Help Me to Help Myself: The Path to True Independence

By Paula Polk Lillard, 2016
(with edits and additions by Margaret Kelley, 2026)
Forest Bluff School

The Plea for Independence

Independence is one of the foundational tenets of Montessori education. This goal begins with the young baby as they roll over and reach for toys themselves, and follows them through early childhood, the elementary years, and into young adulthood. It manifests in the young adult heading into the world in their 20s—an adult who knows they can care for themselves, who knows they can think for themselves, and who knows who they are and what they will do in the world.

If the plea for a child of any age is, "Help me to help myself" then how do we help them to help themselves?

In the First Plane (the years from birth to six), a child's desire for independence is physical: independence in the here and now. They ask, "Help me to do it myself." In the Second Plane (years 6–12) a child asks, "Help me to think my own thoughts." This is a more abstract aim. This older child is searching for independence in the intellectual and mental realm. The Third Plane child (years 12–18) asks, "Help me to find out who I am." This child is looking for self-knowledge. And, finally, the Fourth Plane young adult (18–24) asks, "Help me find out what I can offer the world." They are seeking help in finding where they belong in their society and the larger world.

The question, then, is ultimately a spiritual one. It is the human spirit that begins with, "Help me learn how to put on my coat myself," and grows into, "Help me figure out how to find answers by myself," before becoming, "Help me learn who I am" and "Help me find out what I can offer the world." This knowledge informs how we can view our children from their youngest years, as we must keep in mind where the child is going next so that we help them build a strong foundation for each succeeding plane.

What Really Matters?

How then can parents help their children under the age of three build the foundation for eventual independence? A parent's first response is often to try to recreate the Young Children's Community (for 18-month to-3-year-olds) or later Montessori classrooms in the home. However, any parent attempting to do so soon finds that this task is neither possible nor necessary. Instead, we ask parents to bring their child to Forest Bluff starting at 18 months where we have created an environment that meets the needs of these little ones.

All rights reserved © 2026 Forest Bluff School
To read more articles visit https://forestbluffschool.org/blog/

We do suggest activities for supporting your child's independence at home. Incorporating these ideas into your routines is enriching and meaningful. Giving children opportunities to care for themselves and their home in ways that match their abilities will affect the way they view themselves—their autonomy and their competence.

This work is important, but *real* independence is not going to come primarily from specific activities. It is going to come from a place that you may not have considered before. *It is going to come from your child's experience of you: of your relationship together.* We have to begin with who we are, our spiritual selves. The child before us is a spiritual being; we have to address and relate to them with the human spirit within us.

In order to support our children in their growth and in their lives, we always want to see them before us, human spirit to human spirit, recognizing and respecting that this is a unique human being never created before and never to be created again in all of human history—past, present, or future.

This incredible mystery, and the awe it calls forth, is the basis of our loving interactions with our child. It is in these moments of awe that we find the answers for how to help our children to eventual independence from us, both in the physical world and in the abstract world of ideas— reason and imagination. These answers are far more likely to be based on our own intuitive observations of our children than in the many "how to" books of our current day, helpful as some of them may be.

An Examination of Ourselves

For Dr. Maria Montessori, preparing a child's environment was the most important part of supporting their growth towards becoming a complete adult. But the physical environment is only a part of this factor. The other, and more important part, is ourselves—the self that we bring to the spirit-to-spirit relationship we have with our children.

Motherhood, with its forced slowing down in activities during pregnancy, nursing, and the body's recovery period, presents the perfect opportunity to reflect on our inner selves and our journey through life to date, our hopes and dreams for the future, and our values and those achievements in life that will have the most meaning for us when our life's journey is complete. While fathers do not have the same physical experience as mothers, they, too, can use this time of new beginning for reflection. Such gains in our inner lives are hard work but they will be with us for the lifetime of our parenting and reap benefits for all whom we touch in every area of our lives.

All rights reserved © 2026 Forest Bluff School
To read more articles visit https://forestbluffschool.org/blog/

When I was a child, I loved the quote attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson, "What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say." It is a powerful reminder that our actions, that reflection of who we are inside of ourselves, permeates the air around us in ways we cannot explain away or equivocate. What we do and who we are will matter much more for our children's growth than anything we prepare on shelves in our home.

