

## Montessori points from consulting and speaking

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Dear Friends,

During the time I consulted for your school, or spoke in your country, this fall it became clear that some of the things we discussed are situations I have found in places as varied as Russia, Nepal, Romania, and so forth. At your request I promised to write them down and share them with you all in written form.

You may recognize some of the points and replies to questions as having to do with your own classes and communities and others that have nothing to do with you. Most of the points refer to the 3-6 class, or *casa*, but at times also the infant community and 6-12 class. Thank you for inspiring me to think back and to record all of this. I hope it is helpful.

### INTRODUCTION

To begin a visit as a consultant I focus on support for concentration because all of our work in Montessori depends on the child's having long and deep periods of concentration on activities that are appropriate for his stage of development, are freely and intelligently chosen by the child, repeated if that is the child's choice, and enjoyed. These periods of concentration result in normalization, happiness, and compassion toward others.

The points usually have to do with the schedule, the environment, the role of the teacher, and the child's work.

The concentration graphs, also called work curves that I always show can be found in the book *The Advanced Montessori Method*, Vol. 1, the chapter "My contribution to experimental science."

*When the children had completed an absorbing bit of work, they appeared rested and deeply pleased. It almost seemed as if a road had opened up within their souls that led to all their latent powers, revealing the better part of themselves. They exhibited a great affability to everyone, put themselves out to help others and seemed full of good will.*

*It was clear to me that the concept of order and the development of character, of the intellectual and emotional life, must derive from this veiled source. Thereafter, I set out to find experimental objects that would make this concentration possible, and carefully worked out an environment that would present the most favorable external conditions for this concentration.*

*And that is how my method began.*

— Maria Montessori, *The Child in the Family*

**Note:** False fatigue is a temporary stage of the process in the normalization of a child or a class; it eventually disappears. If we continue to expect false fatigue to occur we might be creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of chaos in the middle of the morning.

Here are some of the pain points that support concentration.

## **THE SCHEDULE**

### **What is the length of the work period for different ages?**

#### *Infant Community*

For the Infant Community the individual work period gradually increases from the beginning of the year and eventually should be two hours or longer. Individual snack can be available (the child setting his own place, getting the snack, cleaning up) at the beginning of the day, but no group snack should be offered at that time because children should be able to choose their work from the moment they enter the environment.

#### *Casa*

As you can see on the concentration graphs the minimum work period is at least 3 hours each morning.

#### *6-12 class*

There is often a temptation to have more and more group lessons at this age (beyond the 5 great lessons given at the beginning of the year) because there is so much academic work covered in our albums of folders, but please keep the 3-hour work period in mind. The five great lessons are aimed at new children but usually all children, from age 6-12 come to them because it shows how deep their understanding of these concepts have grown over the years. See the quote on page 8 below.

### **How can we get parents get children to school on time?**

If the work period is from 9-12, then it is good to have arrival time be 8:30-9. I have seen children wander round aimlessly until all of his friends arrive and then finally settle down to work. It is important to inform parents about the value of at least 3-hours uninterrupted work period. A school I know in Moscow, Russia lock the doors (each casa has an outside door) at 9am requiring parents to take their children around to the school entrance and get someone in the office to come and unlock the door – this inspires the parents to get there on time. The school at the AMI training center where I observed years ago locked the door at 9:00 and the child and parent had to wait till the directress had time to open it. This limit-setting was aimed purely at helping families understand the reasons their child should get to school in time to experience the full 3-hour work period. This understanding is necessary for the sake of each child and the class as a whole.

### **How do we do dancing? Singing? Snack? Being outside? Stories, news time, preparing for lunch, all of the things we do in groups?**

All of these things are done (except having the choice to work outside at certain schools) during the 3-hour work period. The activities can be initiated by a child as individual work, or the teacher having gathered a few of children who have not found something to do, or sometimes a child will gather a small group of friends for these activities because he has seen the directress do this.

Preparing for lunch by moving tables and chairs, setting tables, cooking, etc., are important work and part of the 3-hour work period, each element a choice by children, not assigned by the adult, just as any other work.

