

## Practical Life at Home: It BROKE!!

Have you ever considered the materials that most children's toys are made of these days? Everywhere we see so much plastic, plastic, and more plastic! Children's toys and learning materials have 'evolved' over the years to make them cheaper to produce as well as more durable. Using so much plastic allows everything to bend, bounce, withstand impact, and virtually last forever - with little care needed. So... have you every wondered if there are any drawbacks to surrounding children with so much that is 'childproof'?

When you look around your child's Montessori environment, you may notice that there is very little plastic. Two of the integral characteristics of the materials (especially in Practical Life) are that they are *real and breakable*. Let's first examine what we mean when we say "real". Although they may be child-sized, all of the materials have working parts and full functionality. If not, their purpose would seem unclear and they would be confusing to the child. It is important that the objects exhibit authentic qualities, so that the child gains a respect for what they can do, and uses caution where needed. This means that your child will use a real knife for food preparation, will peel vegetables with an actual working peeler, will grate cheese with a metal shredder, will have scissors with a point and sharp edges, will use an iron that gets hot, will have a heavy hammer and steel nails, and so on. Whenever possible, we will get these items in a smaller size so they are more manageable for smaller hands, but they will always *work*. This may require us to really search out materials, spend more money, take time to find the perfect item... but it is worth it to the child. The children cannot fully learn real skills with pretend tools. You may see some of the 'children's versions' of real adult things in the toy aisle... but if you try to use them you will notice they are usually cumbersome and often don't get the job done well. When children are first learning a new skill, we take into account that the child is less coordinated, which can be frustrating. Imagine the added frustration trying to master a skill if the tools they are given are poor quality or inefficient. (Have you ever tried cutting anything with those rounded, plastic 'safety' scissors? Oh my, what a chore!)

Ok, you may agree that real is good. But **breakable**? Why would we want that? After searching high and low for the most perfectly sized glass pitcher for a 3-year-old, wouldn't we want it to last more than a week? Isn't that an inefficient use of our budget? Why pour from a heavy glass pitcher when a plastic one is lighter and pours just the same?! [\*its not the same, the weight helps to strengthen their hands, the glass is more attractive and offers a different tactile experience; but I digress...] Why use a ceramic serving bowl, a metal pail, a glass tray, a porcelain vase, a delicate lace doily, a thin needle, etc.- when they are sure to get broken by the child's carelessness or clumsiness? When we see things from this perspective, we are not giving the child much credit. We are actually expecting failure, and merely trying to minimize the damage. As an adult, I'm sure you find yourself to be most effective and motivated when you believe that you have an opportunity for success, rather than when you feel you are being 'set up' for failure. It is the same for your child, yet society assumes that since he is a child he is naturally destructive. Anticipating failure, we surround him with 'childproofing' and the constant reminder that he *can't*.

In Montessori, we try to maintain the utmost respect for the children, and give them tasks to suit their abilities and limitations, but also to challenge their minds and their bodies. When children are given the opportunity to work with items that are breakable, we are letting them know that we trust them to handle the items with care. This trust inspires confidence in the children, and causes them to be more aware of their actions and surroundings. We give them a higher standard to live up to and are forever amazed as they rise to the occasion, and above. Having breakable objects surrounding the child makes him more aware and more careful, and he sees that if he isn't, those special objects may be gone forever. The child *adjusts himself* to accommodate the prospect of breakage, and he works harder to avoid error. Isn't this a better prospect than adjusting the *objects* to withstand impact, so the child learns that he can be as careless as he wants and nothing will happen? Often this results in the child being purposely destructive, to see what he needs to do and how much force he needs to use to ruin it! I have seen this many times, and I have also seen how a child in the casa uses his full concentration to carry a glass tray across the room to an empty table, spending an immense amount of time taking tiny, slow steps, staring intently at the tray in his hands, almost willing the objects to stay put.

When accidents happen and things break, we purposely may not replace them right away. A replacement may not be readily obtainable, and so the child really sees his error when that favored material is no longer available for use. When he has to wait several days for a bowl to be replaced, or a container to be repaired, his patience grows and he sees the material with a new respect, using it with great care when it returns. In a society where so much is excess and so much is made to be thrown away, isn't it nice to teach our children that not everything is **disposable**?

Sharp knives, pointy scissors, broken glass; isn't that **dangerous**!? Aren't we afraid that the children will cut themselves, poke out an eye, or otherwise injure themselves? Of course this can spark concern, and so we also make very sure that the children know HOW to use these tools with care, and learn how to handle them safely. Children have a vast potential for growth and learning, but this does not just apply to building their intellect. They are also learning how to move their bodies with care and realizing their own abilities and powers. Instead of limiting the child and telling them "no, you *can't do that*", we tell them "yes, you *can* do this, but it requires care and control, and you will have to practice it". As with anything else, the children are closely supervised when there is the possibility of danger, and they are taught exactly how to handle whatever it is in the safest manner. We continue the concept of simple to complex, for example the child may first learn to cut soft fruit or cheese with a rounded blade that utilizes 2 hands, then progress to handling a butter knife, and finally they may progress to using a sharper or serrated knife to cut harder things like raw vegetables.