What, then, are we to do? We must remember that we are all works in progress. That who we are when we begin our path of parenthood is only the beginning, and that our growth must continue alongside our children so that we continually strive to meet them as better versions of ourselves. At the age of 95 now, in 2026, I can tell you that this is a never-ending journey. The best *is* yet to come, as long as you stay willing to examine your inner self, to stay open to endless humility, and to seek authentic connection.

For me, this exploration began when I was a young mother of four children under the age of six in the 1950s and suddenly I found myself totally overwhelmed by the very life I had dreamed of having since childhood. How could this have happened? I was in complete shock. I knew how hard my parents had tried to be the best of parents, and I had done everything that was asked of me from good grades in school to social expectations. What could have gone wrong? Hence, began a long journey of self-reflection and understanding.

I promise you that if you are willing to do this work, your life will become more meaningful and your relationships deeper with every passing year. And as your children grow and their questions evolve and they eventually become adults, you will continue to be able to support them in their quest for true independence.

(For further reading on personal growth, see our blog "Preparation of the Parent: The Work of the Heart")

The Beauty of the Montessori Environment

If children are in an environment that is prepared for them both physically and spiritually, and that brings out their humanness, then it is also going to bring out the best in them. They are going to develop real independence—the ability to do for themselves, to think for themselves, to know themselves within their community. They are going to not only be able to do things independently, but they are going to make productive, meaningful choices that represent an inner independence of being that reflects their unique soul. These are not simply aspirations. They are a reality for children who grow up with the Montessori approach.

All rights reserved © 2026 Forest Bluff School
To read more articles visit https://forestbluffschool.org/blog/

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to observe children in a Montessori environment the early 1960s. It was this experience that led to my initial attraction to Dr. Montessori's ideas about education and an understanding of the importance of independence in early childhood. The opportunity to see this approach to independence for children in action was a key part of that learning process. I was able to witness for a full school year the opening of a Montessori classroom for three- to five-year-olds taught by an experienced teacher who happened to be in France just before the outbreak of World War II and had attended lectures there by Dr. Montessori herself. Miraculously, I saw these little children choosing their own work, putting it back, and calmly and peacefully going about their uninterrupted morning with minimal adult direction.

Subsequently, I learned that visitors from all over the world had come to Rome from 1907 to 1913 to see Dr. Montessori's original classes of young children, first with children of poor and illiterate parents but almost immediately with children from wealthy homes as well. These visitors reported their astonishment as they watched these children quietly choosing their own work, being kind and helpful to each other, and above all, calm and at peace whether: gardening, preparing hot lunch, serving each other with tureens of soup, and even learning to combine sounds and letters, numbers, and one-to-one counting, thus becoming literate and numerate all by age six or seven.

Even more amazing, in these early classes in Rome—as in the classes I eventually observed in Cincinnati, Ohio in the early 1960s—the children's willingness to struggle, their self-motivation and energy when dealing with mistakes and accidents, their matter-of-fact attitude about them, their lack of dismay or discouragement, universally impressed those who came to see them. By 1913 Montessori had published her first book on what came to be called the Montessori Method and established her first International Training Course in Rome with participants coming from over thirty countries.

Visitors to our classes at Forest Bluff School today see the same phenomena as in those early days and ask the same universal question of those first visitors: "But how do the children know what to do?"

From what we know about Montessori, we know that the children "know what to do" because they have always known what to do. Children are not empty vessels into which we pour knowledge and information. They come into this world equipped with urges and tendencies that will allow them to grow and act in astounding ways. A baby is driven to crawl. And as soon as they are moving, they already have ideas about what they want to do. Our job is to provide a physical and spiritual world around them that directs this urge towards constructive actions—to not distract, overwhelm, or thwart their positive

All rights reserved © 2026 Forest Bluff School
To read more articles visit https://forestbluffschool.org/blog/

tendencies. When we are able to do this, we will see children who are peaceful, joyful, helpful, and self-directed, maybe not in every moment, but in many, many moments.

Supporting Your Children in Your Home

Beyond providing activities and routines that match children's abilities, parents can foster an atmosphere at home that allows for continued growth towards independence. This entails both tangible and intangible elements, and all are intended to appeal to the human spirit and allow for connection and spiritual enrichment.

