

ADHD and MONTESSORI A CASE STUDY

DENISE'S VISIT TO CALIFORNIA
APRIL - JUNE, 1996

INTRODUCTION:

Denise Mayclin, age eight, came from Florida to the Stephenson family in Arcata, California on April 30, 1996, and returned home on June 5. She came because it had been recommended, at three different schools, that she be put on Ritalin for suspected ADHD.

Her parents were determined to find out if there could be another way for her to learn.

GENERAL APPROACH:

Since Denise fit the description of an ADHD person, to some extent traditional therapy might include drugs, and behavior modification by praise, reward, or punishment. All of these are antithetical to the Montessori approach.

Over the almost six weeks that Denise has been with us the program which has evolved to help her, based on observing her carefully has been threefold:

(1) Observing the effect of TV, computer, sugar, and food additives on Denise, and changing the environment as a result of her reactions to these influences.

(2) Providing a situation where she can concentrate on self-chosen activities which help her to “ground”, to focus, to process information at her own rate, and to heal

(3) Identifying the “courtesy” lessons which teach her the skills to show respect for others, thereby improving her interactions with adults and children to help improve her very-low self-image.

OBSERVATIONS

Here are some observations, a compilation of comments from the following sources, besides myself, who have spent time with Denise during this visit: Jim Stephenson, uncle and Montessori father of 13 years; Michael Stephenson, cousin; others, both friends and professionals.

GENERAL BEHAVIOR (or “What exactly IS ADHD?”)

Denise certainly exhibits many of the symptoms clustered these days under the name ADHD (Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity disorder), such as having difficulty in situations controlled by others — difficulty sitting still, waiting, not talking, listening, paying attention, not focusing on work. Symptoms also include nervously dropping things, and starting several projects and not completing them.

However all of her problems are exhibited only in the presence of others, so I would call them “social” problems.

When she is alone Denise is able to choose work, concentrate and focus, complete cycles of activity—working to the completion of one task before beginning another, and to take care of her needs completely independently and joyfully.

I have observed her doing this for several days toward the end of her visit, 6-8 hours each day. Denise had, by this time, built up a repertoire of independent activities to choose at will and on which to concentrate. We had guided her gently to the habit of putting away all of the materials from one activity before beginning on another. This seemed to help her mind to be more ordered, and her concentration abilities to flourish.

These activities include: washing dishes, cooking, watering the garden, thinking, reading, exploring nature, climbing in the tree house, caring for the cats, writing (in her journal and on cursive practice pages), knitting, exploring a variety of games, puzzles and blocks, several self-designed art projects, listening to music, playing percussion instruments and playing the piano.

There have been no televisions, computers, computer-type games available in the environment, and no books except good nonfiction and great literature, at several reading levels. There is no plastic (because the affects of handling plastic has not been tested enough for use by children), only objects made of natural materials wood, shell, rocks, etc. This has been like a health store environment for her spirit.

Today, as I have been writing, Denise began working downstairs in the living room/bedroom/kitchen area at 9:00 am.

She came up twice during that time to chat for a few moments. At 2:30 she came up to tell me she had taken apart a California puzzle map (of counties) and could not get it put together. We looked for a geography book for pictures of the California counties, couldn't find one, put it together, went outside and ate a snack.

At 3:00 I came back to work, Denise transplanted some small plants into her garden to see what they would grow into, then she watered all the potted plants on the deck and she is now playing the piano — Suzuki pieces and quite creative and thoughtful compositions of her own. At 4:00, I asked her if she would hang the towels out in the sun when she had a moment. She responded “I would be happy to.” She continued to work on her own until 5:30. This is a typical day now.

Since Denise can live so happily when given this kind of independence, respect, and a calm, respectful, and supportive environment, she does not seem to me to need drugs!

SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Denise was exposed to long hours in front of television in necessary day care from her early weeks. It is not surprising that so many such children exhibit this cluster of ADHD symptoms—children who have been raised to bond with Barney instead of parents, to think of “nature” as something one sees on TV, and to learn to read, for example, on physically-damaging machines which train the brain to think in 5-second intervals or at emergency speed (TV's and computers), instead of in the arms of a loved one, with a beautiful book, creating picture in the mind at leisure and stopping for important conversations at any time. How can a child raised by machines learn to function with humans?

