

The Silence Activity

Introduction:

The Silence Activity is a point of arrival in the Montessori environment; it is an outgrowth of the children's development. It should never be imposed on the children to obtain silence. That is not its purpose. Rather it should be done at such a point in the children's development that it will enable them to enjoy the level of self-mastery that they have each attained, thus the activity will be a source of great fulfillment for them.

The Silence activity that needs the full cooperation of all the children involved. In order that the activity may be done successfully, there must be some degree of social development. Each child must participate in the cooperative effort to create silence.

"Silence" is the fruit of the coordinated purposeful performance of every movement. It is not, as is generally considered, the avoidance of noise greater than what is usually tolerated in schools. Silence imposed from without on children in the ordinary schools (usually done in a noisy and violent manner), means to stop their talking and moving, the opposite of activity, a kind of paralysis.

In a Montessori environment, silence answers an inner need and is itself the fruit of the activity. It invites conscious control of every movement. It cannot be obtained by command, especially during this period of life. It should never be used for outer disciplinary purposes. It is a developmental activity. Do not suggest this activity when the atmosphere is restless, because it requires deep concentration and great effort. It also requires a certain degree of all-round development; hence it cannot be given at any arbitrary chosen moment.

The children need to be able to enter into the Silence activity joyfully; the Silence should be long enough to allow for thinking and meditation on the part of all participating. The true self-control, order and peacefulness involved in this exercise help to make it a truly wondrous experience, which satisfies deep inner needs of the child.

"You are not the same after the silence as you were before it"

"Silence", says Montessori, "often brings us the knowledge which we had not fully realized, that we possess within ourselves an interior life" The child by means of it becomes aware of this "Buried life" (as Mathew Arnold calls it) for the first time. (E.M. Standing—226)

A certain development has to have been achieved before the Silence Activity can be presented. Guidelines to determine if the children are ready for the activity”

- Basic control over movements has been built up through the exercises of Practical Life. Without mastery one cannot exercise control.
- A sensorial preparation helps to build up acoustic and visual consciousness
- A preparation of the intelligence which has to understand what is required
- A development of will, which is achieved only if freedom of choice and repetition is given in the environment.
- A certain social development, not of social behavior only, but of social consciousness.

Preparatory activity

The silence is a collective activity. The experience of silence is deeply appreciated by the children and enthralls them. It has to be built up gradually. After the children have settled down, ask them to sit down comfortably and concentrate on their feet only, trying to keep them quite still, as the adult himself will show.

On another day extend this conscious control from the feet to the legs—then the knees, hands, head, eyes (which can be closed), lips, etc. little by little as a surprising and impressive reward of these efforts to acquire full conscious control over the mobile parts of the body.

This “silence” is enjoyed and becomes willed. It need not be preserved in the absolute form at this time for more than a few minutes.

All these preparations are leading eventually to a full-blown Silence Activity for which the children may sit on their chairs (if it is possible to get up absolutely quietly), or on the floor.

The Silence Activity-2

When you feel the children are ready, invite them to do a special activity—to make “Silence”.

Let the children sit down comfortably. If possible, darken the room for a special effect. Tell the children what they have to do—everyone will make silence, and you will go outside and call each of them, one by one, to come outside with you, while making

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silence all of the time. The child whose name is called will come to you without making any noise.

The adult goes out into the hall-as far as possible and remains visible, when there is silence, call each child's name in a low tone, an aphonic whisper (means without voice), wait until one child arrives before calling the name of the next. If a child does not hear when called or does not listen, after calling twice we call another one and later turn to the one who did not react.

Do not call only those who are perfectly still. The children should know that they will be called. The children who have been called will sit (stand) near the adult until all have become, but with the same concentration on avoiding noise, here the child has to concentrate on the calling out of his name and not on any other sound.

One of the important elements of the Silence Activity is that you must be sure to call every child's name, regardless of how much time that involves. If it is a very large group of children, you may consider beginning to do this activity in the afternoon, during "extended day", when only a few of the older children are present.

Second Activity

This activity is one of identification. Call the children before silence is built up, tell them: "when there is silence I am going to drop something. Try to hear if that something has fallen. Those who hear will not say so but will show with a gesture."

Silence Activity-3

Later we can ask individual children what it was that we dropped

Objects used for dropping: nail, beads, rubber eraser, pin, etc.

Other actions connected with this activity:

- a) Putting down objects with a slight noise, eg. Chair, table, box, vase, etc.
- b) Crumpling paper
- c) Tearing paper
- d) Noises of opening and closing door, window, drawer, book, etc. Each has its characteristic sound
- e) Grinding different things
- f) Cutting vegetables

g) Jumping softly with different footwear and barefoot

There are two stages in this activity:

1. Whether the child hears or not
2. To name the objects dropped, put down, etc.

Instructions how to express what was identified must be given before silence is built up. First, to show what they heard; then when asked what it was they can answer in a low voice.

Third Activity

Let the children hear a bell or the ticking of a clock.

After silence is built up, the adult while making the noise or holding the clock, moves away, behind or toward one side of the children. The children are asked to give a signal when they do not hear it anymore. While moving the sound should be kept on the same level. Sound echoes, so we will think it still continues. This is a perfect test of hearing.

Another activity is to move forward with the noise. The noise can be a bell, a clock or any soft instrument—cymbal, triangle, etc. This is to recognize the sound. The children love to hear the sound on a graded scale.

Once in a while, at the end of such silence activities, the adult could propose singing a suitable quiet song or read an inspiring poem; a prayer could be said or a hymn sung.

The children really enjoy this experience, realizing that of which they are capable. Sometimes the Silence Activity will not be success, and you may have to stop it. But once the children have experienced its deep silence, they will ask for it again and again, for it provides a great inner satisfaction and peace. In the words of Dr. Montessori:

“ ...The silence of immobility suspends the normal life, suspends useful work and has no practical aim. All its importance, all its fascination springs from the fact that by suspending the communal life, it raises the individual to a higher level where utility does not exist, but where it is the conquest of self that calls him.” (‘Disc. Of the child’- 213)