Time and Connection

Relating to our children with our whole selves requires time: time to just be with them (no phone in sight or earshot) for a slow paced walk, sitting in the leaves, looking at clouds, reading a book, and being a calm presence and enjoying life with them. There is no other real way for two people to connect than through moments of undivided attention.

That being said, it would be unrealistic and also detrimental for a child to have this kind of attention every time they are with their parents. But every child should have the experience of undivided attention each day *even if only for a brief portion of time*. This may look like a twenty minute walk around the block at their pace, looking for acorns or beautiful leaves. It may look like ten minutes of reading before bed with just one child at a time. And as your child gets older, it may look like driving them home from soccer practice with the music turned low so that you can hear what they have to say about their friends. For the teenager it may look like leaving your bedroom door open at night and reading a book that you can put down readily when they wander in to tell you what happened in Geometry class.

The intimacy of that one-on-one connection, of that feeling that your children will develop that *my mother or father is there when I need them* does not take hours. It takes intentional minutes where there are no distractions or disturbances.

And as you think about how to allow for these minutes, I want to mention a major obstacle for all of us. It has to do with being fully present for each other—especially our children. We know that screens, cell phones, computers, and much modern technology distract us from face to face contact with each other. Keep in mind that studies suggest that these technological devices can even make it difficult to be comfortable and relaxed after we are no longer using them. Thus they interfere with our enjoyment and opportunity for reflective thinking when we do set aside uninterrupted time for calm and solitude. (See: Reclaiming Conversation by Sherry Turkle, PhD).

All rights reserved © 2026 Forest Bluff School
To read more articles visit https://forestbluffschool.org/blog/

Observation and Reflection
Beyond taking the time for one-on-one connections, we also want to make sure we take the time to observe our children, not in a passive way but in an active one.

With the often chaotic demands of family life, we may find ourselves coming up against the same daily challenges day after day. In the classroom, when teachers are encountering a repeated issue, they will take time to observe, both before the challenge, during, and after. They will observe every child in the vicinity of the presenting problem. And they will make real observations of their own actions. By stepping out of the routine to see the situation with fresh, curious eyes, they find new ways of approaching the challenge.

If we make an effort to observe and think through each situation in family life and what might make this time of day go more smoothly, we will be rewarded with a more joyful and peaceful day, both for ourselves and our children. The bird's eye view will allow us to consider the whole day, and find solutions that may not have come to us when we saw the problem with a narrowed vision.

For example, we may solve transitional challenges or late day fatigue by revisiting our daily schedule. For younger children, perhaps dinner could be prepared after lunch, before a quiet time with all the family in their rooms for a rest. Next, everyone could go outside to play and be refreshed just by being in nature, the human being's original and most natural environment. Even on the coldest days, children and parents can bundle up and get out in the fresh air, even if only for a short time. In the fall when the time change brings darkness an hour earlier, it might make sense to come in from outdoors and start the children's baths at 4:00 or 4:30. Children would then be in their pajamas before dinner at 5:00 or 5:30. They could be in their beds for their individual story time with you just afterwards, thereby eliminating any opportunity to get overstimulated and overtired before going to sleep.

These same kinds of observations work for children of all ages, as we revisit and observe those moments that bring us struggle, and consider how we can better structure our days and our homes, rather than picking battles in the moment.

Simplicity, Beauty, and Intellect
Finally, we can deepen intimate and warm relationships with our children by providing an environment in our homes that fosters the intellectual lives of our children and of ourselves in simple and beautiful ways. Montessori teacher and author, John Snyder in his book, *Tending the Light*, describes the Montessori environment at home (as at school) as "free, peaceful, rich intellectually."

All rights reserved © 2026 Forest Bluff School
To read more articles visit https://forestbluffschool.org/blog/

Montessori gave the details of this Prepared Environment at school for children from early childhood through age twelve. Therefore, Montessori schools throughout the globe are familiar to any child transferring from one to another. Obviously, she could not give details for our varied and unique home environments. However, the principles behind establishing a home environment that is "free, peaceful, rich intellectually" are similar.

