clarifying Roles

She said, "We have something important to talk about. I'm going to tell you about roles, your role as the child and my role as the parent. It's my role as the parent to decide when there will be a choice and to lay out the choices. It's your role as the child to choose among them. I will always consult you about the choices because there could be some good choices that I haven't thought of."

"Sometimes there will be no choice, and your role will be to accept that."

"I will lay out the choices for the daily schedule, for what to wear to which places. I will always listen to your ideas. That's a parent's role. You tell me any ideas I haven't thought of. That's a child's role. And I will be the one to make the decision to include those ideas or not."



"When I listen to your ideas, I will hear them when you can speak in a respectful tone of voice using respectful words. I will listen to anything you have to say and hear all your feelings. But I will make the final decisions about what we do in our family because that's a parent's role."

This same conversation was repeated many times in many quiet and pleasant conversations over the next months. "I will lay out the choices for what to eat,

" . . . Choices for what toys and activities we will have in our home."

" . . . Choices for which books and materials will be in our home."

" . . . Choices for where we will go."

" . . . Choices for who we will spend time with."

" . . . Choices for what kind of birthday party we will have."

"You will suggest additional choices and lay out the reasons for them to be included. That is within your role as a child.

"I will listen to your suggested choices carefully, think seriously about each one and decide whether or not to include it. I will tell you why or why not and explain my decision fully according to our family culture."

And so over the months the parent made clear the distinction between the roles of parent and child including many, many other things. In this way the parent let the child know who was responsible for forming the family culture and who was responsible for living creatively within it with choices and limits, with expression of ideas and feelings.

The explanation was given for each new choice the child suggested, but once that was done, it was not repeated. "You know why; remember, I explained it to you. Think it over yourself and remember. If I ever think differently, I'll let you know. If I don't come to you about it, you will know my decision and its reasoning stand firm. I hear that you don't agree, but till then, that's it! No more discussion."

Collaborating with One Another to Discover Mutually Acceptable Solutions

The parent noticed a growing pattern of rudeness in the child's requests. The child seemed edgy and bossy. "Take me home right now." "Find my blue hat." "I'm thirsty. Get me some apple juice." "Take me to the park to play right this minute." "These eggs are yukky."

As usual, the parent made suggestions each time for more considerate, polite communication, such as, "I like it when you say 'Excuse me, but I'm really tired. Could we go home, please?'" Or, the parent said, "I prefer to hear 'Could you help me find my blue hat?'" Or 'Could I please serve myself some apple juice?' Or 'I don't care for these eggs. They're not to my taste.' Or 'Could we leave for the park to play really soon? When I wait so long, I feel impatient.' Instead of bringing the usual cooperative restatement, the parent's suggestions brought on balkiness and irritation.

At a pleasant moment the parent said, "Sometimes you use a tone of voice that sounds unpleasant or words that seem abrupt when you ask me for something. I feel better helping you out when you are more polite and considerate in your tone of voice and words. But I notice that it annoys you when I remind you to say it in a nicer way. I thought we could plan together a way I could remind you that wouldn't be irritating. Maybe I could just say two words like blue bird or a compound word such as grasshopper or something like that to remind you. What do you think about that? Can you think of a word or phrase you like us to use?"

The child chuckled and said he liked the phrase dump truck better.

"Oh, dump truck, I like that," the parent said. "And if you don't like my tone of voice or the words I use, you can say dump truck to me and I'll know to say it over in a more pleasant tone of voice and nicer words."

The child was delighted and offered other ideas. Parent and child settled on a phrase and for a couple of weeks things went really well. One day the child was testy again and the parent asked if it was time to choose a new phrase. They settled on a new one and the next weeks went well. After the third variation the habit of politeness or of accepting a reminder with civility was well established. Of course, at that point in time, the child was on to a new issue. As every parent has experienced, life with a child brings on a new issue as soon as the previous one has been resolved. And so life goes with the parent and child.

Waiting for Calmness and Respect

At another time, things had gone off track in a different way: the child began displaying emotional outbursts. The parent thought things through and chose a pleasant moment for another conversation with her child to further clarify.

