

# THEORY INTO PRACTICE: ADVANCING NORMALIZATION FOR THE CHILD UNDER THREE

by Alyssa Conklin-Moore

*Alyssa Conklin-Moore discusses normalization in the child under three from several perspectives. She takes an extensive look at the child, including orienting parents to the Montessori environment, the child's entrance into the environment, addressing the sensitive periods, and fostering independence, contribution, and community. She reminds the guide of aspects to constantly keep in mind when considering the environment, including the outdoor environment. Importantly, she reminds the practitioner to constantly self-reflect. From start to finish, she offers practical tools that are deeply rooted in a strong Montessori philosophy.*

As Montessorians, we have been gifted from our training with a theory that steers the course for children to actively construct their own learning, personal success, and community well-being. What we have in our albums is tested across time and place. Knowing that the foundation is solid comes as great comfort as we step into our role as practitioner. The occasional snag within this framework is that sometimes we launch into our days and encounter difficulties that we were unable to foresee and challenges to “what we thought we knew.” In these more vulnerable places, when we have been stopped in our tracks, doubt can come knocking. But we don't necessarily need to allow doubt to creep in and grab hold of the reins. If you are someone who senses yourself really having to work to

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translate theory into practice, you are not alone. This is the work that we all face as educators, and that as practitioners we must continue to address. The deep questioning that tends to arise from such moments of disorientation is likely to come and go throughout one's career. The beautiful part of this aspect of the journey is in the sharing and discovery process. By no means are we done learning. The legacy keeps unfolding. What we collectively advance is what we recognize as strong and potent within our tradition. The mindful implementation of what we take to heart becomes our living tribute to this great work. At the end of the day, the children reveal what this looks like. The successes are theirs to claim and carry on.

## WORKING IN SERVICE TO THE CHILD

### **Orienting the Child to the Environment**

When serving a birth to age three population, we are inherently working with the family unit as a whole. Bringing the family onboard allows us to gain a great deal of information about the child's lived experience, including details about her early history and some unique aspects of how each family defines itself. What I have found over the years is that the parents who feel well connected to the school environment can more readily separate from their child on her first day (and all the subsequent ones thereafter). Why? Because they feel as though they have the information that they need and a prevailing sense of basic trust in the program and staff. In other words, they have the ability to actually step back and celebrate their decision to have this child be a part of community life.

Whenever a child is being welcomed into a new situation, we can think about how to help this transition to be as seamless as possible. Allowing ample time to connect with caregivers on the phone, via email, and ideally face-to-face ahead of the child's initial visit to the environment is a worthy investment of our time. This allows us to answer lots of parental questions, share some of our best strategies and tips, and create a clearly articulated game-plan together. This also gives us a personal way to address some of the nitty-gritty practical details, such as what belongings the child will need to bring, how arrival and dismissal work, what communications to anticipate, what food is served, etc. This invites the parent(s) to feel right onboard from the start and sets them up for seeking

to collaborate and communicate with us in the future. Moreover, when parents have been well received and oriented, it's not such a big leap to trust that the same attuned and attentive care will be extended to their child upon entry.

This is also our moment to shine a light on our approach and how thoroughly the child will be supported by the Montessori environment. We can advance our ideas about what young children need and protect against unnecessary obstacles. Choose to have the difficult conversations about why we refrain from using pacifiers, bottles, paper diapers, cribs, etc. at school and what the alternatives are. Discuss what good sleep looks like and the importance of healthy, whole food with regard to the child's development. We can share what we know about motor development and toileting so that appropriate choices of clothing can be purchased and consistently worn in order to advance independence. Speak to why we opt for glass dishes and why all of our materials are based in reality. We are the ones who get this ball rolling, so start off on the right track. Make these first exchanges with incoming families really count. Rather than tip-toeing around these more important matters, activate dialogue that promotes understanding. These conversations may not always be easy and brief, but they will advance the best interest of the child. The information that we provide is looking to support this family. If they are not well-informed, it is not their fault when they say, do, and provide the things that we may deem to be less than ideal. We can only work from what we know. So help new families to avoid the landmines that are out there when it comes to what is marketed and sold for babies and toddlers. Help them to know *why* we make the choices that we do. Often this content is already highly congruent to a family's style of living. In other cases, it becomes a matter of a few tweaks, and sometimes it can be more of a radical overhaul. The key is that everyone is invited into the dialogue. Learn what they are looking for and what initially brought them to your door. Spend a lot of time listening. Help the family to appreciate the scope of what it is you are able to provide.

### **Articulating What We Offer**

Our physical spaces highlight our values. These classrooms demonstrate our sensitivity to creating a home-like environment,

with child-sized furnishings, and predominantly natural materials and lighting. When prospective parents observe, they have a chance to experience how it feels to be a child in this space. They view the kinds of choices that are available. They witness how the adults interact with each child. They glimpse the children's concentrated efforts and strides toward independence. They see the joy on their faces. This experience helps to tell our story. We further round out these initial impressions with other kinds of promotional materials: perhaps a website, brochure, chat with admissions officer, video clips, school handbook, an introductory "elevator speech" from the guide, etc. Be sure that you are familiar with all of these possibilities and continue to build on the richness and diversity of these materials. Take a good hard look at what currently speaks well (just "as it is" today) and what could use an update. Ensure that all these tools are "up to snuff" and consider how you can further strengthen your message. If this is already well-implemented within the school, congratulations. How can this kind of information carry and inform beyond the immediacy of your school property? What efforts can be made to broaden the extent of your outreach?

### **Helping Togetherness Feel Easy**

We want the children to feel safe with us and to readily rely on us when the going gets tough. We also want them to take as much into their own hands as is possible to actively gain independence. Welcome to our paradox. To address this inherent contradiction, we watch the children closely in order to gain information about what makes them tick. We aim to tap into their interests and utilize this understanding to further connect each distinct personality to the prepared environment. We seek to create a collaborative exchange that allows the full self to make its appearance. This can be a delicate art. Trusting that the child will build relationships and be drawn to the materials is a requisite leap of faith. We must also take the lead when it comes to being ourselves, extending a warm welcome, and being open and relaxed about what the day might hold. If we are fundamentally at peace, this feeling will be facilely received and replicated. By and large, being together will feel natural and serene. When all else fails, sing.

