

# GUIDING CHILDREN “BACK FROM THE EDGE” PREPARING AN ENVIRONMENT TO SUPPORT CHILDREN AT RISK

by Sarah Werner Andrews

*“The children who demand more attention than others, who are disruptive, unmotivated, oppositional, aggressive, or do not give us the positive feedback we get from others...This is where we dig in and find compassion, and understanding, and the knowledge that no child wants to be disruptive, oppositional, or aggressive. They do this because they are hurt, and we are here to help.” Sarah Werner Andrews provides an approach to the children who pose a challenge because they themselves are facing challenges. She offers practical tools and approaches that are first based on positive relationships, then on the relationship with the environment, and finally on positive, collaborative interventions.*

Montessori education is a powerful tool for supporting children who face challenges and obstacles to their development. Within our prepared environments, we have the capacity to leverage the set of common factors that Harvard’s Center on the Developing Child has identified as most effective in supporting positive outcomes for children facing significant adversity:

- Facilitating supportive adult/child relationships
- Building a sense of self-efficacy and perceived control: what we think of the power to make choices and act upon them

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- Opportunities to strengthen adaptive skills and self-regulatory capacities: what we refer to as functional independence and normalization
- Sources of faith, hope, and cultural traditions: the positive, nurturing community that we build in our classrooms

Who are the children with significant adversity or obstacles to development? What are they experiencing? In our Montessori communities, we see children experiencing behavioral challenges, oppositional defiance, sensory issues, trauma, stress, developmental challenges, and attentional challenges. The bottom line is that these children are going to have a tough time anywhere they go. These are the children at risk.

The tendency is to think that children who experience these kinds of challenges will do better in a special program, with specially-trained adults. While it is certainly true that we can all benefit from working together with specialized professions, we mustn't overlook the fact that as Montessori teachers, we are uniquely qualified to provide that help that many children need. Our entire program is designed to bring children to a path of healthy, happy development. Our work is to bring children "back from the edge," and once they are on stable ground, give them the means to become the very best people they can be. This is what we do. But it is not easy; in fact, it's really hard. Children with these kinds of obstacles are challenging for everyone, and all of the adults that are working to help children with challenges are working on the same things: building positive relationships with the children, carefully and relentlessly observing, and finding creative strategies to help the children develop the skills they need to be successful.

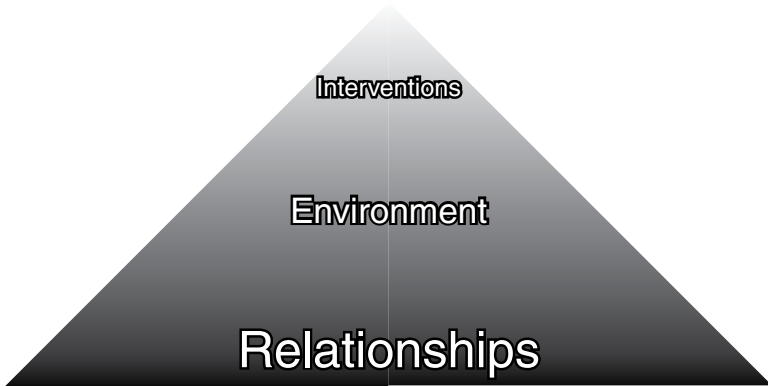
The fact that it is really, really challenging is why we have to stay so firmly planted in the positive. I am reminded of a poem by e.e. cummings that is a beautiful reminder of where we start.

**Love Is a Place**

Love is a place,  
and through this place of love, move,  
(with brightness of peace)  
All places.

Yes is a world,  
And in this world of yes, live,  
(skillfully curled)  
All worlds.

This is where we begin. With love and yes. Within love and yes, all things are possible, but we also work on the “skillfully curled” part. We develop our skills as teachers and observers; we identify what we do well, and what we need to learn more about or learn to do better. Every child we meet teaches us something new about ourselves and adds to the repertoire that we hold, skillfully curled, within ourselves and that we draw from for the next child who needs us. This is how we say, “Yes, I’m here to help you.”



