

THE INFANT-PARENT CLASS: MAXIMIZING OUTCOMES

by Sarah Moudry

The infant-parent class offers the school's first opportunity for a prepared environment and utilizes observation as an important tool for parents. Purposeful work is given to both parents and their young children. Montessori principles, such as teaching sensitive periods for language and movement, convey one activity at a time for bringing parents in touch with their child's point of view.

Within a Montessori community we must work to serve everyone. From the youngest to the oldest, and this includes parents. The infant-parent class is designed to support the needs of parents and their young children. Parents come together once or twice a week for a series of eight to ten weeks. During this time they learn to observe their children, interact with them in a prepared environment, and bond as a community.

OPPORTUNITY FOR OBSERVATION

Observation is the cornerstone of parenthood. It is essential that we teach parents how to observe and show them the benefits of unbiased observation. This can be tricky as all parents have preconceived ideas about their child's needs, wants, and personality. Help them to step back and wait. Teach them to give their child space. One of the most often lessons I work through most often with parents is to not assume what their child is communicating. Many times a baby will be on her tummy on the movement mat and will start to grunt and make noise. The mother will reach to pick up or turn her baby

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over. She'll say to me, "She hates being on her tummy." I respond, "In the beginning many children have to get used to tummy time, but the benefits are so great. Place her back down on her tummy and see how it goes." The mom places her back down and the noises start again. I move the baby so she is positioned in front of the low mirror with a small rattle in front of her just within her reach. I lay down on the floor and look into the mirror at the baby and talk to her in a calm voice. I start a conversation, "I understand that this is hard work. Are you trying to reach that toy in front of you?" I then pause for a response. "It looks like it is within your reach. Can you try again?" The baby looks at me and I smile at her. She continues to grunt and strain. This goes on for about ten minutes. The baby never cries, but her voice does sound like she is working. As she continues her work, I sit up and talk with the mother a bit. I explain that we should not assume that the sound of her voice means she is unhappy, but it may simply be her way of communicating that she is working hard, and yes, maybe it is not very comfortable. I try to connect the mother with a time that she experienced hard work that was well worth it, but not very comfortable. Depending on the family I draw a parallel with running a marathon, trying a new yoga pose, or even giving birth.

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A mother observes her young baby working to reach the silver rattle. The movement mat and low mirror create a perfect space for movement and play.

to respond to the needs of the people that use the space. In this case, the space is for parents and their babies. With this in mind, the space must be prepared for both adults and children. This can be tricky but with the right planning and use of furniture, the environment can be responsive to the needs of both groups.

A PREPARED ENVIRONMENT

The environment must allow for purposeful work and concentration. For parents who are new to Montessori, this can be a difficult concept in the beginning. Patience and repetition allow the parents to see the benefits of both of these. Children need opportunities for real work. This can mean mobiles for the youngest children, then moving on to ring stackers, shape sorters, and eventually practical life activities. It is essential that the class facilitator supports the parents in their works to help their children work with one activity at a time. This can be done through modeling and offering reading material on the developmental stages of their children.

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The environment supports the sensitive periods. Young children, although many are preverbal, need a language rich environment. The infant-parent class can offer parents opportunities for their child to experience new language. Through modeling and direct lessons, parents can see how to have conversations with their children, observe the art of explanation, practice positive framing of redirection, and learn how to offer classified vocabulary. The environment allows for freedom of movement. The children need to move and the parents need to be comfortable enough to move around. The only adult chair in the room should be a comfortable chair for nursing. I encourage parents to sit on the floor at their child's level. This helps them to see the environment from the child's point of view.

Large movement mats covered in soft cotton allow babies a comfortable place to move. Open spaces, tunnels, and stairs are great for



An example of a shelf in the infant-parent class where materials are displayed on a shelf to show their individual beauty. Materials increase in difficulty from left to right. Parents learn the importance of limiting toys when they experience a well prepared environment.

the children who are crawling and beginning to walk. Some classes have these two groups of children in the same sessions while others separate them into pre-mobile and mobile classes. The class supports the sensitive period for order through the layout of the environment and the display of materials. Parents learn the importance of routine and schedules through discussion and supplemental articles. The concept of an orderly home environment can be discussed and demonstrated by offering materials displayed in small baskets and on shelves. Parents and children see the beauty and simplicity of each material (toy) offered.

Babies are encouraged to explore the environment through their senses. This supports their sensitive period for sensorial exploration. By allowing them to taste, hold, touch, hear, smell, and see the beauty of the prepared environment, children take in all the concrete information they need to understand their surroundings. In a calm, but not silent room, they hear voices of adults and other babies. They hear the small chimes of rattles. They learn that their movements directly affect the environment with the ringing of a bell.

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Children explore with the tongue through the freedom to put rattles in the mouth. I help parents to understand the importance of this period and that this exploration is directly related to the child's understanding and connection to the world. It is important that parents understand the materials are safe and well-maintained. This includes regular sanitizing. Parents can be a part of this process by hav-

ing them dip each toy in a sanitizing solution made of essential oils (I use Medieval Mix or Thieves) and water when their child is finished exploring with it.

The development of the senses is further supported by offering toys made of many different natural materials. This can include silk, wool, wood, metal, cotton, and linen. These toys can be rotated into the environment so they are not all offered every week. This helps to keep the order and simplicity in the environment.

A COMMUNITY

The infant-parent environment is built on social relationships. Creating a space that feels safe, comfortable, and purposeful helps to create an atmosphere of trust. Once parents trust the environment, they find themselves connected and engaged.

As parents are introduced to the different areas of the prepared environment, they begin to understand how they might keep this at home. As they interact with their child in the prepared environment, they begin to see how these concepts would be beneficial at home. Parents who bring these concepts home begin their interest, investment, and connection to Montessori principles early in their child's life. Parents who find themselves in a Montessori infant-parent class learn the principles that guide their parenting choices for years to come. The choices they make for their children are based on their understanding of the children's developmental needs and the knowledge they gain from observing them. Their developing relationship begins with this foundation of trust and respect.