## **Generating Hands-On Opportunity**

During infancy, the child needs a great deal of opportunity to explore. The hands function is a powerful pathway to the brain. The more active the child can be in this process, the better. As Dr. Montessori made clear, "Education is a natural process spontaneously carried out by the human individual and is acquired not by listening to words but by experiment upon the environment" (*Education for a New World 2*). In reality, what we introduce to the child comes down to what we believe the child is ready for and deserves to learn. So what do we feel the child needs to experience from our world? How do we help that learning to be accessible and concrete? Knowing that children learn best when they use their hands means that we must seek to supply the child with intelligent choices. We also have to be ready to embrace their mistakes. What we need to remember is that a child's development is not always convenient for the adult. What possibly led us to believe anything different? As a practitioner, I have witnessed this kind of unreasonable expectation arise within myself from time to time. It may also be something that we notice in the attitude of a parent or the remarks of a colleague. So let's be clear, when a child is first invited to pour milk on his cereal, he is likely to spill (assuming we have offered this lesson at the "right time"). That's just the name of the game. Parents and practitioners who are proud because their children "never err" have brazenly missed the boat. Helping to ensure that children have genuine opportunity and the ability to experience the natural consequences of their actions is essential. The lessons gleaned by addressing one's own mistakes are arguably some of the most powerful forms of learning. This recognition sets us free to empower the child to become active upon her surroundings. We demonstrate with care and precision in each presentation; analyzing these movements carefully. The child is invited to participate and make her best attempt to replicate this exercise. As we observe these budding efforts, we hold tightly to the vision that repetition paves the way to mastery.

## **Witnessing a Normalizing Event**

With our youngest souls, this will not often reveal itself as the standard work cycle (choosing a work, completing the activity, returning the material, experiencing satisfaction). However, if we are opportunely serving as the dynamic link between the child and



the environment, we will see glimmers of each of these components that steadily build into more reliable patterns with additional time and experience in the environment. Ultimately, keeping our eye on the prize of sparking concentration and connection will result in this full cycle meaningfully taking hold. Grant yourself permission to step back and take the long view of this development every now and again. Anticipating the normalization that emerges as a characteristic of the healthy child at the close of the first plane can help us to continuously inch our way in the right direction. During

infancy, we work to weave the children into activities that sustain attention and seduce them into increasingly rich explorations. This is the child's opportunity to optimally self-construct. When a child is presented with meaningful work to do, normalization spontaneously emerges. Therefore, we offer a lesson, observe, and retreat as soon as we are no longer needed. These consistent efforts on our part help to generate a community culture that promotes and protects engagement. Activities progress from simple to complex and allow the child to feel adequately supported while being challenged with ever-increasing difficulty.

### **Supporting Children to Make Choices**

Some children are quite active and demonstrative upon the world. Others are more reserved and less inclined to be quite so lively and hands-on. As educators, we serve this whole continuum of personalities by honoring the impulses that are directed by the hormone, supporting children to take their own initiative and enabling each individual to focus on a single activity for an extended period of time. We must present as many complete and cohesive lessons as possible in order to assist the children in their ability to make choices. Adequate intellectual nourishment must be afforded to the mind. Then we observe and dutifully intervene (should this become necessary). The child's ability to will, or choose to do something with conscious intent, develops gradually during this first phase of life. Our environments enable this skill to be strengthened through practice. We entice spontaneous activity to bubble up and generate energetic learning. The key is allowing many opportunities for the child to choose. As we unpretentiously work side by side with this unseasoned being, we allow the child time to process. Time to respond. Time to decide. Then to act upon his commitment. To repeat. To falter. While all of this is being carried out, we sit back. Striking the balance between supporting a child's independence and sustaining interest is a unique dance with each individual. We have to refrain from entertaining. If you are repeatedly catching yourself as "the entertainer," then there is another whole industry that awaits you. This isn't about you. Interfering with the child's ability to tune to his own internal voice is not our place. We also cannot be control freaks. When children are presented with options they must be allowed to choose freely. We should never give the

false appearance of choices or offer options that we do not actually mean to extend. This is also not the time to jump in and rescue the child or try to steer her toward the material that we secretly have in mind. Children get to make their own decisions and live out the results, whether those choices morph into terrific successes or minor calamities. This is the groundwork for growing good decision-makers and conscientious beings.

### **Don't Forget the Basics**

“Putting on Socks” is not in our albums as a formal material, but it certainly needs our time and attention. Many of today’s children are simply being “done to” in a flurry each morning. In a flash someone dresses them from head to toe and off they go. In these instances, there is precious little opportunity for the child to experience independence and supportive collaborative work. This is not his fault. Consider that this child may not have the luxury to be supported in terms of self-dressing at home. Maybe all of his socks are stored up high in a drawer and the family is forever in a hurry. While we absolutely have an obligation to share what we know with our families, and make recommendations about helping the home environment to be increasingly accessible to the child, some homes will be able to successfully adopt these ideas far more readily than others. That being said, what suggestions the family effectively implements at home is often out of our hands. So consider how much time is being afforded to really exploring the self-care exercises within your own environment. Be sure that nose wiping, face washing, tooth brushing, hair brushing, getting dressed, etc. are evident as work that is valued. Help the child sense the power of his own efforts with regard to some of these more personal life skills.

