
Grace and Courtesy for the Primary Child: Theoretical Foundations

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I would like to begin with a story about my oldest daughter. Several years ago, at the age of 5, she had her first birthday party. All the girls (there were 5 or 6) arrived at once, and they behaved in typical 5 year old girl fashion: they came in and formed a tight little group, eyes wide, all smiling in a clueless sort of way; a few were softly squealing ... except one, who stood aside. She was our neighbor and didn't know the rest of the girls, who were from my daughter's school. As I noticed her, looking a bit forlorn, a sudden, hard reality struck me; I had not prepared my own daughter for this social situation. Her first experience of hosting a party and I (a Montessori mother and trainer!) had failed to anticipate what should have been the obvious. In my flurry of baking scones, tracking down Devonshire cream, making an ice cream cake and preparing craft activities, I had forgotten about the most important part of a party: the comfort of the guests. I had not talked to Madeline about hosting a party. However, it was soon clear that *someone* had prepared my daughter for such courtesies. I rushed over to remind my daughter that our neighbor didn't know her other friends. I was about to prompt her when she immediately took over and formally presented each girl to Lindsey, complete with hand gestures, in typical Montessori form. I silently blessed her Montessori teacher. I watched with delight as 5 girls welcomed a 6th into their company with open arms.

I tell you this story because it says so much about the primary-aged child and grace and courtesy. The spontaneous introductions that my daughter made are a typical example of a young child's point of arrival in gracious living. Many factors contributed to this moment. Some of these are: inner drives, psychological readiness, social

opportunities and indirect preparations. I want to take a closer look at each of these factors and their roles in assisting the child in developing social graces.

Definition of Terms

What do we mean by grace and courtesy? In a word, harmony. Grace is the harmony between mind and body. An example of highly developed grace would be a solo ballet performance. For a young child – just as beautiful to us as a dance – grace is the ability to walk around a rug while carrying a tray. Courtesy is the harmony between oneself and others. This may or may not be a direct social interaction. Courtesy is walking around two people who are conversing (instead of between), or courtesy might be expressed by offering refreshment to another. Such harmony is achieved through etiquette: the forms, manners and rituals that a society has established as acceptable and meaningful.

How do manners achieve social harmony? Quite simply, they aid communication. Certain words and gestures carry expansive and particular meanings in a given society. Certain behaviors immediately announce to others: "I have your consideration in mind. I wish you good will." During the Middle Ages, a person extended both hands outwards when encountering another. This meant: "I do not have a weapon in hand. I come in peace. You can let down your defenses." Today's handshake, the descendant of this medieval gesture, carries a different meaning, one that reflects modern life. Shaking another's hand now has nothing to do with weapons. Rather, it is a simple and somewhat formal greeting that says, "Hello, I offer you my respect." Though our customs change over the centuries and differ geographically, the purpose of manners remains the same. *They signify to others that we*

take them, their wants and needs, into consideration. Manners allow a society to form and to evolve because its individual members acknowledge that the welfare of the group works in conjunction with the good of the individual. E.M. Standing, among others, has said that grace and courtesy lubricates social life. Isn't that a nice image? Lubrication removes unwanted friction and lets the parts of the whole work together in closest proximity. Appropriate manners will ease our relationships with other people. When social life is in harmony, the individual can relax and be herself. Relaxed persons are unguarded and more inclined to authenticity of expression. For a child, social harmony assists in maintaining a strong sense of self. In such a milieu, one can more easily satisfy one's own needs. We often think of a well-mannered person as one who puts another's comforts and needs above their own. Montessori had a different view: manners allow an individual to consider their own needs along with the needs of others.

Manners and customs are created and perpetuated by a given society. The impulse to establish manners is universal. Every group of people has them. Grace and courtesy are natural expressions of a community. The resulting behaviors, however, cannot be called "natural." Our ways of interacting have little to do with nature or logic. A young child, then (or a person from outside the culture), needs to be initiated into the customs of society. Gracious manners must be taught. If we can pass on the grace and courtesies of our culture to the young child, we give to her the power to create harmony.