As Dr. Montessori says about the giving of lessons in a Montessori class, in the book *Creative Development in the Child, the Montessori Approach, Volume II*:

*This presentation is given, not to a group of children, but individually, to help the child to grow mentally. We prepare this special environment to help his growth, to offer him freedom so that he can proceed with his work in a normal way. The collective lessons are given only to the child who has not yet been normalized. After normalization each child grows individually, in his own way. One child may be ready for the lesson one day and another child another day. . . . If we give a lesson we do not command all the children to stop what they are doing in order to listen. Many children may have absolutely no interest in the lesson and we may bore them.*

## **THE ENVIRONMENT**

Walking into a children's house one should feel like he is in a house for children, not a school. For example rather than walls lined with shelves and materials and tables in the middle of the room, create spaces by arranging shelves as one would in a home: cooking area, reading corner, practical life near the door accessible to the very young, plants on the floor or shelves, table lamps instead of overhead florescent lighting, art hung on the wall representing all of the culture areas (physics, botany, zoology, history, geography, art, music) at the child's eye level and changed periodically.

**Teacher's desks and materials should be removed removed:** There should be no teacher's desk at any level. Anything that is not for the child's use should be either removed or kept in a cupboard than can be closed. Visual clutter such as teacher's items stored on windowsills or the tops of bookcases, attract the child's attention and prevent concentration. This includes teacher's albums, supplies, extra books, material making materials, anything used by the adult and not the children. None of this should be kept in the view of the children.

**Screens:** Please remove computers, TV screens, iPads, and iPhones. For record keeping it is very important for children to see the teacher writing notes with a pencil. Later, outside of the classroom, records can be transcribed to a notebook, chart on the wall, or computer, whichever is the method used.

**Tables:** to support concentration I suggest that there be only one chair per table so one child working at each table, and tables should be the correct size for use by one child. Also that the tables not be grouped with children facing each other. And also since some children concentrate better when a table faces the wall this should be an option. These tables facing a wall are always in use so there is a need. Tables should be of a size and weight that children, usually two working together, can move the tables for particular reasons. If the tables are made of natural wood they can be used for wood polishing. All work, with the exception of cylinder blocks and knobless cylinders (so the thinnest cylinder will stand upright) can be done on floor mats.

**Floor mats:** floor mats are valuable in supporting concentration because distraction by children walking around the room is minimized, because there is not so much eye contact. It is better physically — humans have been sitting on the floor/ground for thousands of years — as back problems entered our lives when we began to sit too much, too long, on chairs. I first learned this from a Montessori teacher who had been a physical therapist.

**Chairs:** there should be a variety of seat heights so that children of all sizes can have their feet flat on the floor. Little stools are better than chairs with backs because the child will sit with feet further apart and with better balance and control of the whole body. This is something else I learned from the Montessori teacher physical therapist in Sweden.

## **THE TEACHER/DIRECTRESS/GUIDE**

**Rules:** There are just two rules in the class.

*First*, a child can work with any material the purpose and use of which he understands. This understanding can come about from a presentation by the teacher, a lesson from another child, or observing another child. The teacher observes carefully when a child selects something she has not presented to see if this understanding is obvious.

*Secondly*, a child cannot interrupt another child who is concentrating. This skill is taught by means of grace and courtesy lessons that give a child practice in watching without talking or interrupting, rather than reminding or correcting.

All other goals such as tucking in chairs, putting away work correctly, correct use of materials, are considered “points of arrival” and constantly reinforced by modeling of the adult, presentations, re-presentations, etc.

### **Teaching by teaching, not by correcting**

Reminding a child can feel like a correction. So, for example, if a child slams a door when there has been a lesson given on how to close a door quietly, I would write on my weekly lesson record for that child “door closing lesson”, and add this to the list of possible presentations to give at a “neutral moment” or the following week for that child. Always put yourself in the place of the child and think about how you would like to be reminded or corrected.