At the beginning of this visit we planned to get her together with other children her own age as often as possible. We could see, however, that although Denise is drawn to people of all kinds, the interactions usually deteriorate for various reasons which Denise does not understand. People think her unpredictable and strange even though kind at heart and well-meaning. More of such experiences did not seem to be what she needed.

Denise exhibits many relationship problems when in the presence of other people. She is constantly aware of others

and how they are seeing her, trying to get some kind of attention from them. She seems to be worried about what impression is being made by her on others. It was not until after several weeks that I saw any natural behavior on her part even in my presence. She is constantly “on stage”, trying to get a person to like her, and if this doesn’t work, to get them angry at her—pushing the limits to see just how mad the person will get.

She often will be “well-behaved” in the presence of the authority figure, but rude and annoying to a child in the next moment—almost as a release of the strain of pretending to be perfect for the adult. I have seen a lot of lying, tattling, annoying on purpose, interrupting, and a void of good manners.

MONOLOGUES

Denise talks so constantly sometimes that I thought this was a case of needing to verbalize in order to process information. However, when she is working along for hours she does not talk at all. She just occasionally sings happily.

The purpose of most of my observation has been to see what happens in these initial meetings of other people which cause others to be annoyed by Denise.

What I see is that she seems to have no idea of being aware of what the other person is doing before she starts speaking. For example I watched her, at a local outdoor fair, walk up to a man who was in conversation with another man, and blurt out a comment on what he was saying, completely interrupting the two men. Twice at that fair she went up to people with dogs and started talking about how she wanted a dog like theirs. It did not matter that they were already talking to someone else.

Once we entered a store where the owner was busy at work and Denise carried on a 20 minute monologue in the direction of the owner, demanding an occasional response from the women so that her work was interrupted for the entire time. I have seen this behavior over and over.

During this kind of communication she will often ask for something, or hint that she would like something the person has, or even make disparaging remarks

about the price of something (in a store).

Sometimes a person Denise approaches is flattered by such attention by a young girl, and sometimes by a spontaneous hug, but soon tires of the constant, not very polite, chatter, and becomes uncomfortable. Even if the conversation starts on a successful basis, Denise sometimes gets excited about her seeming success and starts acting silly, talking in a high, silly voice, saying things that are not appropriate to the conversation and laughing nervously.

I have seldom if ever seen a successful, calm, reasonable, thoughtful conversation between Denise and another person, unless the person is a genius at dealing with all kinds of children, or the conversation is only a few minutes long.

CONVERSATION EXPERIMENT

Since this communication issue seems to be at the base of her bad self image we have tried many ways to help her with this. Once I asked her if she had heard the saying "If you can't say anything nice don't say anything?" She asked me what I meant by "saying something nice", so we made a list and tried for one hour to say only nice things to each other. For example: asking for something which you know the other person does not want to give you is not nice, but offering to give something was nice. Insulting was not nice but complimenting was nice. It was quite an enlightening conversation for me.

Also I find that if we have a moment to prepare before she encounters someone, she can behave in an appropriate way. If I say, "Let's see if the person we are approaching is busy before we speak to her," Denise will have her attention on observing the other person, and she can exhibit thoughtful and considerate behavior.

This advance preparation (Montessori philosophy: *teaching by teaching instead of correcting*) seemed to be the most successful and I looked for many situations like this for Denise to practice.

I think she needs constant preparation for little situations like this so she can practice consideration for others.

OVERLY MATURE INTERESTS

Denise has acquired interests and a vocabulary which are inappropriate to her age. She sings adult songs about romance and adult subjects. She talks quite a bit about boyfriends and having babies, getting a divorce, etc. For the first weeks she seemed obsessed about money, shopping, winning the lottery, not using all of her money, wanting to be a rich person, etc. When Jim left for work, instead of our usual "Have a nice day." Denise has said "Make a lot of money." She talks about looking ‘cool’ and wants to wear makeup, high heels, and clothes that are not appropriate for an eight-year-old.

I have seen her avoided during her visit here by adults who think this is sad, and by parents of children because they don’t want this kind of an influence around their children.

Denise is very sensitive to the resulting subtle rejection and suffers because of it, thinking that she has done something wrong and not knowing what. She seems relieved not to be thinking about clothing so much. We didn’t say anything about conversation topics—but, since no one was interested in talking to her about the above subjects, she has dropped them.

