

Living in the Moment with your Child

By Mercedes Castle

Without the ability to think in the abstract, young children invite us to live with them in the present moment. Being present with your child is helpful when supporting them in a cycle of activity.

The cycle of activity refers to a complete experience with a job, toy, or activity. In the classroom, we practice cycles of activity with the children. This is something that is helpful to observe and encourage at home also.

The three key elements to the cycle of activity refer to the invitation, engagement, and conclusion. The invitation references enticing a child towards an activity that the adult (guide or parent) anticipates will engage the child. In the classroom, the guide evaluates the developmental level of the children based on her observations of the children, and matches the child to the material that will draw forth an interest and 'maximum effort'.

Invitations are usually given as a statement, such as 'I'd like to show you something. Please come with me' or 'I have something to show you, please take out a rug.' Offering children under three choices about using new things, or diverting attention from something that's being fixated on is counterproductive. The young child lives in the moment, without abstract thought or reason. This understanding of the young child is a guiding principle in the toddler community.

The second element in the cycle of activity is the engagement. This is something that may last only a few moments, or can continue for great stretches at a time. Because of what we now know about the chemical formation of the brain, and that the child's experience actually forms the chemical pathways in the brain, it is the adult's task to foster and allow for a child's deep concentration or engagement.

Concentration is encouraged, fostered, and protected, as it is the foundation for such characteristics as self-discipline, self-confidence, trust in the world, and independence. Ideally during the time of engagement, the young child will be learning new skills, or refining skills the child already has. We trust the child to follow their own inner guide when they choose an activity.

As the child moves through the activity, he or she reaches the conclusion. Anyone who has spent time with young children has seen that a child may come to the conclusion of the cycle instantaneously and completely. One moment the child may be deep in concentration and the next their work thrown to the ground as the child moves quickly to the next task.

There are several great reasons to anticipate this element in the cycle of activity and to support it. We help the children put their work away when finished in order to illuminate a conclusion to the activity. They return work to the shelf, pick up toys when finished, or

even clear their place from the table when finished eating. These tasks all contribute to the child's sense of order and completion.

Additionally, this is a bridge to the world of society and learning social grace and courtesies – we must leave things as we find them for the next person. A small thing like pushing in a chair lays the foundation for character forming attributes such as empathy, and the feeling of connectedness – being a small part of a bigger community.

In anticipation of the conclusion, a guide or parent may wait ready to assist their child in the moment of disengagement. With younger children, it is enough to make statements about doing the work yourself, and you may draw attention to this by saying 'I am putting the puzzle away for you'. The child absorbs the attention that has been called back to their work, and this lays foundation for the child doing it as they become developmentally ready.

We find that it is generally not productive to interrupt a child in a new activity to complete the last one. It is the task of the adult to observe and anticipate the conclusion, and reinforce the end of the cycle. If this opportunity is lost, it is lost forever, as we are in the moment with the child.

In community, we see these spontaneous cycles of activity – the infant who observes as others set and clear their space at the meal table and then one day spontaneously cleans up on their own. Or the child who sees something out of order and sets it right. Observing and serving the child in their cycle of activity truly brings us into the moment, and it is here that we can really meet the child where they are.