### **Maximizing upon the Sensitive Periods**

Remember learning about those critical windows of development when a child is biologically ready and receptive to acquiring a specific skill/ability? You know, the ones that appear at birth as unconscious powers for growth? These are the human characteristics that aid the fundamental self-construction of the psychic being during the first six years of life. Since these are very specific powers present only for certain times, it is imperative that we take advantage of these intervals when the child is predisposed for learning. Capitalizing

on these well-defined periods of interest in certain areas of their development means that we can offer expansive exploration in these domains before the sensitivity fades and ultimately disappears. As practitioners, we know that this learning is powerful and long lasting. We can ensure that the proper objects and circumstances are available for this work to be optimally completed. By offering the right tools at the right time, we can circumvent the possibility of “the dropped stitch.” As Dr. Montessori wrote,

A child learns to adjust himself and make acquisitions in his sensitive periods. These are like a beam...that furnishes energy. It is this sensibility which enables a child to come into contact with the external world in a particularly intense manner. At such a time everything is easy; all is life and enthusiasm. Every effort marks an increase in power... When one of these psychic passions is exhausted, another is enkindled. Childhood thus passes from conquest to conquest in a constant rhythm that constitutes its joy and happiness. It is within this fire of the soul...that the creative work of man... is brought to completion. (*The Secret of Childhood* 40)

### *Order*

Let us support the child’s strong desire for consistency, repetition, and established routines. Children can become very frustrated and even deeply disturbed by disorder when things are not how they are “supposed to be.” For an adult, order might be a convenience, but for a child this is a basic need of life that helps her to feel more in control, and thus, secure and at peace. Order enables the young child to make sense of her world.

### *Coordination of Movement*

Consider the first year of life when random movements become increasingly coordinated and controlled. Think about the slow and steady progression of touching, grasping, turning, rolling over, sitting, crawling, walking. As the child matures, more physical modalities become integrated with ever-increasing amounts of perfection. Employ the materials that best stimulate each of these successive stages of acquisition. Enable the child to practice as she shows interest and readiness. Refrain from positioning children and attempting to expedite this process unnaturally. Honestly, the best gains in motor skills will be the ones that have been exclusively initiated by the child himself.

### *Development and Refinement of the Senses*

The young child is inherently fascinated with sensorial experiences. All her senses are at work. When we offer opportunities to taste, smell, listen, observe, weigh, hold and touch, we are giving the child an opportunity to more intimately begin to relate to her surroundings. Discovering the tactile sensations of temperature and texture come as additional gifts for comprehending our physical world. Stimulating the ability to give and receive sound, distinguish color, build the vestibular system, and utilize our stereognostic sense furthers the integration of these delightful attributes. When we give heightened attention to the differences in sensory stimulation via our classroom materials, we aid the child's ability to recognize and observe differences and gradations. This supports the child's ability to form preferences. Comparing, contrasting, and sequencing are compelling activities that help children to achieve increasingly refined sensorial discriminations.

### *Language*

We know that the sensitive period for language has already begun before the child can speak, and lasts longer than any other sensitive period. When we think about our birth-to-three syllabus, it is easy to understand why nearly half of our materials address this area of learning.

The environment we prepare for this child is paramount. We are the key contributors. Speaking in language that is clear, reading aloud, posing questions, pausing for the child's response, and sharing proper syntax all support the child's early efforts at articulation. If we can offer a consistent bilingual experience, we do. When this kind of steady exposure to a foreign language takes place, we witness children absorbing and replicating perfect pronunciation. It is our hope that babies will experiment with human sounds and actively mimic the voices that they regularly hear. We help children to take the journey with us by initially naming real objects (lots and lots of them in classified categories), followed by an exposure to sets of realistic replicas for the things that we cannot possibly introduce firsthand. Next we combine three-dimensional objects with their identical two-dimensional images, so that the child can more meaningfully relate to picture cards and ultimately move to working with just the images alone. As we advance a child through

this process, the idea that was first physically held and experienced in one's hand can now be named and conjured as an image in the mind. When we explore this sequence thoroughly, books can take on even greater significance and intrigue. A little tip when it comes to books: I have become a big believer in always reading with a child at a table. While I too have a sweet little sofa in our environment, I have found that it is overly complicated for a young child to enjoy a book and properly care for its pages without the support of a nice, flat surface. There also seems to be a dramatic increase in the staying power of a book when perused at a table, so I have followed their lead and adopted that plan as our standard practice for engaging with our rotating collection of well-loved, true-to-life stories.



### *Promoting Points of Interest*

With each formal presentation that was demonstrated to us in training, we were introduced to the idea of points of interest. These special places of emphasis are good to review from time to time. Since not all steps are equally weighted within a lesson, we must be clear about what needs a pause, where we highlight a particular placement of the hand or the position of a material. Toddlers seem to be particularly responsive to this little extra pizzazz. They appreciate these helpful hints that are interspersed throughout the presentation. Also remember that as you offer this initial lesson to really do it justice. This is the child's very first time. Her only experience. You are shaping an impression that will be absorbed in its entirety. At some point in your career, you will have presented this material many, many times. What that means is that as an experienced "expert" you are free to pay additional attention to the child and to the moment at hand. Commit yourself to guiding this child, through her initial introduction, toward the goal, while capitalizing on these enticing points of interest along the way.

### **Forging and Maintaining Healthy Relationships**

Over the years, I have become increasingly keyed into creating a certain spaciousness around being in relationship with one another when it comes to "classroom practice." My experience has shown this to be an area where children are revealing greater needs and are often struggling when it comes to interacting calmly and kindly with others. I have also been witnessing more children who need to be readily entertained or partnered by an adult for lots of their day. Being in control of their bodies, being able to generate acts of friendships, and readily socializing with ease seem to be skills that warrant additional support and attention in our communities today. Some of the basic

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ways in which we recognize one another are how we role model the morning greeting of each and every child, taking time to sing everyone's name, asking simple questions that promote them turning to one another (e.g., "who wore striped socks today?" or "who arranged this vase of flowers?"), these are all introductory ways that we begin to connect the group as a whole. To advance feelings of camaraderie we must first really see and value one another. Daily offerings of small group exercises such as tossing a bean bag back and forth, sharing a language lesson, voluntarily holding hands with a partner and singing "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," inviting a few children to fold laundry together, delivering the attendance to the office, etc. allow us to witness how comfortable the children seem to be with one another. While some relationships form spontaneously, almost like a chemical reaction, there are others that require more time to germinate. Think about how we can assist this process in ways that are not forced or awkwardly artificial. Consider the relative compatibility of the community members and when it makes sense to invite collaboration. Yes, the developmental work of infants and toddlers is best described as self-construction and is a highly individualized process. However, we also must remember that we are fundamentally a social species. To reflect upon toddlerhood as purely "a celebration of ME" fails to adequately ground children in the reality of getting on in the world and damages their sense of both benefit and belonging that community life so generously extends. Ultimately, how to be in the world means that we are able to care for ourselves as well as others while fully activating our capacity to be thoughtful and reflective members of humanity.

