

# BLENDING DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES OF PARENTS AND GUIDES: MEETING PARENTS WHERE THEY ARE AND BRINGING THEM ALONG ON THE JOURNEY

by Maura Joyce

*Maura Joyce's clear approach to initiating parent education is to recognize where the parents are on their own journey as parents. By listening to the parents' hopes, fears, and desired outcomes for their children acknowledges the family's perspective and brings mutuality into a shared community. Maura Joyce encourages the use of questionnaires and feedback and gives specific exercises to implement parent education, open communication, and ease parents' anxieties.*

The title of this talk puts a lot out there, but if I had to rename this talk and simplify it, it might just be "Can't We All Just Get Along?" Parents and guides have different perspectives based on their position in the schooling relationship, so I want to focus on two ideas: *blending* and *perspective*. Parents are coming from a very different place than the Montessori guide because the vast majority of our parents did not attend Montessori schools. We are busy educating our students and we have to find a way to bring the parents along with us. We have to find that sweet spot in the middle where everyone is on the same page. Today I want to share with you the parent perspective and how we can meet them at the door so that they understand us and we understand them.

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The children in our schools are on a developmental journey. We, as practitioners, are on our own developmental journey and parents are on their own developmental journey. You all know this to be true. How many of you here are parents? Did you change as a parent as your children got older? We are all together on this journey and headed in the same direction.

Parents who are not Montessori trained or who did not go to a Montessori school themselves have lots of questions about what we do. They see what we do and many of them trust it and go along for the ride. But many of them question it and, frankly, they should. We'll talk about this later, but those difficult parents are some of your best customers.

Parents enter our schools with their fears and doubts, and they have questions—lots and lots of questions. Generally, we can group parent questions into one of several categories:

- Security—are my children safe at school?
- Curriculum—what are they doing?
- Outcomes—what will they learn/leave here with?
- Assessment—how do I know *how* my child is doing?
- Discipline—what do you do about behavior?
- Life beyond Montessori—will my child be ready for the real world?

But all their questions can be summed up in one question. At the most fundamental level, they are only asking, Am I doing the right thing? Parents just want to know that they are doing the right thing for their child by putting them in a Montessori school. They really want to know that their child will be alright because they only get one shot at this for each child and they can't get it wrong. I believe that

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parents have been asking this question forever, but it has definitely increased in its intensity.

About five years ago, I was introduced to Ed Friedman's work on differentiated leadership. A central thought is that things are changing so fast that change is changing. In a world of rapid changes, change itself is changing and that is affecting the whole world: individuals, society, culture. This point of view is where our parents are coming from. They are coming from a place of rapid change and stress. In my work at my school, when parents come to me with their issues and their complaints, one of the things I always say to them as we sit down in my office is, "It's a stressful time to be a parent, isn't it?" And they agree, they all agree. No one ever disagrees.

More and more people in our society are chronically anxious. And this chronic anxiety leads to behaviors that we see more and more in our parents. Today's parents are prone to micro-managing and hyper vigilance and often make fear-based decisions. They are data driven and rely on experts rather than common sense. Parents will rebel when a leader, any leader, takes a stand, as this puts them in a position to give up control. More and more when we take a stand, we expect some form of sabotage.

How do we answer the questions of these chronically anxious parents? At the beginning of the talk, I invited you to think about our parents the way we think about the children we serve. With children, we see a vast amount of potential as we greet them at the door and meet them where they are. We need to meet parents where they are, and we have already established that they are anxious. In addition, they are focused on modern technology. They have access to information and sophisticated knowledge about child development, education, and what society thinks is best. Parents today are busy and driven and opinionated. But they are also reachable and teachable and in the midst of their own stage of development as a parent.

We have to see the parent they are becoming, just like we do with the children. Montessori asked us to see the child not just who is in front of us, but also the child they are yet to become. Once we meet the parent where they are and acknowledge the stress they feel about being a parent, we need to make sure they know we are

on the same team. As trained professionals, we are the experts on child development and how children in general progress. We see many more children than they do during the day and over the years. However we don't want that to create a distance.

