

## What does “practical life” work look like in the Middle School years?

By: Michelle Willard

I'm standing with a group of ten Middle School students in the underground in London. It's cold, and of course, foggy, and we're all tired with jet lag. It's 7:30am and we have an appointment with a local tour guide in the Financial District at 8am. The students are huddled together looking at a map of London's 'tube'. The adults stand purposely in the background listening with amusement as the 'navigator' for the day checks his watch, checks the map, then looks for support from the group of kids who are depending on him.

*“Yes! It's color-coded! Man, I wish our NY subway were this easy! O.k., we just need to take the blue line to Piccadilly Square and then it's a few blocks walk. J.D., does this look right, dude?”*

*“Uh, let me see, yeah, but you gotta get on going downtown, not uptown. We gotta get to the other side of the track.”*

It's these kinds of conversations between my Middle School students over the years that inspire me to continue putting field trip navigation in the hands of 11 to 13-year-olds. Of course, you don't have to cross the Atlantic to give kids the chance to master public transportation; any city and the right preparation in the classroom beforehand will do!

Practical Life is one of my favorite aspects of Montessori education, and the Middle School years, in particular, offer so much opportunity for preparing our children to handle the everyday tasks they are capable of doing and will need to hone as they approach adulthood. They are so eager at this age to take on responsibilities that define them as no longer young children.

Ten years ago I helped found the Middle School at Princeton Montessori School. Since then we have added many practical life lessons to the program. As this is a cornerstone of Montessori education, it's nothing new to head teachers, but we each enrich our classrooms specific to the culture we live in. In Princeton, we've found some great approaches to very common skills development.

To begin with, who doesn't know a pre-adolescent who is eager to begin earning money? Eleven to thirteen year olds definitely don't need to be talked into the idea that their time and effort is worth hard, cold cash. The thing they don't realize is that they may be lacking any of the job readiness a potential employer will expect of them!

This is where practical life skill training comes in! There are many opportunities for the middle school students to work: babysitting, car washing, raking leaves, painting, shoveling snow, etc. Of course, there are many jobs that just get done for free as a member of a family; these should not be paid for!

So, how do we prepare them for job readiness? We start by discussing things like commitment, first impressions, follow-through, appearance, and quality of job. The students then write up a 'resume' of sorts that lists their skills relevant to what they would

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like to be hired for. They include their age, phone number, name of parents, experience, and a reference.

We take them through a mock interview, show how to shake hands confidently, not to sit down until one is asked, and work on posture and language. Jobs are then created at the school, such as serving as waiters at our annual parent / faculty auction. The kids write a letter if they are interested in applying for the job, interview with the auction committee leaders, and may then be hired, given an hourly rate, and told their responsibilities and who their supervisor will be.

After the event they are given a written evaluation as to how they performed as an employee. The supervisor in charge also offers a recommendation for future jobs if they think the student has done a good job.

*“Sarah was cooperative, enthusiastic, and eager to please. If I were to hire her again, I would suggest she be sure to be on time, ready to perform her job. She used about the first fifteen minutes getting herself ready in the bathroom. Overall, great job!”*

Another practical life skill students get to and need to practice at the Middle School level is respectful communication. Once a week, for a semester, our students take an Interpersonal Skills class based on Stephen Glenn’s book, Developing Capable People.

In this setting, they learn some principles of good communication: to mirror back what is being said, to tell what they are feeling first. They also learn about the most common pitfalls of communication: attacking, blaming, avoiding, blocking. They do this through role playing, discussion, home assignments, and observations and reflections of their own behavior over a given time period.

The kids volunteer examples of tough spots they’ve been in when trying to communicate with someone in their lives, be it a sibling, parent, or friend. The situations range from dealing with peer pressure to expressing uncomfortable feelings.

One role-playing scenario went like this:

*“Come on Jason, everyone does it. The ushers don’t care.”*

*“I don’t know; I told my mom I was going to see Harry Potter. I ‘m only allowed to see PG-rated movies. If she finds out I’ll be grounded for weeks.”*

*“I’m telling you, everyone else has seen this movie. We won’t get caught. We’ll just walk right in to the other movie when they take our tickets.”*

THE KIDS’ POSSIBLE SOLUTION RESPONSES:

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*“Look John, I’m not comfortable doing this. Maybe you should go to the movies with someone else.”*

*“I can’t risk getting in trouble man, sorry, it’s not gonna happen.”*

*“No. I’m not doing this. If you want I’ll call my mom to pick me up now and you can see the movie alone.”*

The kids laugh as they deliver the canned, pre-thought responses, but it sinks in. They come to realize that if they think it through ahead of time and practice it often enough they will feel comfortable saying it. They’re much more likely to follow their conscience and get themselves out of a sticky situation having practiced such situations.

Over the years, I’ve come to realize that this is one of the most important classes we teach. The direct results are right in front of us each day.