When we look at our work, it comes down to this:

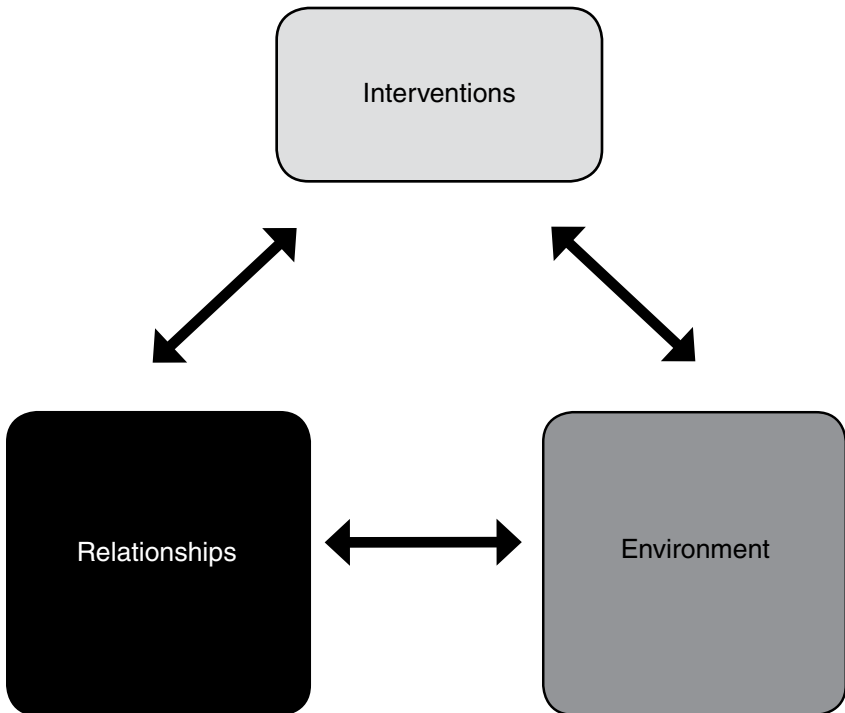
- Relationships,
- Environment, and
- Interventions.

*Relationships* are between teachers and children, between children and each other, and between the teachers and families. The *environment* is, of course, the Montessori prepared environment, which contains its own triangle of the children, adults, and materials. The environment contains both the physical and the psychological: the people, materials, and furnishings, and then the atmosphere of compassion, respect, kindness that we cultivate.

When we look at this hierarchy, relationships are the most important, and form the foundation for our work. The environment is built on top of this foundation. Between our work with relationships and environment, we will be able to meet most of the children's needs.

The *interventions* come for that much smaller percentage of children who need something more from us. Interventions may include how we adapt and modify our interactions with children, or the materials and activities, or they may come from another professional who can consult with us or provide some kind of additional service, such as psychologists, occupation therapists, speech-language therapists, or behavioral specialists.

Here's another way to look at these key elements of our work.



Our relationships and the environment form the foundation, and have an interdependent relationship between each other: The interactions between people are part of the environment and help create the environment, and the environment forms the context in which these relationships take place.

Some interventions can come from our relationships. For example, it is an intervention when we keep a child close to us so that we can support safe behavior, or when a child helps another child with a task or comforts a child who is distressed. Interventions can also come from the environment, such as modifying a material so that it has fewer pieces, or uses less water, or when we create cozy nurturing places for children to retreat when they need some space.

Let's take some time now and explore each of these elements in more detail, and how they help us bring children back from the edge.

There is no way to overstate the importance of a consistent, reliable relationship with the children. In their excellent book, *Visible Learning and the Science of How We Learn*, John Hattie and Gregory Yates devote an entire chapter on the teacher-student relationship. They write,

A sizeable body of research has found that the early years of school represent a critical period in the development of an individual's life adjustment pattern. Establishing positive relationships between young children and their teachers has been shown to cascade and so result in lasting benefits involving trust and affection. (17)

When young children develop a positive relationship with their first teachers, it sets their pattern of expectation for what teachers are: friendly, reliable, kind, patient, and trustworthy. This frames the children's entire approach to school and sets up their success for years to come. In a 2011 study, over 1300 students were tracked from early childhood into adolescence. Positive teacher-child relationships in their early years predicted reduced levels of aggression and antisocial behavior and also served to prevent children who initially showed signs of worry, anxiety, and emotional problems from developing trajectories of behavior problems (Hattie & Yates).