Young children exploring their world with their eyes, then their hands, and finally their whole bodies in coordinated movement, are overwhelmed when they are living in, what is for them, an environment of confusion and disorder. Sometimes such a situation is unavoidable, and it is true that human beings throughout our history have shown resilience in the worst of circumstances.

However, in our affluent societies we have created environments of confusion and disorder for children unwittingly by too much stimulation and overabundance of sight and sound. The internet is replete with enticing "educational" toys and technological devices marketed as giving one child an advantage over another. In truth, Montessori principles of "less is more" and "beauty lies in simplicity" are better guides for establishing the home that will best serve the inner lives of our children.

We don't want overabundance for our children in our homes (or schools) but it is important that what we do give to them represents the best of our culture and human history—in other words, the best of the human spirit of others. Montessori, for example, in her first International Course in Rome in 1913 when participants in the age of steamship and railroad travel came from as far away as Japan, Australia, the Argentine Republic, India, Turkey, Russia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, to name a few, arranged that they would spend the entire first week of the course, not learning about her revolutionary observations of children but discovering the heritage of Rome, guided by the leading experts of the day in every field from archeology to music to art and architecture. Montessori herself was very much a Renaissance person and she recognized that giving the best of our heritage to our children was necessary for them to develop gratitude and appreciation of human beings of the past and their contributions to human progress and civilization.

In our homes today it is important to surround our young children with aesthetic and simple representations of our specific culture—music, art, and literature that exposes them to the beauty that humans have created. Symphonies, works of art, and high quality literature all nourish our souls in ways that cannot be measured.

All rights reserved © 2026 Forest Bluff School
To read more articles visit https://forestbluffschool.org/blog/

At the youngest ages the children will absorb this exposure unconsciously, but in the elementary years this early exposure at home plants "seeds of interest" and provides a foundation for later visits to the symphony hall, art museum, or theater for live performances. Likewise, children will begin to be curious about exploring outwards, learning more about cultures besides their own and the variety of ways that humans have created beauty.

Having said all of this, I want to caution us as Montessori parents. Beware of grandiose thoughts and plans for children! Those of us in the United States today live in the most affluent country and time in human history. There is danger in our expectations of ourselves, of our children, and of our spouses, friends, and colleagues. As much as at any time in human history, it is essential that we accept ourselves and others as the flawed human beings that we are. This is what we are meant to be, not some social media image, dressed up for Instagram, falsely portrayed to the world for its approval. The rich world that you provide for your children is for them, and will be naturally limited by time and energy. Do not push beyond what you are capable of in the name of maximizing child development.

Final Thoughts

We are spiritual beings on a journey—in Montessori's words—of the "development of our inner lives." It is out of this journey, where abstract thought, ideas, and imagination originate, that all creative endeavor and human progress come. If we, as parents, concentrate on the "development of our inner lives," we will naturally set the stage for our children's path to independence from their birth to maturity at 24 years. If we do this, we can be certain that when our children's time of trial in adulthood comes—as it eventually does to all of us—they will make it through.

Our goal, then, is not to make sure every stage of our child's life goes smoothly, resting in stability and contentment. It is to truly see our growing children at each stage, and support them in finding their own way. This is, perhaps, the harder task, as it does not offer explicit instructions or regular guarantees that it is going well.

The temptation is to want to be there every step of the way, to clear the path for our children, to search for promises on the outcome, and to control the uncontrollable. But to do this would be to take away our children's autonomy and independence. It would be to ignore the unique soul that is inside of them—the one that has never been before and will never be again. It is a noble and brave undertaking, then, to tread both confidently and lightly in our raising of our children—to hold tightly to what matters and then, when it is time, to let them go.

All rights reserved © 2026 Forest Bluff School
To read more articles visit https://forestbluffschool.org/blog/

Our job is to help children build a ladder that they can climb from infancy to adolescence; once there, their maturation to adulthood requires that they throw away the ladder we so carefully constructed together. Nothing is permanent about the elementary child, so we [adults] must fall in love with change. Maybe we shouldn't speak of throwing away ladders. Maybe we should say, *Give a child a ladder and they will climb to the next grade. Teach the child to build their own ladders, and they will climb to the stars.*

—John Snyder (1954–2017)

All rights reserved © 2026 Forest Bluff School
To read more articles visit https://forestbluffschool.org/blog/