



# TABLE WASHING

by Robin Howe, EdD

## Why do Montessori Students Spend So Much Time Washing Tables?

### ANATOMY OF A LESSON

#### **Editor's Note:**

If we had a dollar for every time a skeptical parent has questioned the amount of time their young Montessori child spends washing tables ...

In 2007, Robin Howe (now Robin Howe, EdD) was just starting out his career as a Montessori teacher at a charter school in Florida. This article originally appeared in *Tomorrow's Child's* Fall 2007 issue. Broken down into the many pieces of what seems to be a simple process is actually big work for a young child and exemplifies the genius behind the Montessori Method.

Special thank you to Langdon "LJ" Morrison and Kat Ricker of NewGate School for demonstrating this lesson.

Ironically, I missed the session of my Montessori teacher training when we were given the lesson on how to wash tables. I remember doing it as a Montessori child. How hard could it be? I was just getting out of my first career in the restaurant business, and someone was going to teach *me* how to wash a table? I had washed and set tables for the rich and famous. I had cleaned more tables than everyone in that class combined. I was, in fact, relieved to miss that day of instruction. The summer training session ended, with my teacher trainer reminding me that I still needed to have a lesson on table washing.

A month later, about three weeks into the school year, where I was doing my internship, my lead teacher, a wonderful, experienced Montessorian, invited me to join her while she gave a review lesson to one of the returning students on table washing. Great, I thought! This was my opportunity to receive the lesson, seemingly without missing a beat. About twenty minutes later, I found myself sitting there observing a four-year-old finish up his work, while I, the 'non-lesson-needing' 'expert' watched dumbfounded.

I once thought that table washing was one of the most remedial tasks that a Montessori student

would ever have to learn. As a result of watching this lesson, and essentially being humbled by a four-year-old (also an experience that has since occurred on many occasions), I have come to realize how important and difficult this work is for children.

I have now learned how to give this lesson, and it never ceases to amaze me that it is so complicated. More amazing is the way that my students seem to pick it up so quickly and how I still, after many lessons, have to focus in order to perform it correctly. For these reasons, I would like to share the lesson, as well as some observations, on how children respond to this exercise. It is my hope that others will gain a better appreciation for the complexity of this lesson and will, as a result, appreciate its importance and contribution as a part of the Montessori curriculum.

When working with any water exercise, the first step is to have the child put on an apron. Students are already familiar with where aprons are kept in the classroom, as well as how to put one on. Next, the teacher asks the student to go together to where the table-washing kit is located on the shelf. The child is either shown or asked to identify the table-washing kit and is then asked to take it to the side of the table that will be washed, placing the kit on the floor next to the table. Included in the table-washing kit are the following: soap in the soap dish; a soap brush; a



pitcher for gathering the water; a bucket for dirty water; a basin (or bowl); a sponge; a drying cloth; and a hand towel that will serve as a mat for the materials. Generally, the materials are kept in the basin that will be used for the water. With the hand towel in place on the floor, the materials are arranged along the top of the hand towel in this order: sponge, soap, brush, drying towel (from left to right), and the water pitcher. And basin along the bottom. Note: This lesson may vary depending on the classroom and teacher.

After all the materials are placed on the towel, water is brought to the table using the water pitcher. Children have to fetch the water, which exercises body control as they navigate through the classroom, returning carefully with a pitcher filled with water (about two-thirds full). Then, the water is poured from the pitcher to the basin. The pouring of water from a pitcher is an extension of work that the student has already mastered in earlier Practical Life lessons.

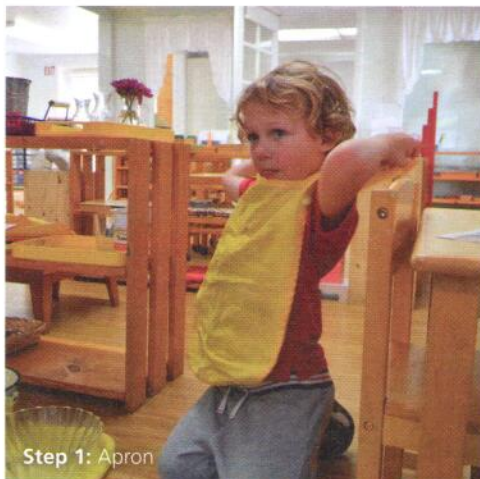
Next, the brush is wet and run across the soap until it is foamy. Using the wet, soapy brush, the table is methodically scrubbed in a circular motion. There should be small, but visible, suds on the surface of the table.