### **Stimulating the Felt Sense of Ownership, Contribution, and Community**

Whether at home or in a Montessori setting (such as the Nido or Young Child Community), babies and toddlers are looking to belong as well as to make an impact. The manner in which we shape their physical space, build predictable routines, call to their sense of agency and foster their capabilities matters.

#### *Shaping Their Physical Space*

The child's surroundings need to be accessible, aesthetically alluring, varied, meticulously prepared, and warmly welcoming.

### *Building Predictable Routines*

Live by a consistent schedule that engenders trust, stability, and calm. A predictable routine enables the child to feel anchored. Secure children will feel safe enough to take some risks. The end result is the peaceful and natural functioning of a daily life that is enjoyed by all community members.

### *Calling to Their Sense of Agency*

This is achieved by affording adequate time for the child to engage in activity, offering creative challenges, refraining from jumping in to rescue, disciplining ourselves to frequently observe and removing the obstacles that pop up, along with sincerely believing in the child who is “not yet there.”

### *Fostering Their Capabilities*

We help the child to become proficient by anticipating and embracing mistakes, freeing her from the need for an adult (be it actual or perceived), recognizing both individual and collective effort, promoting the child’s ability to meaningfully assert her own will, and allowing each child to take on the next level of responsibility.

## **Paving the Path for the Child to Cope with Disappointment**

Helping children to persevere through frustration is work that really needs to be done. In more recent years, I have been encountering a handful of children who seem to display very high expectations while putting forth pretty minimal effort. They want to call the shots and have things instantaneously provided on their behalf minus any personal contribution. This kind of attitude gives us an opportunity to help the child attach to real work and learn to tolerate the fact that not everything comes easily. We can encourage the young child to grapple with a challenge and put additional energy forth. Far too often if there is too much challenge involved, all efforts cease. Some can be quick to throw in the towel and call it quits. In these instances, we can help the child to adopt a stronger pattern of showing up and trying again. Sometimes we just need to say it straight. Spell out the expectation and the next step that is required. We can collaborate with the child so she feels supported and is less inclined to bail out altogether. This allows her to move through all the steps and complete the process with less angst.

Other times what we need to do is actually minimize our support and step away. Some children will rise to the challenge when we remove the crutch of the adult presence. Offering the invitation and then clearing the scene may very well spur the child into action. Now she can sense the real need to fill the void and may feel charged to respond.

Sometimes a child may simply need to hear that we believe them to be capable and then be allowed the room to independently carry on following a quick word of sincere encouragement. (Note this does not sound like veiled praise, subtle bribery, or a “do-it-for-me-please” invocation.) Trust the fact that as imperfect beings, we want to help build the psychological muscle that helps us to move through dissatisfaction and disappointment to regain equilibrium. Contending with these kinds of uncomfortable feelings from early in life helps the child to be less reactive and more creative when it comes to generating potential solutions. So resist the urge to fix or appease. Rather than adopting a mindset of continually abandoning ship, the child can instead opt to reassert her efforts toward the next great adventure. A strategy of “keep on keeping on” can serve. Standing by children as they contend with some of these bigger emotions allows them to feel supported as they work through these challenges one small step at a time.

### **Looking at How Classrooms Develop Habits**

Since the children’s personalities and needs drive so much of what we do, it is not uncommon for patterns to emerge from particular environments. Over time, there are routines and expectations that the adults working within these communities are helping to shape, model, and maintain. This is an active and embodied practice. How much of it can we articulate? How much of it makes sense for the current make-up of the group? How much of it matches the children’s needs and places them at the center? How well do we capitalize on one another’s natural gifts and skill sets? What is it that we are deliberately fostering day in and day out? Sometimes, the culture of one particular community stretches on ad infinitum. It takes a strong effort to keep ourselves tied to the present moment, operating responsively to the children at hand. While it is unnecessary to continually “reinvent the wheel,” we should make

sure we are not mindlessly replicating patterns that evolved from old practices, unusual parameters, and former personnel. This is a new day, and we will be confronted with new openings and possibilities. Undoubtedly, this kind of habituation happens on a micro and macro level. While this trend is often most evident from environment to environment, I would venture to suggest that whole school communities tend to do this too. Keep widening the lens and identify how this tendency can also be traced to physical regions and differing forms of Montessori certification. Take a little time to locate the frameworks that you presently operate within. Consider the tendencies and traditions that are guiding your practice and their ability to provide for the well-being of the many young faces that greet you today. Address what may feel arbitrary or poorly aligned in your current practice.

## ENVIRONMENTAL NEEDS AND SOLUTIONS

### When Materials Collect Dust

As the guide in your environment, you may or may not be in the best seat to assess what materials have been overlooked and forgotten. From time to time, this will happen. Try to raise your awareness of which materials have fallen out of regular use. Be sure that you are routinely seeking feedback from your assistant as to which exercises have been left in place. If they aren't lovingly brought to life by the hands of the children, take some time to reflect upon why. Start with how you feel about the material. If you are not inherently drawn to it, then you may have some extra work to do. Accept that you may in fact be the obstacle and that the children may be energetically reading your felt ambivalence to the material. Maybe the children have surpassed the level of challenge that this material demands. Maybe it simply needs to be rotated out. Perhaps it's poorly displayed. Peruse your environment again. What items seem to be getting great use? Does this have to do with the material's location, appearance, or relevance to the child? Keep looking for clues as to what draws active engagement and help create the physical order that enables the child to thrive. As Dr. Montessori shares, "To help such development, it is not enough to provide objects chosen at random, but we (teachers) have to organize a world of "progressive interest" (*The Absorbent Mind* 206).

