

Family Connection

NOVEMBER 2025

“At some given moment it happens that the child becomes deeply interested in a piece of work; we see it in the expression on his face, his intense concentration, the devotion to the exercise.”

— *The Discovery of the Child*

The Montessori Principle of “Follow the Child”

By Heather White



“Follow the child” is a phrase often heard amongst Montessori educators. It is a principle that lies at the heart of Montessori philosophy, describing how teachers engage with students and access their skills. While this saying honors the child, it can sometimes be off-putting to parents and others who might misinterpret its meaning.

Clarifying “Follow the Child”

Many parents may hesitate at the idea of teachers “following the child.” They might feel that their child needs encouragement—perhaps even a gentle push—to explore new ideas and develop skills. The concern is understandable; after all, parents often want teachers to guide their children through their learning journeys. However, this perspective can overlook the nuanced practice of “following the child” in Montessori education.

When Montessori educators say they “follow the child,” it is crucial to understand what this entails. It does not mean simply watching children make their own decisions without

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guidance. Instead, it is about deeply knowing each child and using that knowledge to support their social, emotional, and academic development.

We follow the child by taking the time to observe them closely. Each day, week, and month, educators watch how children engage with their environment and materials. Through these observations, teachers gain insight into each child's natural tendencies, interests, and areas for growth.

This ongoing process informs their practice. We follow the child when we take the information our observations supply us with and use it to adjust our approaches. It is about meeting children where they are and supporting them through the next steps in their learning.



We follow the child when we actively listen to them and guide them in the right direction—whether that involves introducing them to new materials or offering the encouragement they need to step out of their comfort zones. Following the child does not equate to letting them make all their own choices or dictate the structure of their day. Rather, it involves a thoughtful partnership between teacher and student, grounded in mutual respect and understanding.

Honoring a Holistic Approach to Education

The Montessori principle of “follow the child” encapsulates a holistic approach to education that honors each child's individuality. By observing, listening, and providing thoughtful guidance, educators empower children to explore their interests while fostering independence and confidence.

Understanding this nuanced practice is crucial for parents and educators alike, as it ultimately enhances the learning experience and nurtures a lifelong love of learning in children.



UNDERSTANDING THE MONTESSORI BROWN STAIR

A PARENT'S GUIDE

BY HEATHER WHITE



The Montessori Brown Stair, or Broad Stair, is a classic sensorial material that supports young children in developing visual and tactile discrimination skills. Consisting of ten brown, wooden prisms, this material teaches children to discern size differences, specifically focusing on width and height, while maintaining the same length for each piece. By isolating these dimensions, the Brown Stair enables children to refine their understanding of "wide" and "narrow."

Working with the Brown Stair

When a child first encounters the Brown Stair, they start by carrying each prism from the shelf to a mat, arranging them from thickest to thinnest. This simple act not only builds focus and body coordination but also helps them understand weight differences tied to size. Through arranging the prisms, the child intuitively learns to identify and sequence the prisms by width, making fine observations of their spatial relationships.

After mastering the initial exercise, children often use the smallest prism to measure the "steps" of

the Brown Stair, visually reinforcing the scale of each piece. Another extension involves combining the Brown Stair with another iconic Montessori material, the Pink Tower. In this activity, children place Pink Tower cubes and Brown Stair prisms together, discovering relationships between these two sets of shapes. Such explorations encourage problem-solving and independent learning, as well as a sense of wonder in finding patterns.

Building Vocabulary

The vocabulary associated with the Brown Stair introduces terms such as "wide," "narrow," "wider," "narrower," "widest," and "narrowest," deepening the child's understanding of comparative and superlative descriptors. Parents can reinforce this language at home, encouraging children to use these terms in everyday situations, thereby supporting the hands-on learning that makes Montessori education so impactful.

Discovering Dimensions

Each prism in the Brown Stair is exactly 20 centimeters long, but their heights range from 1 centimeter to 10 centimeters, with each prism's

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**“The hand
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—Maria Montessori

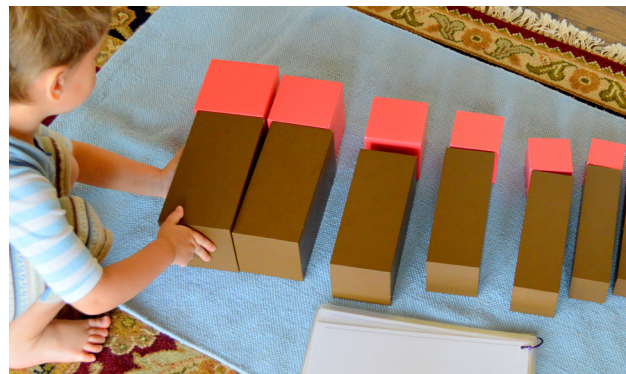
end faces increasing proportionally. This setup highlights the squares of numbers from 1 through 10, introducing children to early mathematical concepts visually and kinesthetically. In Montessori, isolating variables (like width in the case of the Brown Stair) minimizes distraction, allowing children to explore one aspect of an object deeply, a practice essential to Montessori learning.

Control of Error

A fundamental aspect of the Montessori approach is the “control of error,” which allows children to spot and correct their mistakes independently. For instance, if a child misplaces a prism in the sequence, the misalignment will become visually apparent, prompting them to re-evaluate their arrangement. This design element fosters self-confidence and a growth mindset, as children learn through trial and observation without constant adult correction.

Laying a Foundation for Future Learning

The Montessori Brown Stair provides children with a foundation in sensory discrimination and spatial reasoning, laying groundwork for future academic skills in math and logical thinking. As Maria Montessori said, “The hand is the instrument of intelligence,” and through manipulating the Brown Stair, children are indeed working toward intelligence, cultivating their understanding in a hands-on way.



Parenting Inspiration, Rooted in Montessori

Real Conversations to Inspire Lifelong Learning

NEW PODCAST EPISODE

Educating the Human Potential



AMERICAN MONTESSORI SOCIETY

Building Trust: Why Parent-School Communication Matters

Educating the Human Potential is a podcast about optimizing education for a better society, through a Montessori lens. In this episode, our hosts explore the role of trust, honesty, and consistency between parents and educators.

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