Secure and positive relationships are especially important for children at risk. When we commit to being a stable, positive force in a child's life, it helps form a protective shield around the child when stressful events occur. But it also has healing effects on past traumas. In *The Absorbent Mind*, Dr. Montessori wrote about the years from 3–6 being a time to heal or correct difficulties or obstacles to development. She wrote that if, "because of negligence or wrong treatment, the defects caused between 0–3 are not corrected, not only do they remain, but they get worse" (195). Montessori observed that all of these ill circumstances have repercussions on mental life and on intelligence, making the years from 3–6 an especially important time for healing of difficulties and for giving the child a second chance at healthy, normal development.

Montessori called the years from 3–6 the "embryonic period for character and society"—the time when the child's character and sense of society would be developed, much as the physical organs developed in utero and the brain continues developing in the first years after birth. This was the opportune time to imprint on the child's soul life-affirming, prosocial qualities of character. She also identified this same period as the time of the psychological "second chance." This was the time to correct any physical, social or emotional difficulties that may have developed earlier in life, to remove obstacles to development (*The Absorbent Mind* 243).

It is essential to understand that investing time and energy into building a positive relationship with children must come first, before attempting any behavioral or cognitive strategies or other "corrections." This is important for two reasons. First, starting by building a positive relationship reduces many challenging behaviors in and of itself because children are more likely to cooperate thus enabling teachers to spend more time on observation and lesson planning and less time putting out fires and reacting to negative behaviors. Second, as the positive relationship grows, the teacher's influence as a positive force grows, and children begin to *seek out* approval and positive attention. All children want and need attention, and it's our job to find ways to give children attention for positive, prosocial behaviors rather than waiting for negative behaviors to happen and then reacting.

To do it well, our work requires a great deal of self-reflection and courage. Children, in their openness and vulnerability, make us more open and vulnerable too. We expose our humanity—what is best and worst inside of ourselves. It takes courage to be vulnerable like this and self-awareness to continually examine ourselves, our motivations, our actions, and to have the courage to receive the feedback that the children are giving us, and to make the changes needed to become a better teacher and a better person.

We all know that it is easier to make connections with some children than with others. There will always be children with whom we relate to easily, and others that take more work or just seem to push our buttons. When our hot buttons get pushed, we can feel frustrated and discouraged or bad about ourselves as teachers, and so what do we do? We get angry, raise our voices, criticize, or actively avoid these children.

And yet, the last thing we should do is avoid the children who push us. The children who demand more attention than others, who are disruptive, unmotivated, oppositional, aggressive, or do not give us the positive feedback we get from others, the children we find the most difficult to build relationships with are the ones who need positive relationships with adults the most!

It is normal to feel an emotional response, but rather than give in to feelings of frustration, take these emotions as a signal that this child needs you more than anyone else in the room. This is a child on the edge, and it is your work to bring him back. This is where we dig in and find compassion and understanding and the knowledge that no child *wants* to be disruptive, oppositional, or aggressive. They do this because they are hurt, and we are here to help.

It is important for us to remember even if we do nothing else for a child, our relationship matters. Like many other aspects of early childhood education, we don't always get to see the results of our efforts. However, we can be sure that when we take the time to develop a stable and positive relationship with the children, they carry a piece of us with them into their uncertain future of how it feels to have a secure, consistent, and kind relationship with an adult who cares for them, no matter what.

There is a wonderful article from Vanderbilt University (Joseph & Strain) about the importance of building positive relationships. I'd like to highlight a few of the very simple strategies they suggest that you could begin to use tomorrow.

- Greet every child at the door by name – “Good morning, Lyle I’m so glad to see you today.”
- Invite a child to choose a favorite book from the bookshelf and read it to the group.
- Listen to a child’s ideas and stories, and reflect back what you’ve heard – “So it sounds like there was a big spill at lunch but you cleaned it up, and Maryann helped you. I’m glad you were able to take care of that.”
- Share information about yourself and find a common interest: pets, riding the bus, favorite foods.
- Tell a child how much he was missed if he was absent. No guilt here, it’s not the child’s fault if he misses school or is late. “Max, I’m so glad to see you; we missed you yesterday!”
- Hold a child’s hand in friendship – gentle human contact does wonders, and feels so nice. It shouldn’t be a punishment to have to hold the teacher’s hand, it should be a comfort.