### **What's Missing?**

Pull out your albums. Explore the table of contents. What is your environment lacking? Inevitably, there is something that you have yet to offer or a material that could use an upgrade, repair, or refinement. Investigate what has been holding you back. Give yourself a goal for finding, funding or creating what it is that you need. One month. Three months. Push yourself to stretch and tackle this one thing. Repeat this challenge all over again after witnessing the joy of children utilizing materials that are worthy of their time and attention. This is just one more way in which we show our love and respect for the child under three. They cannot construct from what is not there, so it is on our shoulders to ensure that the full array of work choices is readily available and enticing. From birth, babies must have access to intelligent resources that promote their sustained attention. Our omissions serve as obstacles to their development.

### **What's Excess?**

While you have that album out and handy, you may also want to use some time to reflect on the items and materials that currently live on your shelves. Give some thoughtful attention to the ones that are *not* listed in your album. How did they find their way into your space and what purpose do they serve? Honestly consider whether what you see is an enhancement or a deterrent. Does it genuinely promote quality engagement? Many times the “extras” that we find are simply duplications or distractions of other materials. Be willing to clear away the clutter. Now. Children who are falling victim to the excess are losing the possibility of working with something genuine. Don't let the excess detract from what needs to be present, needs to be brought to life, and needs to be prominently displayed. Really look at your manipulatives and curb what's available at any one time. (It's OK, this is why we rotate these materials on an on-going basis). Be sure that you can attest to the fact that each material has *earned* its way into your environment. Keep asking yourself about your collection of materials and if they make sense according to what you see the children needing today. What is out at any given time has to compellingly call to them. All activities must be ready to use and hold their own weight. Clear anything that's cutesy. Bring on the work that is grounded in reality. Keep inspiring practical life.



Brighten the space with a few lovely seasonal items that connect the child with the natural landscape.

### **The Four Areas and Places to Work**

We can also evaluate our physical environment by considering the spaces that we have created for:

1. Eating
2. Movement
3. Physical Care
4. Sleeping

As practitioners, it does not take long for us to recognize that poor preparation seriously gets in the way and exacts a sizable cost. After identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each of these four regions, make a plan for boosting the efficacy of these spaces. Dream big.

You can also invite yourself to consider the kinds of work areas and physical spaces that are available within the environment. Some children need a lot of room. Some prefer their own little cozy niche. Does your environment offer individual tables, work mats, isolated areas for privacy, tables for two, places to stand and work, the possibility of working outside, a soft place to land, room for large motor activity, etc.? Creating a wide diversity of spaces within your environment will allow all children to feel right at home within your surroundings regardless of their personal preferences, tendencies, and needs. Create “yes” spaces. Help the community to be welcoming to everyone. It must feel safe and as though it sincerely belongs to the children. Are they able to readily conduct themselves here? We have to be sure to minimize anything that we must “monitor” as adults in the room. Set them free to find what they need. When there is a range of textures, colors, kinds of lighting, heights of chairs and tables, etc., they will be able to ascertain their own preferences and will appear to be “right at home” within the community space.



## Getting Outside

After focusing so intently on the indoor environment, we get to do the same for the dynamic world of the outdoors. What is it that we are giving to the children outside on a daily basis? Do we actively venture out in all kinds of weather? Do children get to experience the challenge of uneven surfaces, a place to climb, objects to pull, loose parts to maneuver? What are they invited to grow? As I encounter more and more children manifesting retained reflexes, tracking issues, and erratic movement patterns, I have to ask myself about where they can test their own physicality and demonstrate maximum effort? What is available to promote upper body work and strengthening? Are there heavy objects to push and carry? Is there a balance between materials that are natural versus manmade? Assess the level of risk that children are allowed to encounter. Is our message one of “go for it” or do we anxiously hover and restrict exploration? This is the ideal turf for children to really see their impact. So start looking at puddles as a resource and go delight in the outdoor terrain. Reap the benefits of fresh air, whole body work, and free play. Connecting to the natural world has been shown to enhance social skills, reduce stress, increase flexibility, improve the understanding of cause and effect, and boost Vitamin D (Dreher). In





other words, you can't go wrong. For those of you guiding all-day environments, I am convinced this plays a pivotal role in fostering good afternoon lunching and sleep. Make a commitment to inviting the children outdoors every day and enjoy!

#### **PRACTITIONER HYGIENE**

#### **Maintaining an Open Mind, Relaxed Spirit, and Dutiful Commitment to the Work**

If we are fortunate in our professional lives, we have the opportunity to greet children, parents, and colleagues who are different from us, sometimes significantly so. All of these encounters will encourage us to stretch to find common ground and the potential for deep understanding. If we are able to keep an open mind, we will be able to appreciate new approaches, techniques, and strategies that come our way. As we share our ideas and perspective, our aim is to build bridges. In some instances, this will arise almost effortlessly and with others it may take repeated attempts on our end to keep

the lines of communication open and inviting. As we maintain our calm and collected composure, we set the tone for respectful exchanges that can best serve the child. In this work, there may be times when we will feel misunderstood, disregarded, challenged, and even confronted for our beliefs. Take it in stride. Deliver a wise response rather than a reactive one. Skip the judgment and the assumptions and the rumor mill. Hold to the facts, solely what you have experienced and observed first-hand. Speak your feelings if it serves the conversation. Don't when they won't. Anticipate that you will be doing a lot of listening.

Be honest with yourself about where there are strings attached and hefty expectations for the children to endure. Let this go. Be sure that this environment is one to be lived in and loved. Allow the children to work as effectively as they can. Anticipate that some beautiful materials will inevitably be lost to this vitalizing process.

Reveal your professionalism in where and how these discussions unfold. Consider how your dedication to the child, the community, your Montessori understanding, and a healthy resolve show up in your words and actions. Sometimes when the work gets hard, it is because it needs more from us. Sometimes we owe ourselves time to pause. Sometimes we must merely turn to wonder. Be willing to seek alignment when it comes to the pedagogy and its practical implementation. Consult with a mentor. Our Montessori principles should be what light the way.

### **Keeping Yourself in the Dialogue**

Take advantage of sharing with your colleagues. The work that we do can be isolating at times due to the intensity of our schedules and the needs of our young population. At least every now and again, be sure that you are coming up for air. My first recommendation is to connect wherever you can in-house (even if that has to be with Montessorians who support a different age group than you). Reflect on the trends and details that they are seeing. Listen to their concerns. Celebrate their successes. Generate solutions together. Sometimes all we need is to be heard. But push beyond merely commiserating with one another and delve into drawing inspiration. Tackle some of Dr. Montessori's writings with fresh eyes. Drop the timidity.