ENTHUSIASM

Denise shows a wonderful natural curiosity and excitement for any new experience. Part of this enthusiasm is a natural need to move. (See the book about kinds of intelligences *In Their Own Way*) Of course some of the most brilliant adults we know have to move, walk, run, in order to think. She almost explodes into a happy, cheerful verbosity and movement at times, usually from a natural healthy pleasure, which can be annoying to those around her, or can incite a matching hyperactivity in other children who are not aware of what is happening. This gets her into trouble.

I think that the adults must be careful not to stifle this wonderful enthusiasm. We have seen Denise explode in joy, for example on seeing a fox on our deck one evening, only to follow her joy with self-criticism and depression, saying something like “I know I talk too much.” Or “I’m sorry I got wild.” She needs to know that each child is unique and that she is wonderful just as she is. If she has

a need to move and jump and get excited and it bothers others she can learn to find a suitable outlet for her enthusiasm. After seeing the fox and making her cousin mad at her for yelling and scaring it away I suggested that she channel her excitement into writing in her journal which she did quite happily.

Making children sit still is deadly and has no place in a Montessori class of any age grouping. We have "audience practice" so the child can learn appropriate and respectful ways of honoring a play or music performance, but beyond that children are always free to come and go from small group lessons in the elementary class.

Of course children must know exactly what they can do if they need to get some extra exercise. In the children's class at the London Maria Montessori Institute (MMI) a child was always able to put on boots and coat and take a run or walk in the garden. In my school in Michigan we had three "outside" tickets which a child (this was age 2-7 class) could pin on them at anytime and get some exercise outside.

Just because most children have been trained to sit still for hours at a time to watch TV or listen to teachers doesn't mean this is normal or healthful behavior.

SELF IMAGE

Denise seems to feel very good about her self when she has had some time alone to work. She comes out of a period of time like this happy, smiling and helpful. Also whenever she is around an adult alone she seems fine.

But when there is another person present, child or adult, her self image plummets. She seems to get jealous, or get into competition with one of the people in a subtle way, or find herself lacking. Then she revs up and starts talking.

I realize that this observation is subjective but since it seems important I am going to explain what I think is happening. She has had bad experiences in school, being the "trouble child", and she has a delightful younger sister who most people prefer to spend time with instead Denise. With us she has been second to a cousin who is calm and kind and whom everyone likes.

My suggestion is to give Denise as much time alone with a single family

member or friend as possible. Also to think as "loving" her as an action, not a feeling, and to shower her with loving actions—not buying things, but spending time working, singing, cooking, reading, etc. together—because loving feelings follow this behavior.

MEETINGS AND SEPARATIONS

(Another subjective interpretation of behavior that I am mentioning because I don't understand it but it seems important.) Over and over I have seen Denise excited and positive about meeting a new person, a stranger on the beach, a child at a concert, or one of our friends.

She seems to see each new meeting as a wonderful new chance to create an unblemished communication and relationship with a new person. She tries very hard to be 'good' and to make a good impression.

On the other hand I have seen her 'lose it' and get wild at the parting—almost as though each simple parting is a rejection. It seems that she is hoping for something new and complete with each new meeting, and it doesn't happen. (See AMI/USA article on "Self image" - available from AMI/USA, or The Michael Olaf Montessori Company.)

CORRECTIONS AND THE RESULTING PROBLEMS

It seems that being left alone to work and start to feel proud of herself was the most valuable experience for Denise during her visit. One of the reasons why Montessori experience strengthens a child's self image is because a child is never corrected or asked to change or improve.

They become "better" because they are fulfilled by their work. No one is standing over them telling them what to say, or how to hold the pencil, they do not get grades and are not compared to others. They are allowed to make mistakes and to correct them, to try and try again.

The ratio of student:teacher in the best classrooms I have seen were 35 or 40:1 (with one nonteaching assistant) for 3-6 classes, and 50:1 (with one nonteaching assistant) for 6-12. This provides the nonintervention of the adult that is crucial.

I remember another story Margaret

Stephenson (Montessori 6-12 teacher-trainer from England) told us about a school inspector coming to visit her 6-12 class in England. He asked "What is that child working in the corner doing?" to which Miss Stephenson replied "I have no idea. Let's go see."

She was adamant that the teacher should not be in charge of what work children do each day. A self-directed child can sometime go for weeks at a time with no direction by the teacher. This is our goal. I think Denise could function well in a class like this, given enough presentations on independent work, and specific guidance on interacting with others.