In seeking to attain this goal, it is necessary to examine the developmental characteristics of the child from 3-6 as they relate to the psychological disposition to be gracious and courteous.



Psychological and Intellectual Characteristics

One of the young child's most striking characteristics is his self-centeredness. This is necessary, because he is at the stage where he is forming his personality. However, his self-absorption is not total. The young child possesses inner urges that propel him towards his environment and those around him. Maria Montessori identified the human tendency of communication that is present from birth. All humans have a need for self-expression, a need to be understood and to understand others.

Montessori also recognized that the young child experiences a sensitive period, in which he is immensely attracted to observing and practicing the social behaviors in his environment. However, the child is not yet fully social in the first plane of development, but rather in an embryonic stage for social development. During this time, the child acquires social attributes – such as particular courtesies or an awareness of others – in a somewhat isolated fashion. These attributes will not function together as a whole until all are fully developed. The birth of the social being occurs in the second plane, Montessori tells us. It is not until this time that the child is able to empathize, to imagine how another feels, to be conscious of his effect on another's emotions. The first plane child is interested in the appropriate way to *act* in a given social situation, is sometimes able to *respond* with the appropriate behavior and often *achieves* successful results. His understanding of the psychological intricacies of the situation, though, is limited.

My daughter's introductions of her friends resulted in all her friends feeling comfortable and companionable, although I doubt that that was her goal. She wasn't looking that far ahead or thinking that deeply. She made the introductions because she had been made aware that this is appropriate behavior when people haven't met, not because she was sensitive to the distraught feelings of the newest member of the group. Grace and courtesy gives the child the possibility of responding to

situations which could be problematic, even though she may not perceive or understand the difficulty.

Another sensitive period that the young child experiences is for the refinement of movement. This obviously has special relevance for the development of physical grace, and also touches upon social grace. Think of the refinement of movement necessary for serving a cup of tea to another person ... anticipating when and how the recipient will take possession of the cup and saucer (and think of the control of error!).

How does a young child learn? Intellectually, she is a sensorial explorer. She learns by doing: touching, listening, watching, smelling, tasting. She has not yet developed a logical and imaginative mind that would diminish the depth and purity of sensorial experience. We make use of this style of learning when introducing grace and courtesies to young children. We present just enough so that they can sensorially explore the courtesies through play acting with their peers. (I wonder what it feels like to invite a visitor into our classroom?) A child can try it out and practice the words and gestures until they become part of who she is. When they are a part of her, the child is able to summon the behavior at the appropriate social moment.

Perhaps the most significant developmental influence on learning is the absorbent nature of the child's mind. Through her absorbent mind, the child consumes all aspects of her environment without will on her part, or much consciousness. The impressions she takes in are strong. They will become a part of who she is. The absorbent mind allows the child to incarnate her environment.

The process of what Dr. Montessori called "adaptation" is possible because of the absorbent mind. In the first six years of his life, the child slowly evolves into a person of his time, place and culture. A significant part of one's culture are the ways in which people interact with each other. The child will establish a life-long emotional tie to these customs of his culture. They will become an integral part of his self-identity.

These are the major inner guides then – the absorbent mind, human tendencies and sensitive periods – along with the psychological characteristics of the first plane child, which we will consider when we plan our role in assisting the social development of the child, in helping her acquire grace and courtesy. These developmental influences have a certain intensity present only in the young child. Their fleeting nature points to the urgency of our response. We can offer the child the food that truly satisfies her hunger. At this point in her life, she hungers to become and to belong. The subject of grace and courtesy is most closely related to the subject of belonging, but this process cannot occur in its fullness without a strong sense of identity. The two processes, becoming and belonging, co-exist and nourish each other throughout childhood and beyond.