"If you are screaming or being rude I will say with sincere sympathy, 'I hear how upset you are and I want to listen to you. I want to hear your feelings. As soon as you can speak in a regular voice and use respectful words, I will be ready to listen.' Then I will leave a glass of water and a tissue close by and wait at a little distance for you to calm yourself enough to talk. Until then, I'll be waiting in the next room to comfort you when you are ready to receive comfort."

Listening as Soon as Possible

Experiencing complications of a different sort, further down the road, the parent offered new information.

"Occasionally, I will have to listen a little later because there is a reason I can't give you my full attention at that particular moment. It could happen because I'm in the middle of cooking dinner or because I'm driving the car. But, in order to make things easier, I will make and take most phone calls at night after you're asleep so I'll be available to you most of the time. In any case, I will always listen as soon as I can. That is the parent's role, my role. Your role is to wait until I can really listen. I'll always tell you a time that I can listen and you can depend on me to keep my word."

Defining and Maintaining the Family Culture

As the child grew older, s/he encountered new and different ideas from friends or neighbors and began to mount campaigns for incorporating them into his own life, the parent gave further information.

"The older you get, the more new ideas you will have. Many of your new ideas will fit right into our family culture. We'll have to work on others of your new ideas to make them fit into our family or perhaps even tailor a bit or a lot to make them fit. But there will be many other ideas that won't fit into our family at all. You will have many friends who are allowed to do and to have things that we don't do or have in our family. I will listen to how you feel about that. But I will be the one who decides because that is the role of the parent.

"I will spend time thinking about and discussing my decisions with our school community before I decide, but then I will be the one to make the decision. It won't be up to you because you are the child. You may be upset, sad, disappointed, or angry about my decisions, but I will stick to them because I am the parent and that's my responsibility. Maybe you will want to go someplace that we don't go in our family. You might want to have a toy or gadget we don't have in our home. You may want to have music or wear clothes that don't fit in to our family.

It could be very disappointing or upsetting to you. I will hear your feelings about it. I will hear your ideas. But the decision will be mine to make because that's a parent's role. Your role will be to experience feelings of anger, disappointment, or sadness, to express them to me strongly but appropriately, and then to respect my decision. You don't have to like or agree with my decision, but you do have to respect it."

Providing the Child Security and Sparing the Child Emotional Exhaustion

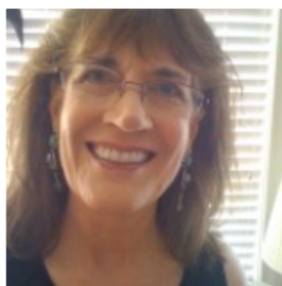
When the child spends time and energy in emotionally exhausting opposition, the parent carefully evaluates his/her communication and behavior for clarity and resolve. It is unusual for a child to persist in behavioral campaigns that don't work. It indicates a lack of clarity in the parents thinking and presentation or a lack of evident resolve.

"I will try to be clear about what your choices are and about which of your suggestions will be added to the choices and which will not. I will try not to be wishy-washy or vague by saying 'I don't think so' or 'I'd rather you not' or 'I'd rather you choose something I already offered to you or I wish you'd choose something else.' I will try my best to keep you from the anxiety that comes when I give in or change my mind after a decision. I will remain steadfast when you display emotional outbursts or whine or threaten. I will make every effort to give you the security of knowing that your parent means what s/he says."

"I will be the strong parent you need and spare you the emotional turmoil and energy drain of excessive begging, tantrumming, whining, and pouting that develop when you know from experience you might be able to change my mind or wear me down that way."

The On-going Process

And so it goes with the parent. Defining, maintaining, and clarifying the distinct roles of parent and child takes time and effort. But that's a parent's role. We are parents, we are bringing up children, unlike dogs or cats, birds or fish. And children are highly intelligent, powerful, driven beings who require that we provide and maintain an ever-evolving structure to hold a social and family culture with firm limits for them to push against. Children need their parents to define clear roles of parent and child within the family for the sake of their emotional growth and security. We, their parents, are the last ones, the last adults in their lives, who should grow weary and let them down. We can rest when our children are grown.



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](#).