Imagine what an adult would feel like if her husband were constantly making suggestions for how to dress, how to speak, how to wear her hair, how to organize her day, etc. This is the exact opposite of "unconditional love." It is "unconditional rejection!"

The result for a child (or an adult) who has been constantly "helped" in this way is have a terrible self-image and to think too much about how she is doing in the eyes of others. I have had to make a great effort to leave Denise to herself—with important work—so that I wouldn't fall into the habit of correcting her.

SENSITIVITY

Denise is sensitive to everything and everyone. She doesn't seem to be able to focus when a person walks through the room when she is busy so we made sure that she had as many hours each day as possible without being disturbed in this way.

From the first day here she has been without sugar or food additives of any kind, eating only organic, healthful food. For the first few days she exhibited typical withdrawal symptoms - headache, and runny nose. She craved sugar and asked for it constantly for the first two weeks. This fact confirmed in my mind that she is sugar-sensitive and addicted.

Since she has returned home Denise has become the "sugar policewoman" of the neighborhood!

Denise is very sensitive—in the way of a true musician—to music. One day she asked me to stop playing Chopin on the piano because the music made her cry.

SUGAR

On the second to the last day of her visit we had an experience that confirmed our observations about sugar. After not having had any for almost six weeks we were at a picnic where Denise had three glasses of what we thought was natural fruit juice but turned out to contain syrup, red dye, and artificial flavoring. All we knew was that she had "lost it." All of a sudden, after a happy and calm afternoon she was being silly, rude, interrupting, complaining, and so forth.

We apologetically approached the friend with whose children she had been playing before this wildness began, and explained that this was our niece who had been diagnosed ADHD and had been off sugar. She told us about the three glasses of "juice." Once we told Denise what she had drunk she herself felt much better, but still found it impossible to stop feeling unfocused, and confused, and to stop running around and talking in a hyperactive manner.

ART AND MUSIC

I think that Denise is truly gifted in music and art. She is an intense little spirit and her feelings and beauty come out through her artwork, singing, playing piano and dancing.

In five weeks she has learned what most children take several months to learn with Suzuki piano. As long as she is not required to practice or play, and has privacy in doing so, she plays over an hour a day with great joy. Her mother is an artist and her father is a musician so she must have had these influences in her life in the home for years.

If Denise were in my class I would give her all of the music and art and craft activities possible, then gradually connect this work to the other subjects through geography-art, biology-art, projects, etc. Then she would be working in areas in which she already has self confidence, and, because she is very bright and curious would move easily into other studies.

Also she would be able to concentrate for long periods and observe, while she works, just how communication works or does not work between other children and adults.

INPUT AND PROCESSING

Because of her sensitivity to external stimuli, and her openness to learning (and because of a backlog of TV/movie images, I think) Denise has a great need for private time to process intake. We have been careful to let her sleep until whatever processing goes on in the night is complete. For the first four weeks she slept almost eleven hours each night. This need for so much sleep may also have been due to the process of sugar withdrawal.

So that she could get up near the same time as we did, we started the bedtime ritual (nightgown, teeth, sometimes bathing) at 8:00 and she was in bed being read to from 8:30 - 9:00 almost every night.

With a short time, since reading had started to become a joy rather than a requirement, she began to read (aloud) to herself for about another half of an hour each night.

On days when she and I were home alone, I offered to work with her for awhile, then left her on her own downstairs to choose activities while I did my work in the office upstairs. I could often hear her humming or singing as she worked. She concentrated for hours at a time.

CONCENTRATION IN THE PRESENCE OF OTHERS

I began teaching Denise Suzuki Piano during her visit. Because she was unable to focus if anyone was walking past the piano, or in the room (she would immediately turn to them and start talking), on her own she started getting up early in the morning to play while we were still in bed.

I realize that this need to be alone to concentrate could be a great hindrance in school. However, in the last week I observed her developing the ability to concentrate in other environments. At an aerobics class (she goes with me twice a week) and an orchestra rehearsal (she attended once—1 1/2 hours) sitting quietly and processing, completely engrossed in what she was thinking, and sitting absolutely still, though this was not at all required. I was encouraged to see her be able to do this in a room full of active people and noise.

I phoned a Montessori friend of mine,

Dr. Jean Miller, about this distraction problem. She has had many children in her Montessori elementary classes who needed quiet or privacy in order to concentrate. She told me that in this case she would have a discussion with the child to help them identify what kind of environment they needed in order to concentrate. Then the class would help that child create such a space—perhaps a corner or desk facing a wall, or a bookcase behind her.