Find ways to visit with other guides. Get into their environments to observe. Ask your curious questions. Participate in the chat groups and blogs that fuel your thinking and bolster your regard for the child. Attend conferences. Read what current researchers are discovering. Apply the gems that you receive by being on top of your game and ever-ready to learn something new.

### **Doing A Self-Check**

When we work with young children, we have to be really able to assess where we are (physically and emotionally) and leave all of our “personal baggage” at the front door. The children come with open eyes and open arms and we must be ready to receive them. All that we do and say serves as an example to them upon which they order and organize their lives and expectations. The absorbent mind is not selective. It takes it all in. Deeply. Continually. Like “a photographic plate” (*Education for a New World* 13).

As energetic beings, children take in what we say and also what our body communicates. They can detect when these convey contradictory messages. They are likely to let us know when we become untrustworthy in this way. So before they have to be the ones to call you out, make an honest assessment of your own ability to serve as the example you need to be in their presence. Ensure that you are in a good place and ready to serve. Being erratic is not a gift. So own your own stuff. Take the time to reflect upon the tensions you are holding and what types of things typically trigger stress in you. Figure out how self-care fits into your equation in a way that is protected and maintained. As Matshona Dhliwayo reminds us, “Your inner light lights up your outer world” (6). Keep yourself leading this community from a place of strength and compassion.

### **Using Either My Speaking Voice or My Hands**

If you have the opportunity, consider setting up a way to film a morning work cycle and watch to see how faithful you are to this notion of either mouthing or moving, but refraining from doing both simultaneously. Being able to review actual recorded footage of yourself at work can be highly informative when it comes to isolating a specific skill such as this. Since we know how interested children are in language *and* motor activity, we know that they are

drawn to each of these sources of information. Rather than overwhelming them by offering both, try to choose one modality at a time. So either I am moving my body (most often using my hands to present the material), or I am speaking to the child and offering auditory stimulation that cues a child to a particular detail or seeks to extend concentration within the work. In my experience, it is often the visual demonstration that really gets through. Silently showing is such a powerful way to build a child's understanding. If we overly narrate every step of the way, the child will learn to tune out our voice in order to watch what we are doing, or will attend to the verbal commentary, but fail to pick up any nuance or sequence displayed by the physical presentation itself. We don't have to force the child to split their attention like this (since we know that they are drawn to both forms of expression). Being mindful of this is definitely a discipline that is likely to feel counter-intuitive to our general mode of being at the start, but I have been amazed by how much more the child gleans from my presentations when I am able to share in this way. So jot yourself a note on this. If you catch yourself being a repeat offender, hang a photograph of a pair of lips and an outline of a hand so that you have a reminder right there in the environment to cue your actions throughout the day. Observe the people you work with and ask them to do the same for you, so this kind of feedback can be freely exchanged. As we raise our awareness to the manner in which we create opportunities for learning, we are mapping the course for the child to experience greater ease in scaling the scaffolding that a good presentation affords.

### **Releasing What You Have Created**

Often we have worked and worked upon the creation of a physical space, a new language material, or a parent handout to such a great extent that we are reticent to completely share our investment. Somehow we have poured so much of our own identity in it that we get caught off guard when we observe children by-passing the space that we intended to draw them in. Or we witness repeated falls in an area due to our choice of that new area rug, but struggle to part with it since it cost us \$XXX dollars. And don't get me wrong, I too have been heartbroken as that little light blue pitcher goes crashing to the floor to meet its demise, and the instrument from Australia is found floating around the toilet bowl. There's definitely a pang

involved when we witness a child fold that language card or slide it under the radiator. But that struggle is all yours. Those moments are isolated and fleeting. When we shape these spaces, purchase these treasures, and create dynamic materials, we do so to serve the child. Continuing to grip on to these gifts, rather than freely and openly sharing them with others, constrains and diminishes the gift. Be honest with yourself about where there are strings attached and hefty expectations for the children to endure. Let this go. Be sure that this environment is one to be lived in and loved. Allow the children to work as effectively as they can. Anticipate that some beautiful materials will inevitably be lost to this vitalizing process.

### **Modeling from Start to Finish**

In the Michael Olaf catalog and webpage, a lecture given by Dr. Rita Schaefer Zener posits that normalization appears through the repetition of a three-step cycle that she describes below:

The building of character/the formation of personality that we call normalization come about when children follow this cycle of work.

- (1) Preparation for an activity, which involves gathering together the material necessary to do the activity. The movement and the thought involved in the preparation serves to call the attention of the mind to begin to focus on the activity.
- (2) An activity that so engrosses the child that he reaches a deep level of concentration.
- (3) Rest, which is characterized by a general feeling of satisfaction and well-being. It is thought that at this point some inner formation or integration of the person takes place.

This passage serves as a good reminder to me about when and where to direct my time. As a practitioner, it can be tempting at times to skip a step or to shorten a sequence. But truth be told, this approach never banks out. What I have found to consistently pay dividends is presenting the work in its entirety (from start to finish, every time). Yes indeed, even that part about checking the material first to ensure that the activity is complete and ready and beautiful prior to even inviting the child to the lesson. Be steadfast to the

work as a whole. Take the time to put on the apron. Wait for that last drop. Move the chair away before you begin table scrubbing. This does not bog down the process; it is the process. These pieces are all integral parts of the work, and should not be shortchanged. If our ultimate goal is to ensure the greatest likelihood for the child to experience success, then we can appreciate that there are no shortcuts. Once the work is underway, this can surely be a collaborative give and take with the child. In most cases, it is imperative that the child play an active role, too. Trust this relational dynamic enough to take the lead and do all that you can to live out the sequence in its fullness. When we are just moving through the motions on autopilot, lessons are uninspired. This will reveal itself in the child's inability to remain attentive and involved during the presentation itself or lack of subsequent retention.

