

# What Montessori gave my children

by Randall K. Wilburn

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This article was published in the Association Montessori Internationale's Family Life magazine. I was the editor of Family Life at the time. When I received a Christmas card update from the Wilburn's last month, I was reminded of this article.

My children's experience in Montessori classrooms from age two through ten gave them a multitude of skills. I know that Adam, now thirteen, and Jason, twelve, have a foundation of personal integrity and interest in learning received in the Montessori environment.

To focus upon at least three primary areas of growth and learning will help me share the power and long-term impact of Montessori upon my children as individuals and upon my family as a whole. I share this as a father and as a professional marriage and family therapist.

First and most importantly, the Montessori experience of learning provided my children with a sense of self-esteem based upon their ability to receive and integrate new data about life. I remember when Adam, at age four, showed me a leaf and identified it. He proudly expressed his awareness of himself; we celebrated the self-observant way in which he experienced learning. This awareness of having value and feeling good about the learning process is a building block to long-term learning and is at the heart of what Dr. Montessori called "education". I do not recall having that experience of self-esteem and self-awareness as a learner until I entered college. However, by then that learned self-esteem was often contaminated by the second dynamics of competition.

Awareness of competition and its effect upon learning brings me to my second affirmation of Montessori's gift to my children. Because of their self-esteem, they were given internal permission to set, meet re-negotiate, and re-set boundaries for learning and discipline. As they were guided through their learning environment of shapes and colors, of peers and objects, they understood something so fundamental that most of us adults either ignore it or simply overlook it: the ability to be motivated to learn not by boundaries set by someone else measured by competition, but by boundaries set in the interior of the child as modeled by the guide, or teacher. This integration of a sense of space eliciting discipline and curiosity is a self-conscious part of the Montessori Method. With self-esteem and internal controls, my children were then enabled to explore anything everywhere at anytime. Learning was not only in the "classroom" but learning became a way of life.

Finally you should know my children are in no way perfect nor are they expected to be. They are not encouraged to think about experience as pass-fail; rather as an opportunity for participation. This leads to my third awareness of what Montessori gave my children. The fact that my children love babies and relate to infants in the way they received guidance reveals a human compassion and responsible use of their gifts. They learn music and memorize poetry; they are curious about nature and are sensitive to the feelings of others. They are advocates for the powerless and know the limits of their own power. My third emphasis is that of wholeness; a bit elusive to define but does take shape around issues and events I describe. I believe Montessori gave my children a sense of wholeness and well being with nature, others and themselves. If you will, this is what I call the "soul" or the spiritual wholes of personhood without dogma. I am not surprised when my one son who wants to be a pro-football player and a stockbroker in off-season bakes a cake, he

embroiders a gift for his grandmother and then practices his violin. And then he proceeds to tease his brother just like any other kid.

When I see this all going on, when I assess the gift of Montessori to my children and see how it has supported our family values, I feel confident that the time, money and parent involvement we have invested in our children was well worth it. In fact it has been more than worthwhile, it has outgrown my own expectations. I am grateful that my wife introduced me to and convinced me that we ought to give Montessori a try. Thank you, Karin.

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Note: As elementary children, Jason and Adam enjoyed sports, music and their Montessori education. Their parents nurtured music with lessons, sports with carpools and as you can tell from the article, delighted in watching them blossom.

### **Twenty Four years later**

Jason, now 36, plays 6 instruments, writes music, does voice over animation and radio ads, has written a screen play and has appeared in 6 films. Ps He did become a stockbroker early on, but his creative side demanded more exercise!

Jason has 2 children.

Adam, now 37, is a college athlete turned chiropractor. He maintains a practice in Amherst, Mass and is the chiropractor for Sports Medicine at the University of Mass. Adam's 2 children attend a Montessori school.