In my own experience, because I have a very low tolerance for noise in the classroom, I have always created two spaces for the elementary class - one where talking was allowed, and one where it was not allowed—the silence area like in a library. It was always interesting to see the size of these spaces change from year to year, sometimes from month to month, depending on the concentration environment needs of each particular group of children.

RESISTANCE TO BEING MANIPULATED

Denise is very bright and savvy, and knows when she is being rewarded, threatened, or punished in any way. (See *Punished By Rewards*, a great book on the subject). She has learned somewhere that schoolwork is not fun, but required.

I remember a wonderful lecture by Margaret Stephenson at The Montessori Institute in Washington, DC on "taking a public school child into a Montessori elementary class." She stressed that the parents be warned that it is quite possible that the child may do no academic work for up to six months, or for whatever period of time the child takes to learn that work is not required in Montessori and never will be. Only then does academic work begin to be chosen by and enjoyed by and internalized by the child who has been in a system where work is required.

I have seen this to be true in my classes over and over. The best impetus for work is seeing others happily at work, even in the home. (Another reason for parents not to watch TV in front of their children)

During my first year of teaching a class of 7-13 year-olds I picked the library books and told the children they could read whenever they liked, for as

long as they liked. For three days they did nothing else and I began to doubt that this would work. The next day, satiated with the freedom to do nothing but read, they began asking for other work. I have continued to find that the child's interest is the most important reason for any work, and that children set very challenging goals for themselves, and remember what they learn, when they are taught to be in charge of their own work.

After four weeks of freedom from requirements Denise began to choose academic work over gardening, cooking, art and music at times.

I have been careful to offer and never to demand that she read or write. If there is the slightest frown or other sign of disinterest in anything we are doing my policy is always to say "Oh dear, this is too much work, let's stop!" And I constantly ask her, stopping at the end of a page, "Do you want to read another page or is this enough?" Most importantly, whenever she wants to stop I agree with a smile "Okay, let's put this away until later." It is always better to stop the work before the child is tired of it instead of after.

In the ideal Montessori classroom the child is free to play music, paint, explore a piece of material on the shelf that she hasn't seen, take a nap, garden, talk a walk outside, visit another classroom, do bicycle repair, knit, make biscuits, have a snack, any number of things, but she is NOT free to disturb anyone else who is working, so the child almost always finds something intelligent to do with the hands and mind working together which is the whole purpose of Montessori.

Since uninterrupted concentration is the basis of the development of the whole personality, it is far more important than an externally decided curriculum of academic work.

When all of the activities—academic and other—are on the same level, when the dividing line between them becomes dimmed, when nothing is required, everything begins to be enjoyed and chosen. This is why Montessori schools are famous for the high level of academic work—because the impetus is the children's interest, not the adult's plan.

REPORT ON SPECIFIC AREAS OF MONTESSORI CLASSROOM WORK

PRACTICAL LIFE

Denise is thrilled to cook and garden. It seems that she has two kinds of previous experience with working in this area, one positive, the other negative. First she talks with great happiness of cooking with her mother. But, when she spilled milk all over the kitchen one day she seemed very frightened that we were going to punish or yell at her.

She is sometimes clumsy in moving her body through space and doing this kind of work because she is afraid of what will happen if she makes a mistake. It would be great if she could do more practical life such as cooking, knitting, and weaving, in the classroom during the period of time that she is testing the philosophy of "self-chosen over required academic work".

GRACE AND COURTESY

Everyone who has been in contact with Denise has noticed "behavioral problems." It is not my concern where these came from. I only want to identify them in order of the level of difficulty they cause in Denise's life, and to figure out the "Manners" lesson to help bring about behavior modification.

Because in Montessori we *teach by teaching, not by correcting* I had to come up with games like my mother's famous "appropriate and inappropriate game" where we take turns coming up with an example of moral-immoral, or polite-impolite actions.

Examples: "It is appropriate to plant trees, and inappropriate to cut down trees" (one of Denise's favorites that she made up), or "When someone compliments you it is appropriate to say 'thank you' and inappropriate to say 'hmm.'"

Also we play acted lessons, such as introductions and shaking hands, before the opportunity presented itself in real life. Sometimes the morals of Aesop and other great stories helped, as long as Denise didn't think that she was being corrected on purpose, or embarrassed. Of course she has not been asked to treat anyone with respect in any way that she is not also treated with the same respect.

