

Spontaneous Activity vs. Compulsive Behavior

A Montessori environment is created with the promise for spontaneous activity. This activity is not a disruption to the flow and order of the classroom but is an activity of a "higher order" - the drive toward learning and discovery. This activity brings joy to the learner and often ends in a hush of tremendous satisfaction with an amazement at the complexity and awe of the joyful discovery. Spontaneous activity often is an inner response to an external stimuli - a call of discovery and curiosity that beckons to the learner.

Compulsive behavior also arises from within but is often unfocused. It might appear to be rash, jagged, uneven and rough in distinction to spontaneous activity which might appear much smoother and calmer. Compulsive behavior might not have a focused objective. And because there is no objective to the journey there is not the satisfaction of discovery but only an unregulated and unsatisfied impulse. Compulsive behavior throws the child into turmoil and the end result is not only disorder but agitation.

Spontaneous activity is an adventure. Compulsive behavior is often a nightmare. Spontaneous activity is controllable. Compulsive behavior resists control. Spontaneous activity is done with thought ("I wonder.") Compulsive behavior is done without thought. Spontaneous activity is an indirect aim of the environment. It is a path that beckons and because the child knows how to follow a path - step by step - it leads to a delightful conclusion.

Compulsive behavior falls under Dr. Montessori's categories of deviations and fugues (a disturbed state) - things that inhibit learning. Compulsive behavior is like the Texas cowboy who jumps on his horse and rides off in all directions at once.

To some extent all children are compulsive but can children with compulsive behavior thrive/survive in a Montessori environment? It is a possible challenge because the compulsive behavior can be modified or maybe even replaced by a systematic approach to spontaneous learning. The operative word - the magic word of all Montessori - is "training." Normally children don't talk softly, don't walk quietly, don't put things back where they belong, don't consider others, or don't share spontaneously. They have to be trained to do so by instruction, by example and by the environment. When this training happens the compulsive impulses become more focused and channeled so that eventually spontaneous activity may be positively followed to a fulfilling, satisfying and peaceful result.

All training, whether it is how to sink a basket, hit a fast ball or put toys in their place is the groundwork from which excellence can arise. Spontaneous activity, ironically, is actually planned and prepared for by the systematic training the child receives on the way to self-control and self-discipline. Spontaneous activity is a reward for being prepared to take advantage of what appears on the horizon. Being able to observe life going on around you and to be able to act on that observation at

the spur of the moment - with deliberation - leads to great joy and great satisfaction on the journey.