

Service Learning and the Lower Elementary Child
By Noreen Sullivan, Lower Elementary Teacher

In her book, *From Childhood to Adolescence*, Maria Montessori wrote of the 7- to 12-year old child:

“It is at this age that the concept of justice is born, simultaneously with the understanding of the relationship between one’s acts and the needs of others.”

Montessori education is developmentally-based. That is, the educational practices always conform to the needs and capabilities of the child. Concerning the lower elementary child, three developmental principles naturally lead to the inclusion of service work in the school program:

- 1) The child’s need to expand beyond the prepared environment.
- 2) The child’s increasing ability to understand abstract concepts.
- 3) The development of a strong moral sense.

One way that the lower elementary program at Queen of Angels Montessori School meets these needs is by giving children the opportunity to help others.

Helping Cincinnati Shriners Hospital for Children

Service opportunities provide an excellent way to participate in the real world. All the lower elementary classes take part in many service opportunities. My class recently decided to have a bake sale to raise funds to bring joy to children at the Shriners Hospital for Children.

In these instances, I step out of the way and let the children run the show. First, making candy and cookies and selling them got children out of the classroom and into the “real world”. Children took turns dipping pretzels into white or dark chocolate, and then sprinkling them with decorations. Many also baked and decorated cookies at home. Third grade students were in charge of the sale, making price tags and setting up tables. They supervised the younger children who sold the goods and made change. In these ways they were building real-world skills outside the classroom.

Dr. Montessori knew that children this age are learning abstract concepts. She said children need experience with money and “It is therefore necessary that children have first-hand experience buying objects themselves and that they come to realize what they can buy with a unit of the money of their country.” In this case, children were both buyers and sellers. Third grade children priced the

goods high, to make the most money for Shriners. Some younger children changed the prices so that more students could afford the treats. Setting prices, counting money, and making change had children practicing mental skills.

Lastly, the moral sense of our students is acute. Is it fair to charge \$1.50 for a pretzel? Can we have the sale again tomorrow to make more money for the hospital's children? Also, what *about* those children who are in the hospital? Our students were happy to make the children notes and paper crafts. As Montessori said: "The question of aid to the weak, to the aged, to the sick, for example, now arises."

Some people have asked why Montessori-schooled children "work". Real work satisfies the needs of children. Queen of Angels Montessori is a generous school, and many of the gifts come from children. These contributions help the giver as much as they do the recipients and provide a way to children to learn by working. In short, our students do real work, and feel the joy of a job well done.

Valentine's Service Project

To send our warmth and joy out into the Cincinnati community, our lower elementary class cut and tied fleece blankets this Valentine's Day. Each blanket had two pieces of fleece. The children cut the fringe and tied the pieces of fleece together. Students worked in teams to make the blankets, and then shared a Valentine's treat. The blankets were donated to the children at Children's Hospital.