Somewhere in my journey I got very comfortable with the fact that I can never be certain about what the child needs in any given moment. That discovery freed me to stop expecting the impossible from myself. I was at peace with the idea that, as guides, we can only touch the periphery of the child and never the core.

### **Choosing Vivid and Meaningful Words**

Sloppy speech is a serious obstacle for the young child. Selecting the words we want and the phrasings that carry takes tremendous care. Being deliberate and succinct is a good way to go. Don't use *don't*. Honestly avoid *don't* altogether. Consider hearing the following three statements: "Don't climb on the table," "Get off the table," or "Place your feet on the floor."

The truth of the matter is that young children typically focus on our words of action. So in the first example, what really registers in the brain is the "climb on the table" part. That message is far from helpful. When you get to the heart of the matter, young children really just want to know *what to do*. When we are able to spin a phrase and emphasize what it is that we want to see happen, we tend to witness an increase in the child's willingness to follow through. It's not really about the child being any more or less collaborative but simply a reflection of our guidance aiding the child's ability to

act. Our words have offered a possible route to success. Then we must give the child adequate time to respond. If the child becomes gamey or resistant, we can say more. In this instance, “You may put your feet on the floor, or I can help you.” This gives the child the choice of how they would prefer to come down from the table, but less wiggle room to ignore the invitation. If the child really digs in, then we can offer some additional assistance, but we have avoided bribing the child into activity. We have used our words in a way that skirts being abrupt, harsh, threatening, untrue, dismissive, insulting, sarcastic, or rude. In other words, we are respectfully communicating as one human being to another.

### **RECOGNIZING THE CHILD’S ABILITY TO DIRECT HER OWN LEARNING**

#### **Pacing What We Offer**

Many of us came to this work because we are doers and do-good-ers. We like to get things done. We may or may not have some perfectionistic tendencies. While the hustle-bustle has its place, it doesn’t seem to jibe particularly well with the young child. Part of this is simply due to the fact that as adults, we process so much more efficiently and effectively than during these early formative years. While I continually envy the tremendous power of their absorbent minds, I appreciate the fact that my executive functioning skills enable quick decision-making and zippy retrieval from memory. I am able to multitask and seriously move a project along when speed becomes necessary. In the community, I often need a reminder to slow down. Way down. To match their speed. (I used to have a turtle figurine in our windowsill as my own gentle daily reminder.) Once I adapt to their pacing, we are all good. I find that they are able to more readily receive my invitations, suggestions, cues, and prompts. Attending to the tempo of activity will also help to extend work cycles and better sustain concentrated work efforts. Remember that development is not a race. Much can be accomplished in a day if it is done with care. Strive to live a rhythm that promotes wellness. Support the rate at which the children can become true contributors to their environment. As Dr. Montessori wrote in *The Discovery of the Child*:

Small children, who are making their first solitary efforts,  
are very slow in carrying out their actions. Their life thus

is ruled by special laws quite different from our own. Little children take great pleasure in performing slowly and deliberately many complex actions, for example, dressing and undressing, cleaning up the room, washing themselves, setting the table, eating and so forth. In all these activities they are most patient, and they carry their laborious efforts to a conclusion, surmounting all the difficulties that confront an organism still in its formative state. (311)

## **Honoring Rest and Ceasing the Glorification of the Occupied Child**

As a child moves throughout her day, there will be times of great investment followed by moments of necessary downtime. These sweet moments of respite enable the child to regroup. In recent years, scientists have been finding that little mental breaks actually help to increase productivity, replenish attention, solidify memory, encourage creativity, and affirm our sense of identity (Jabr). Our communities need to allow for this kind of rest to be honored.

Particularly in the classroom environment, we can be terribly quick to “busy” a child. This is not our role. My place as guide is not to badger, prod, insist and coerce. Pushing work is painful (for all parties involved). I have been in environments where the adults are tasked with continually keeping all students occupied and these are not happy places. The freedom to choose and self-direct has been all but obliterated. Trust is far from the predominating spirit. So children are situated with materials before them – but there’s no magic there. This is the tragic exemplar of “busy work.” Any activity that does happen is largely superficial and supervised. In effect, we are working against what we are hoping to achieve. When the child’s next activity is repeatedly rushed and forced, we are diminishing the effect of all that has come before. Moreover, we are diminishing the likelihood of benefit from whatever is coming next. The child is not able to address his own inner inklings. When we are able to recognize that perpetual busyness is not a particularly healthy strategy to adopt, we can let go of this toxic agenda.

Somewhere in my journey I got very comfortable with the fact that I can never be certain about what the child needs in any given moment. That discovery freed me to stop expecting the impossible from myself. I was at peace with the idea that, as guides, we can

only touch the periphery of the child and never the core. It will never be mine to declare and decide when any given child needs a little breathing room in order to make a discovery and then deservedly revel in the “a-ha” moment of it all. I am grateful for that. As practitioners, we can all appreciate the fact that sometimes idle can be good and sometimes idle can be dangerous. Our knowledge of the child (which roots itself in observation) is what will help us to discern the difference.

When we can genuinely relax into this kind of thinking and employ our softer eyes, we catch a fuller view of the child before us. We wisely refrain from being so quick to pounce and direct. We can opt to connect ourselves to the moment at hand and take advantage of all that unfolds. When we are honest with ourselves, the very best lessons tend to be the ones that arise spontaneously: because it is the perfect fall day for raking, because all the bread burned and now we need to start a new batch, etc. While we must plan and thoroughly prepare lessons and materials for each day, we also must be willing to go where the spirit moves us and the meaningful openings arise.

### **Appropriate Material, Appropriate Time**

Our Montessori albums help to spell out the ideal time to introduce each exercise to a child. While I am grateful for this baseline, I have also learned that I don't have to get myself overly hooked on ages. Based on our powers of observation, we are able to recognize when a child displays an interest and ascertain what the child may be ready for next. We have to apply what we know. I consistently protect the basic sequence of presentations but accept that some children may move through this progression more rapidly than others. Sometimes children are highly gifted in a given area and wind up readily advancing. In other instances, children are slower to reveal their readiness and additional time can be afforded for mastery to manifest. In each of these cases, what we are hoping to share is the appropriate material at just the right moment along the developmental continuum.