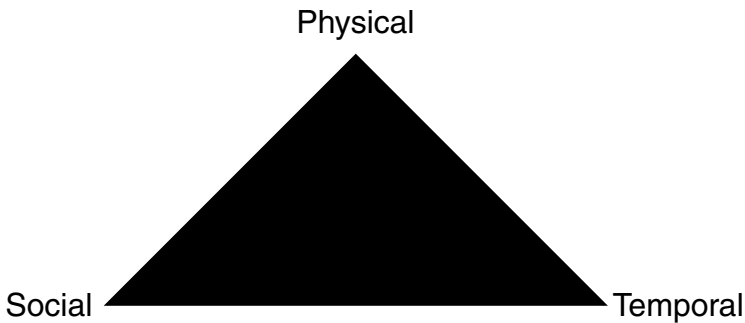
This is not rocket science. But just think about a child in your class who gives you a hard time, and how much better it would be if you did several of these things every day with him. I guarantee your relationship would be better. And when we feel better about the children, we feel much better about our ability to help them and that we are making strides in the right direction.

Now that we have built a foundation of positive and supportive relationships and talked about the power of relationships in bringing children back from the edge, let’s look at the environment and the resources we have there to help children.



Many Montessori teachers think of the prepared environment as an equilateral triangle consisting of a group of children in the same stage of development, the prepared adult, and materials and activities. Our prepared environment contains both the physical and the psychological—the people, materials, and furnishings—and then the atmosphere of compassion, respect, and kindness that comes largely from the relationships that we cultivate between and among the adults and children.

Another way to think of the elements in the prepared environment is to consider the *physical* environment: the space, the furniture, the materials; the *social* environment: the interactions between children, teachers, and parents; and the *temporal* environment: the schedule, the transitions, the order and structure of the day.



Each of these elements provides us with resources that we can work with, modify, and adapt in order to support the needs of the children as a whole, and also to make individual accommodations to support any one particular child.

We all learn in our Montessori training that the Montessori adult has three responsibilities:

1. to prepare, maintain, and enrich the environment;
2. to connect the children to the materials and activities; and
3. to withdraw, observe, and give the children the freedom to work with the materials without interruption.

While it is true that for many children, this is really all we need to do, but for children at risk, or children with obstacle to development, we have to think differently about how we prepare the environment, be more creative in how we connect them with the materials, and know that they might not work independently for a long time. Let's talk about how we work with these children.

Let's start with the first task we have, which is to prepare, maintain, and enrich the environment. First of all, let's recognize that there are three stages to this: *prepare, maintain, and enrich*.

Our environment is something that we are continually working on; it's not something we just do at the beginning of the year before the children come. First, we start by thinking ahead and *preparing* for what our experience has taught us, and what we anticipate we will need. Second, we *maintain*, and as the year goes on, we keep what is working, and we adjust and modify what isn't working based upon our observations. Third, we *enrich*, which means we fine tune our environment so that it meets the developmental needs of every individual child in our community.

Let's keep the above in mind now as we look at the social, the physical, and the temporal aspects to the prepared environment. The social environment consists of the interactions between children and their peers and between the children and the adults. Two essential resources we can work with are our own relationships with the children and our lessons of grace and courtesy.

We have already talked at length about the importance of developing a strong, positive relationship with the children, and

again, here, we see that it is the first place we start. The other resource we have is grace and courtesy. We have grace and courtesy lessons because we trust and believe that all children desire and prefer positive, prosocial interactions. If we see children who are not demonstrating

All children thrive on order and predictability, but for children with behavioral challenges due to internal disorder, or disorder in their life outside of school, consistency with expectations, routines, and schedules are essential.

positive social interactions (and we do, every year), it is our work to demonstrate and give the opportunity to practice replacement behaviors and interactions.

Children may have already internalized the patterns of negative interactions or they may behave the way they do because they crave attention, and they've learned that negative attention is better than no attention. However, regardless of why children may have negative social behaviors, the intervention is the same: Decide what we want the positive behavior to be, demonstrate it through grace and courtesy lessons, and give children multiple opportunities to practice. We keep presenting, representing, and practicing until we see this new, positive behavior spontaneously occurring with the children.

