

# Understanding Montessori

*The Kids Talk Way*



## Understanding the Three Levels of Obedience for a Three-Year-Old

October 25, 2009

Sometimes when I am working on the computer, I feel like a three-year-old. At least, I think I feel like a three-year-old. I try to do some function that I haven't done in a while, and I look at the computer screen wondering how I did it. When I am utterly confused, I'll phone one of my daughters and ask, "How do I...?" Fortunately for me, they always laugh and say, "Oh, Momma!"

What does this have to do with a three-year old? A three-year-old is having new experiences, learning new skills and working on self-mastery of those skills, just like I do on the computer. Some days they can do something on their own, and other days they need assistance. This is because learning occurs in three stages, as

follows:

**At the first stage**, we can do an activity with assistance.

**At the second stage**, we can do an activity when we are asked to do it.

**At the third stage**, we can do the activity independently and are fully aware of when it needs to be done.

In the example of my computer skills, trying to learn how to double-line format was a challenge. The first time, I had to be shown the series of steps. First stage. Then I could do it when someone reminded me of the steps. Second stage. I am proud to report that I can now do it with no assistance and no reminders. Third stage, or independence.

As we learn new skills, we go back and forth between stages one and two. What leads us to independence is repeating the activity with additional instruction. This independence allows us to obey a command or request.

Obey. We tend to think that it means, "to carry out a command without question." The word obey comes from the Latin *oboedire*, meaning "to listen or to hear". To obey, we listen and then make a choice to follow the command. If we hear a command from someone we trust, we will usually choose to carry out the command, if we know how to do it and have no conflicting information. We can also follow a command out of fear. To the casual observer it might appear in both instances that the command has been followed without question.

For the participants in an activity, command giver/command follower, teacher/student or parent/child, the dynamics of fear and trust create a relationship. To build a relationship based on trust, it is critical to understand the skills necessary to accomplish a command.

Most three-year-olds have a strong desire to please the adults in their lives and are willing to do what we ask. What children lack are the experience and the skill. We can look at their ability to obey or level of obedience in this way:

**First Level:** will | no experience | no skill

**Second Level:** will | experience | no skill

**Third Level:** will | experience | skill

In a trusting relationship, the child is eager to learn new activities. Remembering all the steps in an activity is difficult, and children need to be shown many times. Because they are keen to learn, children are always watching others, which is a reason to be a good example.

To master a skill, children need to repeat an activity perhaps hundreds of times. Children need the opportunity to do activities uninterrupted with the freedom to make mistakes without being corrected during the activity. The exception to this is when there is immediate danger to the child or property. Observing a child's "mistakes" and "messes" gives us a clue of what needs to be retaught. Also, being interrupted or not being allowed to finish an activity can be the cause of frustration

that may be expressed as a temper tantrum.

So we teach and re-teach as the child moves between levels one and two, and then one beautiful day, the child is working at the third level of obedience.

Let's take an example of making a bed. At the first level, the child is shown how to make a bed. The child shows willingness by trying to make the bed the next morning. The bedspread is hanging too low on one side and there are lumps. Being friendly with error, the adult simply states, "You made the bed by yourself."

The next day the child forgets to make the bed. The adult gives another demonstration, wordlessly looking at both sides of the spread to make sure they are even. The next day the child makes the bed. The fourth day the child forgets to make the bed. The adult reminds the child, and the child goes cheerfully to make the bed. If the child protests, the adult simply smiles and says "Let's do it together," knowing that the child may have forgotten how to do it.

After a few days the child can make the bed with just a verbal reminder. At some point, weeks, months or years, the child will reach the third level and make the bed perfectly without any reminders. (Parents of teenagers are allowed to roll their eyes if still waiting on this third level of obedience.)

All of us learn faster and better in a trusting relationship. Trust is developed by offering assistance in a clear, concise and kind manner. The adult doesn't ask the child to do something that is too difficult or belittle the child for not being able to do it. The adult remembers that it takes many re-teachings to get to the second level of obedience and much practice to arrive at the third level.

The adult needs to observe the child's will, skill and experience levels before asking them to do something. We can offer assistance to the child, keeping in mind "any unnecessary help is a hindrance."

For the three- to six-year-old, these levels of skill, experience and obedience are changing daily. As adults, we need to remain "friendly with error" as the child's experience and memory propel them to the third level of obedience, an obedience built on a relationship of trust and mutual respect.

**Next week:** The Myth of Sharing