For the young child, gaining consciousness of herself and who she is in relation to those around her will give her the impetus to make contact with others. If she also possesses some knowledge of the customs of social interchange, she will experience satisfaction and gain self-confidence in her social relations.

We see then that the drive to communicate and the psychological characteristics of the young child combine to render her ready for the indirect preparations for gracious living that we offer her in the prepared environment.

The Prepared Environment

Let's look at the elements of the prepared environment that indirectly give the child the opportunity to encounter and practice grace and courtesy at his level of psychological readiness.

First, we create a space that is orderly and child-sized. Here, the child feels comfortable. The environment fits him like a fine pair of slippers. He doesn't feel small or out of place. He *relates* to the room. The order of the room assists him in orienting, in getting to know the physical space. Its consistency means that he can count on finding what he needs. Here, he can establish a secure relationship with the objects in the room.

Secondly, we offer a community of peers to the child. It is a diverse group. There is a three year age span, or more. There are rich opportunities to relate in many different ways. The age differences allow for true spontaneous helping to occur (a cornerstone of a strong society). The group is consistent; everyone comes everyday. The teacher is the same person every day. The child can settle into this community and quickly feel that she is a vital member. In fact, she is missed by all when she is not there.

A third and essential element of the prepared environment that promotes grace and courtesy is the freedom we extend to the child. He may choose his activity. If he is unable to do so, we do not immediately make the choice for him but help him learn how to make a decision. He may make contact with another person whenever he feels moved to do so. If he is not allowed to act on his spontaneous urge to talk, we know that the opportunity will be lost. The young child lives in the present moment. Putting off a desire to speak to another is nearly impossible. In an atmosphere of freedom, the child will experience – in a natural way – mutual help, sharing, respect, cooperation and acts of kindness and generosity.

Inseparable from the freedoms are the limits that we impose within our classroom community. I say “impose” because that is exactly what we must do. Young children are incapable of judging the moral implications of behavior, and so *we* must determine the limit to the freedoms they exercise and *convey them clearly to the child*. This will take some thought and planning on our part. The child may or may not choose to exercise all the freedoms afforded her on a given day (to eat snack, to engage in conversation, to go outside and water the garden, to place their flower arrangement in the entrance hall – all those decisions made without asking an adult for permission), but going beyond the well-defined limit of the freedoms is not an option. We, as directresses, will choose our limits by determining what is best for the community of children and for the individuals living in that community.

Limits have nothing to do with control or classroom management and everything to do with independence.

It is the freedom and limits of the community that determine the quality of the social life of our classroom. This is the element that defines social development in a Montessori classroom, that makes possible the social opportunities afforded the children. Social development is so much more than children getting along together! All the children benefit from all the social interchanges. The individuals gain in goodness and the group gains in goodness. The obvious gains are to the practitioners: to act graciously ennobles me. But to the recipient of grace comes the divine energy of being cherished. To allow oneself to receive grace at the hands of another is perhaps a lesson greater than giving. And the group in which we live should be so wonderful that it includes as a constancy, as part of its firmament, that we are noble and cherished in turn. These thoughts bring to mind the Shaker folk song, *Simple Gifts*:

*'Tis a gift to be simple, 'Tis a gift to be free,
'Tis a gift to come 'round where we ought
to be.*

*And when we find ourselves in the place
just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.*

*When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend, we shan't be ashamed.
But to turn, turn will be our delight,
'Till by turning, turning, we come 'round
right.*

I want to draw your attention to the way in which we convey the freedoms and limits to the children. We do so through presentations, just as carefully prepared as a table washing demonstration. These are grace and courtesy lessons: how to behave appropriately in the classroom, how to get what you need without imposing on the freedoms of the other members of the community. Our technique of respectfully *presenting* the appropriate behavior frees us from the constant need to direct, to command and to correct, and it frees the child from being treated disrespectfully. Our respect for the children dictates that we guide them, inform them, orient them, so that we

give them the independence to be free in the environment: to act, according to established norms, without needing our assistance and supervision.