The brush is then rinsed and returned to its place on the mat. The dirty water is poured from the basin to the bucket, and the child carefully walks the dirty water to the sink to empty it. He will return it to the mat and fetch the pitcher so that he may again fill it with clean water to pour into the basin.

Now, the child wets the sponge and wrings out the excess water. Both the wetting of the sponge, as well as the squeezing of the sponge, are skills the child already possesses as a result of previous lessons in Practical Life. Starting at the bottom of the table, moving in horizontal motions, the child begins to rinse the soap from the table.

The sponge is wet once again. As an extension of this Practical Life exercise, the student might be asked to count how many compresses the sponge gets and then count the number of squeezes in order to expel excess water.

The child rinses the sponge, and picks up the towel to begin carefully drying the table top. After the surface is completely clear, the child checks the edge for suds and wipes it accordingly.



Step 1: Apron



Step 5: Pouring Water



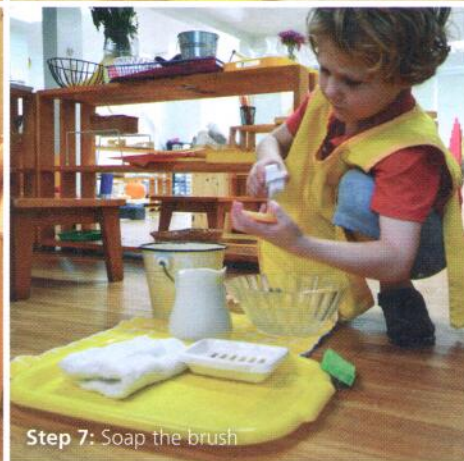
Step 2: Collecting Materials for the Lesson



