

Changing plates

Philippe Fraser, Director of Mars Montessori, relates an example of how MEAB accreditation is bringing professional discussions to schools.

As part of our MEAB accreditation process the assessor suggested we start using real plates and glasses for the children instead of plastic ones.

We had been using plastic plates since 2000 and it had never occurred to us to change them. In fact, some years ago the plastic plates had started to look washed out, and without giving it any thought we replaced them with another set of plastic plates.

One of the advantages of accreditation, like an Ofsted inspection, is that it prompts self-reflection and a re-evaluation of established ways of practice. As soon as we heard the suggestion it seemed obvious. Why were we using plastic? Plastic is easy for the staff team as it doesn't break or shatter, and whole piles can be carried with almost no weight. However, we were missing an opportunity for the children.

Maria Montessori saw that very young children are frequently frustrated in their attempts to do things for themselves and



that what they need is to have specific exercises, as closely linked to real life as possible, that allow them to master the tasks that they see going on around them in everyday life. How does plastic achieve that aim? Quite simply, it does not.

At home most families use crockery and real glasses, and in restaurants children are very rarely served on plastic plates. We could offer children an experience that is rooted in the real world by switching to porcelain and glass.

In true Montessori style, we bought real things as inexpensively as possible so any breakages could be replaced.

Before introducing the new tableware, we used a morning circle time to outline the basic rules of use to prepare the children for the change. We explained how to look after

the materials and stated our expectations of how they would be used by the children. We explained how to carry a plate, how to scrape left-over food into the food-bin and how to place a plate in the bowl at the end.

We gave another recap to the children immediately before lunchtime.

As the children sat down and started serving themselves lunch, you could have heard a pin drop the room was so quiet. The children were wholly engrossed in the activity of serving themselves lunch and using the plates, and their behaviour and handling of the real plates and glasses was exemplary. They rose to the challenge of respecting the materials, showing us that they deserved the trust we placed in them.

In the six months since the change, we have only had one broken plate, and more recently one broken glass. When the plate broke, the little girl needed some reassurance, which we gave her. We explained that things break, and talked about how to sweep things up to ensure nobody gets hurt. When a glass was broken some months later, the boy who had dropped it knew what to do to clean it up with the dustpan and brush, and did not need any emotional support.

Reflecting on the change, we would encourage every setting to use real materials at lunch time.