The final element of the prepared environment that assists the child in living graciously is the directress. We are the models that will inform and inspire the children in their poise and conduct. Any of you who are teachers know how powerful you are in influencing the behavior of young children. They will admire and imitate us no matter what we do. This awesome power carries great responsibility. We must attend to our every movement, our every word. More potent than any grace and courtesy lesson is the way we interact with the children.

As I was writing this talk I had occasion to consult a thesaurus. I was looking for alternate words for grace and courtesy. The words I found were not quite synonyms; their meanings were subtle and provocative. I discovered that the list was a good check for my own behavior. Have I been some or all these things for the children? ... and had I found ways to create opportunities for the children to acquire these traits? Here's the list:

- refined
- attentive
- kind
- polite
- civil
- courtly
- cultivated
- elegant
- cultured
- dignified
- affable
- amiable
- courteous
- friendly
- considerate
- diplomatic
- respectful
- mannerly
- fair
- honest

The ultimate question is, of course, do I have these attributes in real life? Of course I can “put them on” when I need them but some might question the validity – if the traits are not mine, they do not truly carry me to the child.

In the prepared environment, our well-mannered behavior takes on a particular significance. We are the living example of how to live graciously within the community of the classroom. Through our behavior, we assist the child in development; we want to aid her independence. Aside from being respectful and gracious, we must be



consistent in our relations with children. This allows the child to see us and the environment as predictable. It also gives her an example of one way to behave in the environment. She may choose to imitate our phrases and gestures or she may find her own, based on the knowledge that she has gained from observing and interacting with us.

We make sure our interchanges are meaningful and satisfying to the child. (Are we addressing this particular individual and this particular time? Do we know her need?) We use interesting and precise vocabulary. Our conversations are informative without being preachy. We are active listeners, as well. A true conversation is an exchange. Both parties listen, both parties talk, and both respond to the other.

Grace and Courtesy Lessons

Our grace and courtesy lessons will be a bit more immediate than our everyday behavior in demonstrating appropriate behavior. These presentations will be customized to the particular children and to the particular culture of our classrooms. As the child becomes conscious and interested in social interchange, she will be shown a variety of practical ways to satisfy her needs. We will give her the freedom to apply this knowledge as she is psychologically ready to assume the responsibility.

Our lessons of grace and courtesy will spare the child confusion and awkwardness in social situations. They will spare her the need to depend on adults for directions or promptings. The lessons will require planning, anticipating the needs of individuals as well as the group.

For the youngest children, we will introduce the very basic lesson of refined movement or grace: how to walk, how to carry an object, how to sit in a group, how to stand in a group, how to form a group. And then, as an awareness and interest in others develops, we can add more challenge: how to get someone's attention (use their name, look in their eyes), how to greet another, how to take one's leave, how to ask for assistance. To foster social relations further: how to relate something to another, how to invite someone to play,

to have a snack or to work together. As the child begins to understand other people's needs and feelings: how to offer help, how to ask to join a group, how to enter a conversation, how to listen attentively, how to express gratitude or appreciation, how to eat and converse, how to answer the telephone, how to offer refreshment, how to greet a visitor, how to tell a story or make an announcement, how to start a conversation, how to ask leading questions, how to avoid hurting another's feelings (birthday parties), how to express a differing opinion.

Through the grace and courtesy lessons, we will help the young child understand the behavior that she encounters: the body language, the facial expressions, the words. We also will help her to find her own expression within the environment. The lessons of grace and courtesy allow her to *be* herself in the "valley of love and delight."

Ultimately, our goal is that the child will grow, as an adult, to consider all of humankind – past, present and future – in her behavior. She will assume the joy and responsibility of taking part in society and contributing to its cohesion and evolution. Even in the absence of other people, she will live with consciousness of others. She will be careful with the earth's resources so that future generations can lead safe and satisfying lives. She will leave her place ready for the next person and feel gratitude for those who preserved her place. She will realize that we make the world in which we live. ❖

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