Denise absolutely loved this part of her experience here. She loved practicing manners and talking about raising and teaching children.

One day we were sitting on the lawn at a friend's house and she suddenly said "That mother did it wrong. She should have given the little girl a choice. She should have said 'Do you want to put your socks on or do you want me to.'" She was watching a mother yell at a little girl across the street to put her socks on and the little girl was resisting. I had completely forgotten a discussion with Denise and Michael about giving little children choices instead of ordering them about. Denise has a great hunger for learning about behavior and morals.

Some behaviors we practiced:

1. Respecting a person who is sleeping, because sleeping is important work of the mind and body. Never awakening them except in an emergency.
2. Respecting a person who is reading, working, thinking—by not calling to them from the other room. She has learned to come to them, to look, to stand next to them until they acknowledge her. In emergency to say "Excuse me. I have something to say when you have a moment."
- I think that Denise's habit of talking without being aware of the other person's interest is her most annoying habit. I have explained to her that it feels like she is "demanding that they be her audience" or that "whatever they are doing is less important than anything she would have to say." She understands this completely, but it is hard to change a habit.
3. To look in a person's eyes and give them your attention when they are speaking to you.
4. To say "How do you do." and shake hands firmly when being introduced to someone.
5. To admit that you have lied and to say you are sorry, immediately after telling a lie (Denise lies quite without thought - perhaps having learned that her lies are more interesting than the truth, or sometimes because of being afraid of telling the truth), or as soon as you have the courage to do so.
6. To try to stop and think before automatically telling a lie—to try and tell

the truth.

7. To say “Yes, I would be happy to” when someone asks you to do something reasonable, or to explain politely why not if you would rather not.

8. To say “Thank you” and “Please” as often as possible

9. To say “Just a moment please” when answering the phone and it is for someone else.

10. To be able to tell a person, in a polite voice, what they are doing that is bothering you, instead of “tattling.”

I suggested that these lessons be continued at home and at school. The most important thing though is that they not be used in a corrective situation, only a game unrelated to the behavior of the moment.

It would be wonderful if Denise were to be surrounded by people being as polite as possible, so that she change her habits of rudeness in the most natural way—by living them with family and friends.

Any lessons, or books on manners, etc. should be presented to her ONLY after she has done something well—so she can feel good about what she has already done. They should never be presented as a correction after she has done something wrong.

For example any information (a lesson, discussion, manners book reading, play acting) on saying “please” and “thank you” for example—should come on a day when she has been using these words, not omitting them. This is building success on success— this is a way of teaching which works.

SENSORIAL WORK

Denise is fascinated with any sensorial-related toy in our house. It might be good if she could at least have a short period of time with each of the pieces of sensorial material in the 3-6 class, because she did not go to a Montessori school at that age.

CULTURAL LESSONS

She is hungry for this information (as long as it is not required in any way). One night we had to get the globe and a flashlight out because she could not figure out how this night and day thing,

in Florida and California, worked. She figured it out immediately and asked several intelligent questions. She has quoted her teacher a lot about early man, the history of the earth, etc.

One day when we were watching an ant on the deck she gave me a lecture on the sociology of ants. When I asked her where she learned this she replied “I learned it from that ant book you gave me to read, remember?” She had memorized it.

We have visited the Marine Laboratory several times and she has learned enough about the tide pool to teach other children there on field trips. When she is not manipulated into learning she remembers everything. And she can be very good at teaching what she knows.

If Denise gets all of her language and math in connection with the Montessori elementary culture work (instead of isolated, repetitious, boring reading and writing work, of which she has already had negative experiences), she will make great strides in all directions.

LANGUAGE

We worked with Muriel Dwyer’s *MMI London Reading Scheme* (taught during the AMI Montessori training at MMI in London, England) for the first week and Denise made progress with phonetics. She needs highly imaginative or interesting nonfiction and great literature. She has been turned off by “readers” and “worksheets” and is suspicious of the quality of reading material.

We have read to her every night, from an animal encyclopedia or from great literature. She has noticed the difference in grammar of the great literature and started to incorporate it into her vocabulary spontaneously. For example she asked me to clarify the use of the word “whom” instead of “who.”

Her cursive handwriting has improved dramatically. The first day she was practically shaking with nervousness with a few letters. Yesterday she practiced cursive capitals and lower case letters for an hour on her own.