The children are learning a new skill. Just think about how many times we have to practice a new skill in order to get good at it! Think about practicing lay-ups in basketball; we would never say, "Oh, I tried it twice and it didn't work." Or "I tried jumping off on one foot like you said, but it didn't work!" We know we have to keep trying and keep practicing, and eventually we will be able to do it successfully.

The idea that all behaviors can be improved through teaching and learning a "replacement behavior" is the root of the positive behavior support and interventions movement (PBIS), and it is already integrated into Montessori education; we just need to remember that grace and courtesy is more than just making introductions or closing the door quietly. For example, we can give a lesson on how to get a friend's attention, but we don't have to stop there; we can give following lessons on how to *respond* when a friend wants to get your attention, or what to say if your friend tells you she *doesn't want* your attention right now. We can take any social encounter, break it down into its component steps, and develop a grace and courtesy lesson for each step. As one of our former students said during training, "Grace and courtesy are the analyzed movements of social life!"

We can prepare our *social* environment by anticipating the kinds of grace and courtesy we will need to support the children's relation-

ships; every year, we know we will need to give lessons on certain things. We can *maintain* our social environment by observing and responding to what the group is showing us it needs as the year progresses, and we can enrich the social environment by “fine tuning.” How can I modify or extend the grace and courtesy that we are already doing so that it better matches what this particular child needs? Or, how can I improve my relationship with this particular child so that I can be more effective?

Now let’s look at the *physical* environment. We have two great resources to work with when we think about strategies or interventions involving the materials and activities: the idea of isolating the stimulus, and utilizing preliminary activities. Julia Volkman, in her excellent article for the *Montessori Public* newspaper, expands on how we can use these two particular resources to better support children.

Volkman suggests that if children seem to have difficulty processing information or remembering a series of directions or steps, consider that children’s developing brains have a limited amount of capacity, and if a child has to spend a lot of her brain resources on compensating for some kind of developmental obstacle, whether it is trauma-based like managing stress, or sensory based such as a sensory processing disorder, or a language obstacle such as difficulty hearing or processing speech, then she has little leftover mental space for processing a complex series of steps or instructions.

Remember that in the sensorial area we *isolate* the sense and the quality we are helping the child to refine, so that all of her energies can be focused on this one aspect of development. We can apply this idea to other aspects of the physical environment to limit extraneous stimuli and focus or isolate what we want the child to pay attention to. For a child who is overwhelmed by too much sound, we can offer noise-cancelling headphones. For a child who receives too much visual stimulation, we can create a visually protected work space. For children who have difficulty listening to what you are saying, we can make sure we are always making eye contact, smiling, and speak slowly and clearly, with fewer directions.

Volkman also reminds us that the other resource we have in the physical environment is the ability to use preliminary exercises to

help children who have difficulty sequencing long tasks or activities. Preliminary activities are not just limited to pouring and spooning! They can be used to isolate and practice any step of any activity a child has difficulty with. For example, if you never are able to do the golden bead addition work because it takes the children too long to lay out all of those small number cards, just spend some time practicing how to lay out and put away the number cards! Challenge the children to see how fast and neatly they can do it or time them!

If a child continually makes a huge mess with water activities, take just the pitcher and the bucket, and give a lesson on how to fill the pitcher at the sink, dump it into the bucket, empty the bucket, dry everything and then do it again. Preliminary activities are designed to isolate a skill and give practice at it until a child can master it. They are golden opportunities for children who find obstacles within a cycle of work. As teachers, we have to observe carefully because each child might need different kinds of preliminary activities, depending on what their obstacles are, and some children won't need any! We also have to keep in mind that any unnecessary help become itself an obstacle.

Last, let's look at the *temporal* environment. The temporal environment involves our resources related to time and sequence, so it relates to order, consistency, routines, and schedules. It can also relate to the time needed for a child to work with something until it is mastered. All children thrive on order and predictability, but for children with behavioral challenges due to internal disorder, or disorder in their life outside of school, consistency with expectations, routines, and schedules are essential.

Remember that children are in the process of developing the ability to adjust when something does not go as planned; this is a new ability, it is fragile, and it is built upon a foundation of things happening in a predictable, consistent way. When children understand what is going to happen and what is expected of them, they are much better able to focus on what they *should* be doing in a particular situation. When children are comfortable following a routine, and know exactly what to do in a given situation, it becomes automatic, and then they can devote brain energy into dealing with a situation that does not fit the usual.