Montessori is friendly with **error**, seeing true mistakes (not being purposely careless) as learning opportunities. As the children learn, they will make many mistakes, and the consequences of that provide the child with his own control of error, so that he may correct his actions accordingly. If water is spilled while pouring, a sponge or towel is available for him to clean it up. At first the child may be very upset that he spilled and made a mess, but we assure him that accidents happen, and calmly show them exactly how to clean it up. The child soon learns that he is responsible for his own actions, and that he has the ability to take care of himself without needing constant direction. Instead of looking to an adult to handle his problems, we see a deep sense of satisfaction when he

uses his logic and makes the decision on how to proceed on his own. Now it is not a chore to clean up if he makes a mess, but rather part of the whole process.

This is why it is important that we do not rush in to clean up after a child, or help him to do it 'better'. If we whip out a big mop to clean up his spill, we take that work away from the child. We teach him that someone else is ultimately responsible for his actions. He then comes to believe he is incapable and expects others to complete his tasks, becoming a passive participant in his life. When he is allowed to take care of it himself, he has the opportunity to learn more skills – possibly even more complicated than the original task! If he was pouring and spilled, he then learns to get the specific clean-up towel from the shelf, to crouch down and balance over the puddle so he doesn't get wet, to place a pail nearby, to spread the towel flat over the spill, to fold it to a manageable size and pick it up, to center the wet towel over a pail, to twist and squeeze the towel with all his might, to inspect the floor and make sure all the water is gone, to empty the pail, to get a clothespin and hang the towel on the line, and finally to replenish the bucket with a dry towel... much more complicated than pouring water into a cup!

As the adults, our duty is to guide the child to remember and complete all the steps involved, to help him inspect and decide where he may need to spend more time cleaning, and to make sure the environment is kept safe. We realize that the child is still learning the process and so we don't correct them if it is not done perfectly. We hope that if they forget a step (or two), they may figure it out on their own, or may remember it the next time. If the accident has the potential of being unsafe we **balance** involving the child in the clean-up process while minimizing the danger. This balance includes realizing that the best way to learn is through experience, meaning that if a child chooses not to heed our warning and [is running where there is a spill and he slips, he cuts his finger on broken glass or a sharp knife edge, etc.] they will surely [walk with more care, avoid the sharp edges, etc.] the next time they encounter a similar situation.

For example, with a **wet spill**, the children can and will clean it up themselves with a cloth and bucket. The floor may still be wet, but we may not bring out the mop to clean up any excess until the children are out of the room. We would instead encourage the children to walk with more caution where the floor may still be wet, so there will be less chance of them slipping. We may even have them take responsibility for others by setting out a little orange cone to alert others that the floor is wet. Similarly, if a child breaks something glass, they are encouraged to clean it up themselves. (yes, really!)

Often when the child first encounters **broken glass**, their reaction is to panic, which is never the safest way to go. Our first task is to make sure that the children are calm so that they are in control of their bodies and thinking about how they need to proceed in the situation. We assure them that it is not a big deal and calmly show them what needs to be done, moving slowly and with great care. Often the breakable items in the environment are purposely made out of heavy glass/ceramic not only to strengthen the child's hands, but also so that if they are dropped, they will break into several large pieces, rather than splintering all over the floor. As with other accidents, we show the child how to be responsible for what happened, while we supervise and assist as needed. If the pieces are large, we show them exactly how to crouch down without putting knees/hands on the floor, gently

pick them up one at a time with their fingertips, being careful of the sharp edge, and carry each slowly to the trash can. With any small pieces, the child will bring the broom and dust pan to the area, and depending on their ability, may assist by sweeping it up themselves, or by pointing out stray pieces for us to sweep up, holding the dust pan, carrying the dustpan to the trash, etc. If there are many small pieces spread over a large area, we may help by sweeping at the same time, being sure that the child feels it is mainly their responsibility, and *we* are helping *them*.

When the mishap is handled in this calm, orderly, and *inclusive* manner, the child continues to gain skills and increase responsibility. Once he realizes that he knows how to handle an unexpected problem, his **confidence** grows and spreads to other areas. The child is no longer hesitant to choose work that he may have seen as ‘too difficult’. His shaking hands steady as he pours the bowl of water into the pail, and the pouring thereby becomes easier. He scrubs with gusto, lifts the heavy pail, picks up the glass bowl with one hand to wipe underneath with the other... and on and on. We start to hear “I’ll try” more than we hear “I can’t” (or “you do it!”), and very seldom does the child actually get hurt, because they now have learned how to handle themselves with care, and concentrate on the task at hand.

Who knew you could learn so much from a broken bowl?