Parents are the experts on their child, and we have to be humble enough to accept that. We only have them for a small percentage of their lives. We may not agree with what a parent may be doing, but we have to be realistic about how much time we have to influence them. A lot of what can make parents feel that we are on the same page are subtle actions. Simply changing how we talk to them about their child can make a difference. We have trained our staff to say things like, "This is what we observe. Our experience with other children is this. Can you help us understand what your child may need?"

In my years, I have come to really appreciate parent questions about what we do both in the classroom and at the school in general. We survey our parents on a regular basis. The first few years it was scary and it hurt to read the comments from some of the more dissatisfied parents, but now we love it. Parents need to feel that they know what is going on and questions are good! We need to listen, and the survey is one way that we do this. It allows us to assess what it is "about" Montessori they need to know. We have also learned to focus on the audience, recognizing that there are different needs for different parents at various stages in their development. The toddler parent and the elementary parent do not need the same information.

As Montessori guides, we get caught in a word salad. We really need to learn to speak the parents' language. We have our own vocabulary, and they don't get it. We have to be careful. We want them to hear these words: *Montessori, pedagogy, absorbent mind, normalization, creation of the personality, freedom and responsibility*. But parents want to hear these words: *discipline, anti-bullying, results, outcomes, data, testing, assessment, achievement, twenty-first century education, Common Core Standards, technology, and brain research*.

This may seem like an overwhelming list, but the good news is that we as Montessorians already know how to communicate in

the way parents want to hear. I am suggesting to talk to them about *their* outcomes. What kind of return do they want to see on their investment? What skills and characteristics do they hope to see their children acquire as a result of being in our Montessori schools? Find out what is important to them.

### **Parent Education Event on Outcomes**

I have had great success with the parent education event at Montessori in Redlands in which I advertised that Montessori outcomes would be discussed. Many parents came eager to hear what the staff and I had to say. What they didn't expect was that we were going to turn this around on them and hear what *their* expected outcomes were.

After inviting parents to an event to discuss Montessori outcomes, prepare an introduction that ponders this question, How do you define and measure success? This is a great question and one that educators have been grappling with for decades. Is a good education measured in college acceptance? Grades? Job prospects? Earning potential? Happiness? It is quite a challenge to put into words how we assess the effectiveness of our education.



Courtesy of Barbara Gordon



Courtesy of Barbara Gordon

Next, post three easel pages with the following titles: “academic skills,” “social skills,” and “personal characteristics.” Invite parents to choose one page, whatever category is most important to them, thereby dividing the attendees into three groups.

Each group will list the skills or characteristics that they want their children to have acquired by the time they graduate from your school. Give the groups about fifteen minutes to make and discuss the list. Once they have completed their list, give them time to do whatever they need to prioritize the list and identify the top three skills or characteristics. Observe how thoughtful your parents will be in prioritizing what is important to their child’s education. Next, invite your teaching staff to discuss how they provide opportunities to learn and practice each of these skills and foster the development of the characteristics. Staff should also share how they assess that the children are progressing. At first this may sound overwhelming and tricky, but you will be surprised how the parents respond. Below is a list that the parents at Montessori in Redlands recently identified.

### Academic Skills

- Math/science proficiency
- Reading and writing skills
- Logical and creative thinking skills

### Social Skills

- Respectful behavior to others
- Communication skills: confident and articulate at self-expression, also a good listener
- Team building and how to contribute in a community

### Personal Characteristics

- Adaptable and resourceful
- Kind and generous
- Independent

As teachers, you will have no problem describing how the Montessori environment provides children with the opportunities to practice each of the above. The parents' answers reminded me that generally the parents want the same things for their children as we do. I encourage you try this exercise so that you can ease some of their anxiety about what their child will get from their Montessori experiences.