A very popular topic these days in most middle and high schools is the idea of community service, with some schools requiring hours of service in order to graduate. We all agree community service is a good thing, but we want to develop a life-long awareness and dedication. This must be modeled, discussed, and connected to their lives in a way that allows them to own it.

We’ve found you really don’t have to go far or do anything on too grand of a scale to open kids up to the idea of service. In fact, we start with our school community! This is nothing new in Montessori where even toddlers begin the process of giving to their own little community through such simple acts as cleaning up their own mess so others can enjoy a work.

To begin with, the sixth through eighth grade students are taught that they are the role models and guides for the younger children at the school. At 3p.m. each day, a handful of them make their way out the front doors of the school to run the entire dismissal program for the 3 to 6-year-olds, assisting them to their cars, strap them in, comforting them or conversing playfully along the way.

There are few things more precious to observe than a thirteen-year-old boy, who moments early had been roughing it with the boys on the basketball court, now holding the hand of an apprehensive four-year-old as he takes her to her car.

*“Hey Jessica, is that a picture for your mommy? O.k., do you need help getting in? Watch your step. Does she need help buckling? O.k., see you tomorrow Jessica. Bye, bye!”*

They also serve pizza to the younger students one day a week. Watching them manage a contract with a pizza parlor, account for checks, handle the logistics of serving, and sweet talk an angry customer at times is inspiring.

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As one eleven-year old girl said, *“I think I could run a real business someday. I’m pretty good at this!”*

They take all the school garbage out to the dumpsters each day with care and consistency and minimal complaints. They serve as ushers, choir members, waiters, and spokespersons at our parent events. They are ambassadors for our school.

Each day, they know they are needed members of our community; the place ticks partly because of them. Pre-adolescents need this. They don’t want invented tasks assigned them; they want to really contribute, to really be needed.

When getting ready to leave on an overnight fieldtrip, one student worried the school might not run without them.

*“Wait, but whose going to do dismissal and did we get the fifth graders to deliver pizza?”*

We spend time every week processing, which is crucial if meaning is going to be gained from their action. In class, we gather each Friday for a meeting run by the student monthly coordinators. Our purpose is not only to go over the calendar and issues the students want to bring up, but to talk about what community service means and how each member is contributing to the group.

Teachers, staff, parents, and outsiders come to talk to the class about how they give back to the world and what service means to them. Students comb the newspapers and the Internet for inspirational stories of service they can share with the class.

Finally, toward the end of the year, students vote on two local day projects that they can all participate in. This year the class visited an animal shelter and learned what they need to do to be trained to volunteer regularly.

We went to a local soup kitchen and tore turkeys apart with our bare hands preparing an afternoon meal. The kids loved it; they came back more energized and really believing they could change the world. They were inspired, moved to service of their own initiative. Although, elbow deep in turkey, you might not have believed we would get there.

*“Gross. I can’t believe I’m doing this,”* Kristine, a 12-year-old girl declares as we stand in hairnets and gloves in the kitchen of the Trenton Soup Kitchen, *“I have my hand inside a turkey!”*

*“Yeah, well think of the people who have to eat the turkey that your hand is in,”* another responds as he scrunches up his face in disgust.

*“Hasn’t the shelter ever heard of chicken fingers?”* Kristine continues.

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“Hey, wait, I think I’m getting the hang of this.” comes the cry of a more optimistic 11-year-old.

“Wouldn’t this be a great moment for a food fight?” Kristine decides to make the best of her situation.

The ‘war stories’ on the bus ride back are peppered with comments of pride and maybe even a dash of joy.

As the last days of spring approach and our pizza business comes to a close, students present a report on the charity they feel most passionate about. The students then add up their hard earned money from serving all those slices and beam with pride as the check is written for their charity of choice.

Because we process so much with the kids and focus on finding a way that they are likely to give and to a cause they feel passionate about, I believe we are setting the stage for a lifetime of awareness and giving.

What a precious gift to give our children!

Overall, there are an exhaustive number of possibilities for practical life skill teaching in the Middle School. Community service, job readiness, and interpersonal communication are just a few. There are some that are universal to all groups of children this age and some that are more culture or community specific. The key is to get started and see where the children take you.

### **A LIST OF PRACTICAL LIFE SKILLS – for a side bar**

#### MANAGING RESPONSIBILITIES

- Homework
- Home chores
- Job readiness training

#### SELF-GUIDANCE

- Critical Thinking
- Common Sense
- Defining your values
- Following your values

#### NAVIGATION

- Hometown
- Public transportation
- The internet

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## **MANAGING MONEY**

- Allowances
- Finance terminology (credit / debit / savings / checking / investments)
- Running a business
- Shopping wisely

## **MANAGING TIME**

- Planning (extracurricular, fun, family, work, day timer)
- Communicating (calendar, family meeting,)
- Self-discipline

## **GRACE & COURTESY**

- Phone manners
- Greeting adults
- Manners for all Occasions

## **CARING FOR OTHERS**

- CPR & First Aid
- Fundraising
- School servers and performers
- Safety Patrol at school
- Babysitting course
- Role Model