Our task is to think through and *prepare*, all of the little routines or situations the children will encounter during the day: How do I hang up my coat or change my shoes in the morning? Where will the teacher be to greet me when I come into the classroom? What do I do when I want snack? How do I clean up after snack? What happens if there is a bathroom accident? What happens if some glass breaks? We can anticipate many, many things in the life of the classroom, and our job is to think about them, decide what we want to have happen, and then be completely consistent with how we implement these routines.

In my early years of teaching, I was always searching for the “best” way to do snack, or the “best” way to transition from the morning work period to lunch, and I frequently changed the routines. As a result, my children never really knew what to do. They couldn’t be independent, and the children who had difficulties tended to melt down more often. At some point, I realized that there is no “best” way; usually, the best way is to find something that works pretty well, and stick to it. Often times, teachers who have the smoothest routines for arrival, transitions, snack, etc. tend to just do the same basic routine each year, and focus on refining that process so that the older or more confident children can be independent and helpful in assisting other children who need more help.

It is ironic that the best way to help children become more cognitively flexible is by being very consistent and ordered, but that is how children develop. We all know that the more chaotic a child’s external life is, the more dysregulated and disordered their inner life becomes, so if we want children to feel secure, confident, and self-actualized, we need to provide an external environment that is calm, predictable, and consistent, so children know what to do and how to be successful. This is how we maintain and enrich the temporal environment.

When we think about how to connect a child with the environment, we begin with the child’s interests. We all know that children are much more likely to concentrate on an activity that they are interested in. They are also much more likely to come with us for a lesson on something they are interested in. As obvious as this may sound, this is the place where Montessori is way ahead of the

crowd because many other programs begin with an adult-planned activity or preplanned curriculum rather than beginning with the child's own interests. Let's not forget how important it is to truly "follow the child" as Montessori advised us.

How do we know what a child is interested in? We observe and work on our relationship with that individual child so that we have an idea of where to "hook" that child into the materials. It is through our observations and our conversations with children that we discover their interests. That's how we know that this child loves fire trucks, or that one loves superheroes, or this one loves the new Disney movie. The important thing to remember is that no matter what the child is interested in, we can use that interest as a starting point for some activity in the environment. We don't need to waste any time at all judging a child's interests or the family's. Let's just work with what the child brings to us, and embrace the opportunity to expand those interests and use them to connect the child with the incredible materials and activities that we have in Montessori.

Sometimes connecting a child to the environment involves sitting right next to a child and providing frequent prompts and reinforcements. I'd like to explore that a little bit more. Our goal, of course, is that every child can work independently without any prompts or reinforcements. But children experiencing obstacles to their development may need a lot of prompting to help them develop cognitive skills, support their positive behavior, or to help them learn and practice the order, sequence, and routines within a work cycle. Prompts can be full (child's hand is right over your hand), partial (child's hand is on your arm), or gestural (adult points to what needs to happen). Prompts can also be positional (moving the next piece in front of the child to place or do), verbal (telling the next step) visual (a picture schedule). It is important to use as little prompting as needed to help the child, so that the he can progress to working with no prompting at all.

Our goal is that the children can work independently, but if a child cannot, you and the child will both be frustrated by expectations that are too difficult to achieve. It is much better to acknowledge that at this moment, this child cannot be independent and needs more help, and then we offer what the child needs. Sometimes children

also need additional positive reinforcement of a new behavior, or social interaction, or cognitive skill.

In Montessori, we rely on the idea of intrinsic motivation. We believe that children naturally want to do well and improve, and generally, this is true for children who are normalized. But children who have experienced many obstacles to normal, healthy, happy development do not demonstrate the characteristics of normalized development, so they frequently cannot rely on intrinsic motivation alone, they need some other kind of reinforcement. Think of children having an internal balance scale of positive and negative experiences with a fulcrum in the middle. Children who are more resilient or can rely more on their own inner self-confidence, can remain in balance with less explicit positive reinforcement. But children who have less resilience and encounter more obstacles need many more positive experiences to balance out the negative. Where that fulcrum is placed is a little different for every child. Even some days a child is more resilient than others or needs more encouragement than other days.