We also support this idea by being knowledgeable consumers of the activities that we provide. More and more often I find myself

seeing birth-to-three manufactured materials that lack purpose or infringe upon the beautiful materials of the Children's House. While it can be easy to be swept away by the allure of the new materials on the market, take caution. There are many "Montessori products" available that seem highly compelling and are actively marketed to our age group that we should collectively refuse to purchase. Here are a few examples of where I would advise: "Buyer Beware."

First, let's talk about the cylinder block. This is a Children's House material that has four distinct varieties. Each block offers a specific collection of ten cylinders. More recently, toddler versions have cropped up. I have seen blocks that reveal, one, two, three, four and five pegs. They are smaller (for toddler hands). They are simpler (for toddler minds) and they are marketed for children as young as a six months. Here is my struggle: These are not the same and cannot be used in the same fashion. Infants and toddlers simply do not possess the precision to do this work in an appropriately controlled manner. Instead, they use these manipulatives to make noise and relatively slam the corresponding pieces around. So then manufacturers made the pieces larger so they would be less apt to splinter and break. Are young children interested in putting things into and on to other things? Absolutely. That's why we have our imbucares and infilares materials. But I would argue that this other activity is something we should say no to and remove from our shelves if it has already managed to find its way in. When these miniature cylinder blocks are prematurely introduced to children in the Nido or Young Child Community, it takes away from the interest that could (and should) be present down the road in the Children's House. In a sense, the child is saying, "been there, done that" when they ultimately greet the real deal in the *Casa*. Regrettably, the work was never done well during infancy and it was not completed with the indirect preparation that comes from working with base ten. We have altered a sequence in a way that makes the work less clear and cohesive for the growing child.

So perhaps we can collectively watch out for materials that look like mini-variations or simplified components of Children's House materials and consider passing them by. The pink tower, brown stairs, red rods, etc. are the domain of the Children's House. When in doubt, shy away from the components that make up the sensorial area of

the three-to-six environment. It's important to create an understanding between program levels about protecting this content and sequence. As with all levels of training, it is helpful to familiarize yourself with what comes before your level

Taking a toddler's rejection or refusal personally only compounds the obstacle that the child is already facing. Rein your emotionality in. Here's just another one of life's opportunity for us to get in touch with our humility. Choose to let the moment go, but hang on to the insight.

and what comes next for the child (programmatically and developmentally). In our case, that means a steady curiosity about prenatal life and a good understanding and introduction to the *Casa*.

This is also why in the early years we deliberately refrain from formally introducing concepts and designations of color. Trust that there is time to advance the specific color names and gradients via the three stunning boxes of color tablets. Let the Children's House share these discoveries and explorations. While there may be times when we casually make mention of these kind of details with children under three (e.g. "I see you used the blue paint to make squiggly lines at the top of your paper" or "James is wearing his new yellow raincoat"), we are not attempting for the child to name all shades of the rainbow. There are not materials on the shelf that aim to represent and embody this understanding.

In a similar fashion, we can keep numbers at bay. While there may be days when we count the birds at the feeder (because it is marvelous to see so many of them enjoying the seed that we provided), this is offered in the context of a casual conversation. We are also remarking on the varieties of birds that we see, the parts of their body, their dietary needs, and the types of nests they build. Our aim is to round out the experience of this lived impression of the birds that we see in our yard. Or perhaps as we are passing time at the close of the day during our dismissal time we count the buttons on a child's coat. This differs from presenting the representational images of the numbers as a formal exercise. We can trust and celebrate that the four-year-old will have all that he needs when invited by his Children's House guide to use the number rods, sandpaper numerals, spindle boxes, etc. as he becomes ready to do so. We can settle

into appreciating that there is a multitude of brilliantly designed materialized abstractions that await.

Just as we are unimpressed by the parent who brags about the fact that her child can recognize all of the ABC fridge magnets by their appropriate letter names (since we would prefer the child relate to the lower case cursive letter and its phonemic sound), we can help to protect the integrity of the materials as they respond to the child throughout the entire first plane. We can choose to center our attention upon offering the ideal developmental materials with love and care. We have our albums to help us direct where our purchase power and creative material making needs to flow. Delving into genuine practical life experiences and language exercises is our best way to go. Give some time to really assessing what is the “best” material and when is the appropriate moment. Spark these kinds of conversations at faculty meetings.

### **When We Make a Bad Call**

Throughout the day, there will be many moments when we make a split-second decision. Often this happens almost instinctively. If we are lucky enough to be really in tune, lots of these decisions will land just as intended and what we have to offer will be well-received by the child. Inevitably, there will also be instances where our timing is off, the words that we use inadvertently create distance, our intention is misunderstood, or the work just falls flat. Be humble enough to accept the outcome (“it is what it is”) and strong enough to graciously move along. Taking a toddler’s rejection or refusal personally only compounds the obstacle that the child is already facing. Rein your emotionality in. Here’s just another one of life’s opportunity for us to get in touch with our humility. Choose to let the moment go, but hang on to the insight. Take notes or journal about the missed opportunities and see if there’s a pattern worth investigating further. Pay careful attention to the manner in which you are phrasing your observations, invitations, redirections, concerns, and gratitude with the children. Think about the timing of the child’s day and her energy level. Forgive yourself as readily as you would your assistant. Recognize what is working well. Celebrate the pieces that have been “just right.”

## WRAPPING IT UP

When it comes to putting theory into practice there are many potential paths. Many of these routes will try your identity. Some will push your patience, test your stamina, and send you back to the drawing board. Many of them will encourage you to find other voices, potential collaborators, dreamers, experienced practitioners, faces fresh out of training, and current scientists to further fuel your work. All paths will have you thinking on your feet and living your way into the recognition that the theory holds. What we do is valid. And while what may work for one community may not always hold to be true for the next, these exchanges will certainly help to clarify how we think about our environments and buoy our dedication to the child. I sign off as an enthusiastic birth-to-three colleague with this sublime invitation from tennis great Arthur Ashe:

Start where you are.  
Use what you have.  
Do what you can.

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