Step 6: Wet the Brush



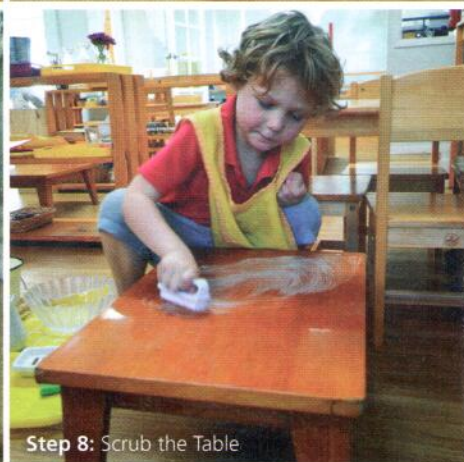
Step 3: Preparing the Materials



Step 7: Soap the brush

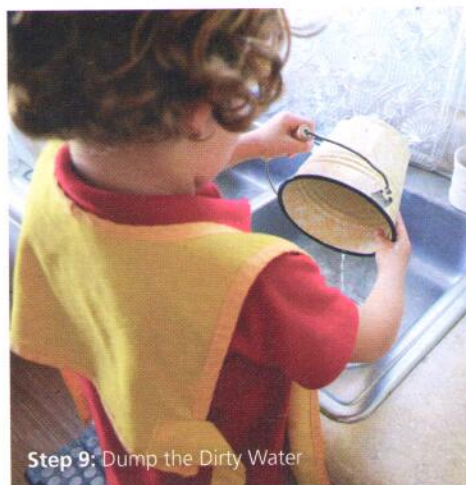


Step 4: Getting Water



Step 8: Scrub the Table





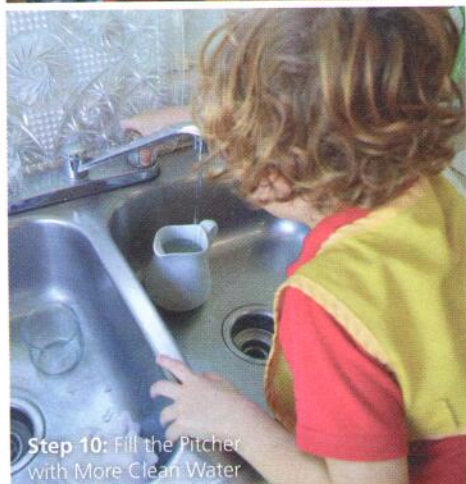
**Step 9:** Dump the Dirty Water



**Step 13:** Wipe the Table with the Sponge



**Step 17:** Clean Up Any Spills



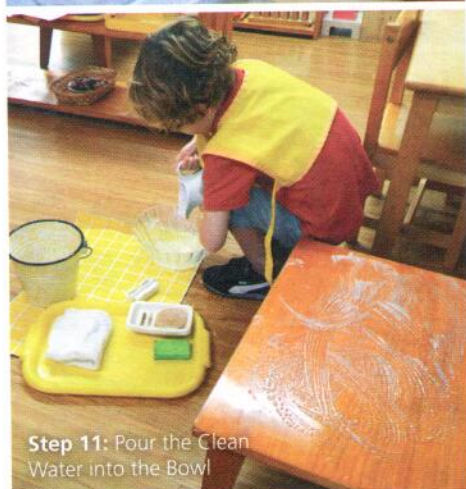
**Step 10:** Fill the Pitcher with More Clean Water



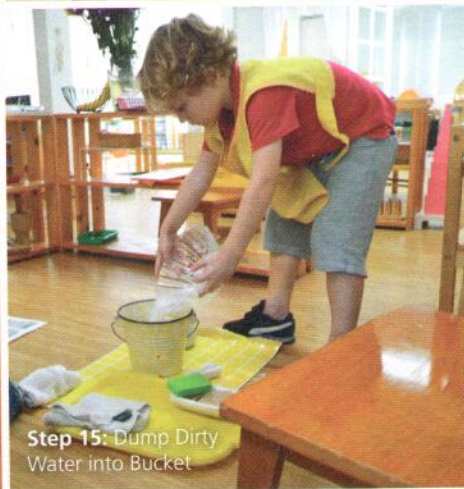
**Step 14:** Dry Table with Cloth



**Step 18:** Roll Up a Clean Towel



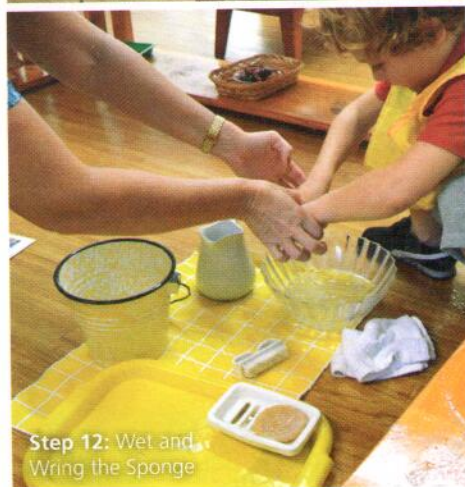
**Step 11:** Pour the Clean Water into the Bowl



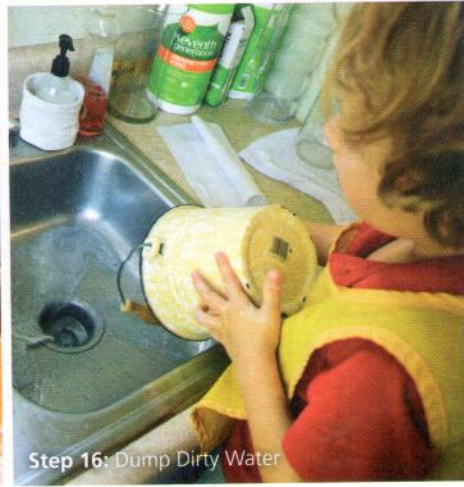
**Step 15:** Dump Dirty Water into Bucket



**Step 19:** Fold the Mat



**Step 12:** Wet and Wring the Sponge



**Step 16:** Dump Dirty Water



**Step 20:** Return the Materials to the Tray



At this point, the table is now clean and dry, and the basin is filled with soapy water. The student then pours the water in the basin into the bucket and disposes of the soapy water. The process of disposing of the water is also a very important part of the lesson. The child, again, has to navigate through the classroom, focusing on his movement and the balance of the bucket so as to not spill the water. This is great practice for walking slowly and being patient.

Once the water is dumped, the child uses the towel to make sure the work area is clean and dry. The dirty towel is placed in the laundry hamper, and a fresh towel is carefully rolled, and placed in the pitcher. Next, the mat is carefully folded and all materials are returned to the tray as they were found.