Remember that as Montessori teachers, our work is to meet the child where he is, and give him what he needs to develop. We work to remove obstacles and help children get back on the path to healthy, happy, development. If a child needs reinforcements to tip the scales towards more positive experiences or outcomes, then it is our job to give those reinforcements.

Anything that increases a behavior or action is a reinforcement. Sometimes, even negative attention can be a reinforcement; we all know of children who seem to misbehave to seek out negative attention. We want to make sure that we are reinforcing positive behaviors, so it is important that we pay attention and notice when children are successful and that we reinforce positive behaviors.

Reinforcements can be tangible or activity based, such as looking at a favorite book, being given a special classroom job, being a leader, or helping the teacher or the assistant. They can be social, such as sitting by a friend at snack or lunch, playing a game with a friend, sitting with the teacher at group or at lunch, or helping a younger child. Reinforcements can also be intangible, such as verbal



praise, an encouraging smile, a “thumbs up,” or positive comments regarding the child’s work.

To be effective, the child has to want the reinforcement, and we want to progress from tangible reinforcements to more social and intangible reinforcements. This will happen more quickly if you are also working on developing and supporting positive relationships between you and the children and between the children and each other. Remember that some children don’t like a lot of praise or attention, so if your reinforcement doesn’t actually accomplish what you want, change it up, and try something more intangible, like a quiet smile and a nod of encouragement that lets the child know that you noticed her accomplishment.

There is one more task related to the environment that the Montessori adult is responsible for: withdraw and observe. It is through this observation that we can determine if what we are doing is effective, and if it isn’t, observation is the tool to help us find out what to try next. Observation is the core of our work. Observation helps us to:

- develop a positive relationship with the child;
- connect the children with the materials and activities in the environment; and
- determine what interventions are needed.

When we observe, we are stepping back and performing an essential task that will give us some needed information. We have to take care to be positive and give equal weight to what a child is doing well, and to what he is not yet successful with. It is very easy to give in to simply seeing the negative, so we have to be vigilant about not succumbing to this kind of negativity bias. We want our observations to tell us something so we can learn more about the child and be better equipped to remove obstacles to development.

I want to share with you a few thoughts about observation as they relate specifically to children at risk. It is often children’s behaviors and disruptions that are the most challenging for us in the classroom. It is easy to get frustrated with children’s negative

behaviors, and when we are frustrated, it undermines our relationships. However, if our observations help us understand what we are seeing and why, then it is much easier to find the compassion needed to help the children who need us the most.

Children's behaviors have a form and a function. The form is what we see when we observe, and the function is what the child gets out of the behavior. The function of most behaviors is either to get power or contact. It is normal to want power and contact, but there is a negative way and a positive way to obtain power and contact. Another way to think of this is to understand that children often do the things they do in order to *get* something, or to *escape* something.

When we observe negative behaviors, we have to figure out what the child is trying to get and then figure out how we can give that to the child in a positive way. When we use observations of children's behavior to try to understand what they actually need and want, it is called a functional behavior assessment. This technique is one of the first intervention tools specialists will use when trying to figure out how to change a child's behavior and determining what is the "function" of the behavior? What is the child trying to get, or escape from, by doing what he is doing? The careful observations that we make are actually an intervention, embedded into our everyday habits.

This is a good time to reflect on how many of the strategies for building positive relationships are actually also interventions. This is what we mean when we say that just by doing our good work as Montessori educators we are actually making interventions all the time!

Think about Tanner, the boy you heard about in an earlier presentation today [see chapter by Jones and Cossentino in this journal]. His plan worked because:

1. The school collaborated with his family. That's where they found out he was interested in the planets and solar system, and that he loved going to museums.
2. The teacher used grace and courtesy lessons to help him practice using words, instead of aggression.

3. Everyone helped orient him to the classroom by kindly taking him back whenever he left the room. That's how he learned that the classroom was his space. He also needed to be oriented to his teacher, and learn that she was a good, kind person who would show him cool stuff, just like his mom did.
4. The teacher made interest-based lesson plans instead of age-based. Just because he was three didn't mean he was interested in spooning grains; he was interested in space and planets. It's no wonder he dumped the couscous on the floor and stirred it up with his foot!