MATH

Math is so easy for her that I decided to leave it for school—because the

concepts will be much more clear and more fun with the materials, also because it is so easy to teach. I recommend that she work with the golden beads for a short while, and with the wooden hierarchy material, as she has missed the sensorial experience and abstraction of the relationships between the categories—units, tens, millions, etc.

COMPUTER

Just as Denise is sensitive to TV she also seems to be affected by the radiation, or hyper speed of the computer. I gave her a lesson on our typing tutor and she immediately became nervous, rushed, matching the energy of the “game like” part of the program (See *Endangered Minds* on that subject—how it destroys our children’s minds). That afternoon she sucked her thumb, which she had stopped.

I would recommend no more than an hour a week of computer in the future, at the very most, and only typing tutor WITHOUT GAMES. And this only because she has been prematurely exposed to the keyboard and has developed bad keyboarding habits.

SUGGESTIONS

I hope that over the summer Denise can continue to be read to every night from great books. In order to keep her on top of her cursive and reading accomplishments she should have a relaxed and fun time practicing both each day, with a relaxed adult present to help her with great patience if she needs this.

This would be necessary only for 5-10 minutes a day but should be at a time when the adult can sit and focus on her and they enjoy the work together. Just a few happy words and letters, read or written, are worth hundreds which are required and not enjoyed, as far as making progress. This should be offered as a fun time to be with one of her parents, not as a requirement.

It would be especially helpful if the manners lessons (perhaps with an etiquette book and the whole family learning new activities together), the private space, and uninterrupted concentration could be a part of each day.

I hope that Denise's reaction to TV, computers, sugar and food additives will continue to be monitored by her family

and friends.

There could be experiments about food, to see how she acts following different meals. But I would certainly keep sugar, food additives, TV, computer-type games, and computers out of her life if possible.

As far as the other above information is concerned, anything can be applied in the home or at school now that we have some ideas of Denise's needs and learning style.

CONCLUSION

In talking to Denise about her visit she told me that her best times were the long days when she could choose her own work and to work on her projects for as long as she wanted. She says she has never before had an opportunity to have so much time to herself. Every day she is more creative with her 'alone' time, sings for a longer period of time during it, and is happier and more polite as a result of not being interrupted. I hope that she can have this chance at home and at school in the future.

Until her suspicions of academic work and resistance to being forced to work diminished, it would be good if, she could do mainly art, combining it in creative ways with math, geography, history, biology, and so forth.

Denise is very bright and has a low tolerance for being bored, but given the correct piece of work she can concentrate for hours. I would love to have her in a Montessori 6-12 class if I were teaching.

In many ways, however, she is very much like a four-year-old. Especially in the way she lies, which seems unrelated to an attempt to deceive. She automatically answers direct questions with a lie just to get attention, to say something interesting, or to change reality to suit herself. This is a normal developmental stage—but for a younger child.

She is also like a four year old in the interest in classifying and sorting objects, and in learning simple practical life and grace and courtesy skills, especially conversation skills. It would be interesting to see what she would do in a situation where she was free to move back and forth between a 3-6 and 6-12 class.

I do not think that identifying a cluster

of symptoms as ADHD and administering drugs is much of an answer for the majority, if not all, of the children who are being treated this way. It is common knowledge that both Einstein and Mozart had all of these symptoms. Our world would be a very different place if these two men had been put on drugs because of their behavior.

Nor do I believe in arguments for training children to sit still for hours listening to someone talk, or to always study what someone else says they should be learning—as some preparation for the future. Our society has enough people like this.

We need to help children learn to become people who can make intelligent choices and plan their day, and their lives, who can be happy in their work and spread that happiness to their family and friends, and who can create and be responsible for completing valuable projects. We need people who are sincerely interested in how they are getting along with people, at home and at work, and who want to make the effort to learn how to show love and respect toward other people.

Denise can do all of this.

FOLLOW UP:

After Denise left I gave this report to our neighbor, an international lecturer in psychology who writes psychology textbooks. He was very impressed with the results of this study. He was sorry that he did not know what we were doing ahead of time so that he could have documented it as an official study. Of course we did not know what we were doing either, or what would happen, but we promised to include him if we ever did it again.

Denise is now, 2016, 20 years older. She often eats junk food and has problems, but she knows that it is a physical perhaps genetic problem, that there is nothing wrong with her, that she is not "bad." And that makes all the difference.

Written by
Susan Mayclin Stephenson
www.susanart.net