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## THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-DISCIPLINE—PART ONE

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The development of self-discipline is a long process and begins at the birth of the child. It is an important and comprehensive subject that is extremely important to all parents and educators. After all, we all want our children to be self-disciplined in both action and thought. We want the child to be able to make appropriate choices and also to be able to think for himself. Many factors contribute to this development, especially prepared environments, which offer opportunities to concentrate, to experience freedom within the environment, and to benefit from the examples of the influencing adults in the child's life.

First, let us define self-discipline as a force that comes from within the child who can thus control his own actions and make positive choices regarding his behavior. It relates to the development of the child's own will and it is not a result of teacher or parent control based on rewards or punishments. We cannot MAKE a child achieve self-discipline. We can, however, provide the environments, examples, and opportunities for the child to build up his own discipline. If the child does not build self-discipline, he will be subject to his whims and impulses.

It begins at birth, when the baby reaches for an object of interest, or tries to crawl toward an interesting toy, or stands and walks. The development of language also requires much practice and repeated attempts to perfect. We often see the development of coordinated movement and language as positive steps and encourage and applaud those efforts.

When it comes to the development of the will, however, we often have difficulty grasping its importance and think in terms of 'breaking' the child's will. We see it as a negative process, instead of celebrating it. Around the age of 18 months to 2 ½ years is the emergence of this strong will and the child is able to have significant control and awareness of himself and his actions. It can be a trying time if we do not honor the process in the child and help him to maintain positive actions and relations with the people and the environments in his life.

Here are a few suggestions to help the child with this process. In the prepared environment of the Toddler Community all these ideas are implemented. It is what makes it such a special place for young children. I do not mean to say that it couldn't also be done at home, for it certainly can.

**Order:** When the child experiences order in both structure and action in the environment, he will become disciplined in both thought and action. He should be able to predict and know the 'what' to expect, the 'when' to expect it, and the 'where' to expect it as well. For example, we eat and drink at the table, not carrying food all over the house; we play ball or run outside; we don't jump on

the couch, etc. These rules should be reasonable and enforced without exception. "No" should mean "no", consistently. The child will begin to trust this and develop appropriate actions and develop his own will regarding these rules. Schedules for the child should also be orderly, such as a night time routine of getting into pajamas, brushing teeth, reading a story, and going to bed. These sequences and routines apply to other times of the day as well: getting up and dressed in the morning, eating lunch and then taking a nap, etc. Order not only aids the child's development of will, but of independence and self-confidence as well.

**Activities That Foster Concentration:** Interesting activities engage the child in the peaceful state of concentration. They also ask the child to move with purpose, which develops his will. As he practices and repeats the activity, his movements become more and more perfected. Concentration on appropriate activities with sequences helps order the mind as well. **Never interrupt a concentrating child!!** For the young child, these activities usually include practical life activities that relate to the life of the household. They want to participate in the life of the home and all its activities. "Children whose lives are filled with the over stimulation and entertainment of television, computer games, and endless plastic toys inside the home, and an action-packed daily schedule of events outside of it, have trouble developing the concentration required for forming the will and thus a disciplined approach to learning." *Montessori From the Start*, Paula Polk Lillard and Lynn Lillard Jessen, page 217

**Choices:** The child must be given choices when he begins the period of development of self-affirmation (the "terrible twos"). All choices, of course, are appropriate and interesting. Redirect inappropriate behavior every time with positive and real choices. The child will feel empowered by being in control of his behavior. When the adult accepts the responsibility to teach the child about limits, the child has the opportunity to develop the control of self. When choice and redirection is not working, the adult must follow through in a more direct way. You may have to pick the child up and remove him from the situation, or perform the requested task with him (putting on his pants, for example). If we are realistic in our expectations, we do not need to fear being too demanding of the child