What Tanner's team figured out about him was that he just wasn't oriented yet to school; he didn't know that he was supposed to stay in that one room, or what a "teacher" does, or how to communicate his needs using words. Think about the importance of orientation. If we always

Our work as Montessori educators is to love the children, and then find a way to connect them to the environment that will help them heal themselves, through meaningful engagement with their work, supported by caring and knowledgeable adults.

started by thinking about how we truly orient a child to the environment, the adults, the children, and the space, then we would probably eliminate the need for other interventions down the road. And, if we don't start with orientation, then our interventions are not going to work anyway; they will not have the necessary foundation to be successful.

Remember the balance scale of negative and positive experiences, or encouraging and discouraging events, and that children experiencing trauma, disorder, insecurity, or other obstacles to development need more positive encouragement than children who are not having all of those negative experiences piling up against them. In Montessori, we generally tend *not* to give a lot of praise, but if we think about an individual child's own fulcrum determining how little or much positive encouragement it takes to balance out the scale of negative effects, in order to tip the scales firmly into

the positive, we can see that some children are absolutely going to need more encouragement than others.

When giving a little extra encouragement for children's effort, creative thinking, or problem solving, remember that we are going to talk about the *action*, not the *child*. When we encourage the effort, we empower the child, "You did this!" "Wow! You made this happen!" This is very important for children who are perhaps feeling out of control in their lives, and it is very important for developing the growth mindset that frames the ability to think positively in the face of challenges. "Wow! You have really learned how to count that chain!" "Give me an extra huge high-five for that!" "Whoa, how did you do that?" "You really worked a long time on that!" "Tell me about that: What were you thinking about?" "I so appreciate that you helped Max with his apron, and I can tell by his face that he appreciated it too."

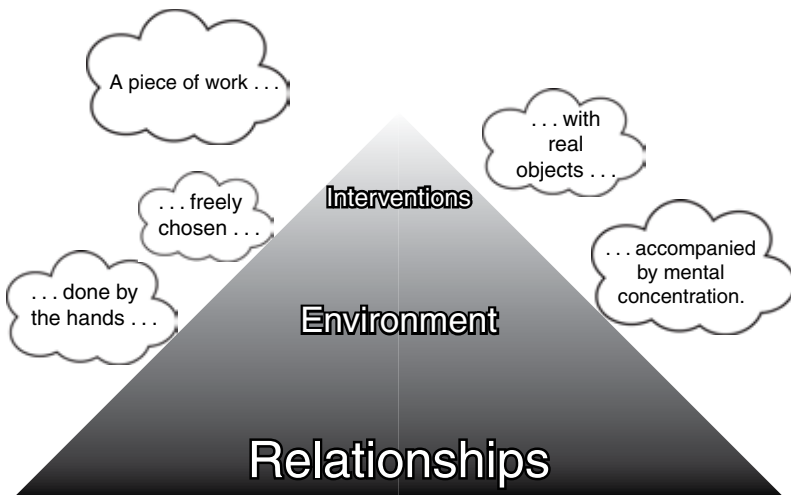
Be generous with these words; they are telling the children that they matter, their work matters, and that they are an important part of our community. Positive results beget more positive results. We want to start in motion a cascade effect of positivity and change. You will also find that when you are more encouraging or looking harder for things in the children to be encouraging about, your attitude, positivity, and growth mindset changes too!

Water what you want to grow. This is probably the best intervention there is. Find the good in the child, and water it. What are his strengths? How does he add to the community? What do you like about him? Water those thoughts and actions. Every child deserves to have someone who thinks he's amazing, who thinks he's creative and interesting and has something to offer. Every child needs someone who believes that even if he messes up sometimes, or disrupts the gathering, or breaks things, or hurts himself or others, that he is capable of learning a different way of being, and who understands that deep down, he *wants* a different way of being. If only someone takes the time and makes the effort to help him.

Montessori environments are such a powerful way to help children who are in danger of losing themselves, children at risk, children with obstacles to healthy, happy development. It is reas-

asuring to know how well supported children can be through our relationships and our prepared environment, and how that can help them to come back from the edge. This is the power of normalization that Montessori discovered.

The path to normalization, that magic formula that we all are looking for to help save those children who need so much, is the very same formula that helps *all* children develop: A piece of work, freely chosen, done by the hands, with real objects, accompanied by mental concentration. Our work as Montessori educators is to love the children, and then find a way to connect them to the environment that will help them heal themselves, through meaningful engagement with their work, supported by caring and knowledgeable adults.



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