This lesson is important for many reasons. As mentioned during the lesson description, the child has to practice patience, while exercising fine-motor skills and balance. The student's ability to sequence is challenged, as the proper completion of the work is dependent upon the ability to follow the proper steps. Another important aspect of this lesson, perhaps overlooked much of the time, is the time that the student spends working with the teacher. This is one of the longest lessons and can often take up to fifteen minutes.

During this process, children must listen carefully and ask questions, which helps them develop important language skills.

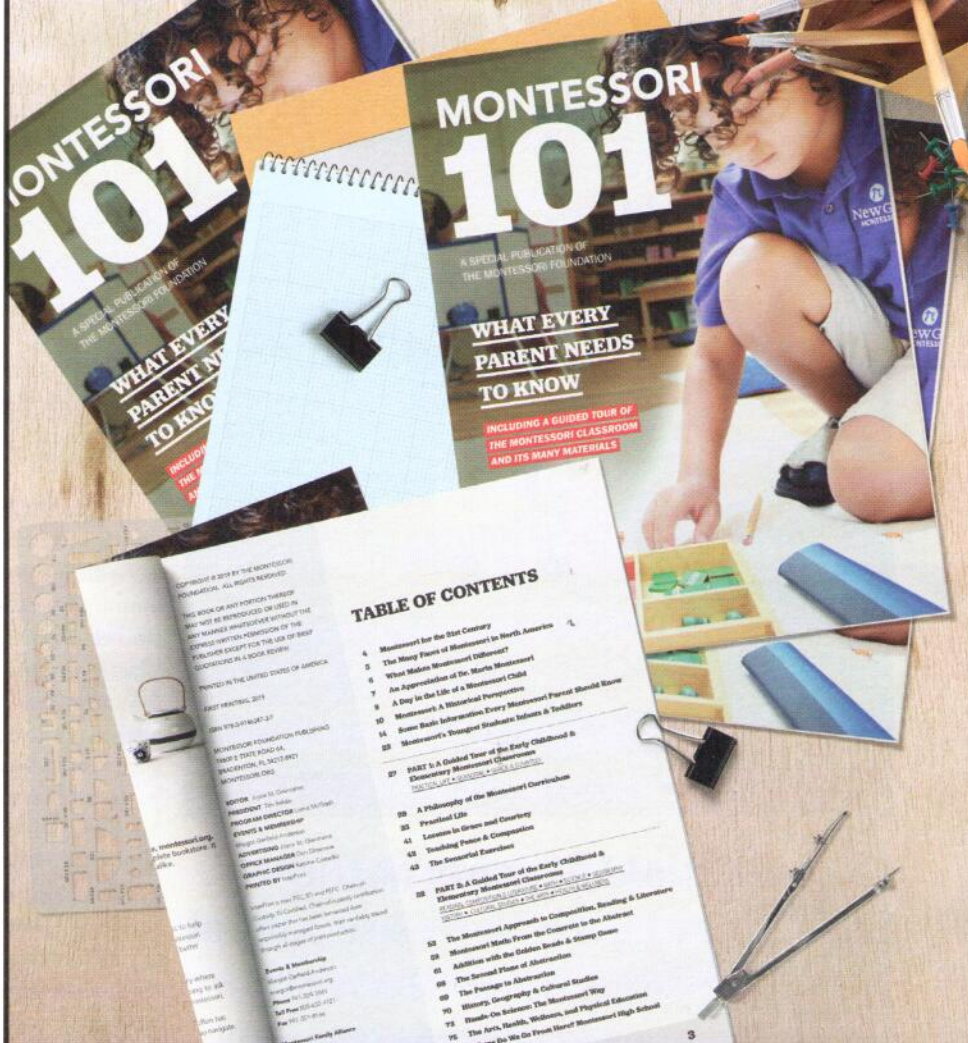
I hope that my description of this exercise offers some insight into the Montessori classroom and instills a sense of respect and feeling of awe for the children. Similar to the mistake I made, many people assume that these lessons with simple names must be simple, causing us to wonder how they could be so important. Indeed, I have come to realize that they are important, not only as a part of children's Montessori academic curriculum but also their development as people. ■



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III was a Montessori student from age two through the eighth grade.

He worked his way through multiple levels of certification, spent many years in the classroom, managed a number of Montessori schools, and then earned his EdD. Formerly, co-head of the NewGate School, Robin is a senior consultant with the Montessori Foundation.



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