### **What is the best adult/student ratio?**

*Nido*

The ratio is one adult to three babies.

*Infant Community*

For the infant community (age 1-2.5-3) the ratio is one adult to five or six children. This of course depends on the training and experience of the adult and the age range of the children.

*Casa*

Montessori recommended 1 teacher to 30-35 children of mixed ages. That means one teacher giving lessons and one non-teaching aid. In a 3-6 class if most of the children began their experience in the beginning of the 3-year cycle the older children will be excellent models and teachers of the young new children. Unfortunately, in order to protect children in non-AMI-Montessori classes from overcrowding state or country laws often prevent this ratio. But I always recommend, in normalized situations, as many children as possible, for too many reasons to go into here. In beginning a new class there should be a full mixed age group from the beginning but a smaller number of children. As the year(s) progress children should be admitted before they turn 3.5 or 4 years of age so they get the full three year program and so that the older children will be normalized models for the new children.

### *6-12 class*

When children can spend six full years together at this age the independence and student-student teaching is amazing. Then the group can be very large, sometimes up to 40 children in one 6-12 group. I always recommend a group from 6-12 rather than dividing the students into groups of 6-9 and 9-12. If this is required by state or country laws then there must be a complete set of materials, for children from age 6-12, in each class. And ideally, in this situation, the door between the two rooms is kept open and children are free to do their work in either class. Usually we find that children will settle themselves in this case into two 6-12 classes. In my experience at this level the broader the age range the easier the work for the adult and the more advanced is the social and academic growth. I have never had an assistant at this level.

### **What is the role of the assistant?**

Each teacher-assistant relationship is unique and precious. There are 8-10 day AMI assistants courses given by AMI, at all levels, to help build this relationship. What the assistant without an AMI diploma should NOT do is present materials. She will not have the complete overview of the 3-year program (gained only during an AMI diploma course) and will not have the ability to know exactly which lesson to give at any moment, or how to give it, and how to respond in each situation.

It is important for the assistant to understand the concept of the sense of order and how important it is to keep the environment as spotless and in order as possible because that is something the assistant can do. And to create this order by knowing where each item belongs and by moving gracefully and carefully, understanding that she is the model for the children in everything she does.

### **Why don't we reward or praise a child?**

Montessori spoke a lot about this. We want children to be in touch with their inner guide in making choices on what to work on and for how long. When we interrupt this process with praise we training the child to work for us and not for its own development.

An example is when a child takes a drawing home and the parent is so pleased to finally find out something that the child did in school, make a drawing. Children are in the moment and it is not natural for them. This praise of a drawing will teach the child to quickly make a drawing, not a beautiful one that he spends a lot of time and effort on, just a quick one in order to get that response, that reward, from the parent. This has a negative effect on the work of the child, both the reason for the work and the quality. This is why we do not send work home except for the end of a term.

It is important to help parents understand that the child is constructing himself and that praise and rewards get in the way of this process. "Punished by Rewards" by Alfie Kohn who was a speaker at Montessori conferences in the US helps to explain this.

### **Misuse of apparatus**

One of the most often mis-used material I see in the 3-6 class is the metal insets. If the mis-use has spread throughout the class and is being practiced by others the best thing to do is to remove them from the classroom and represent them at a later time.

Sensorial materials are also often misused, turning into building blocks. Each piece of sensorial is a "key to unlock a door." When, for example, the child has learned the two main presentations of the

pink tower, built them from a distance, explored the concept of *large* and *small* in the environment, learned the language including comparative and superlative, that door has been unlocked. Then he moves on to explore and master something else. If he begins to use the cubes in other ways it is quite often 'busy work'. And a sign that he is ready for more challenging work. Often teachers say "follow the child" and let him explore, but usually I observe that further work with the sensorial is busy work and boring and a sign that the child needs more challenging work. And this becomes a model of mis-use for other children.

Another example of mis-use of apparatus is in the process of learning to write. The movable alphabet is for children who are not yet ready to write with a pencil – beautifully. So it makes no sense to ask a child to write with a pencil something he has "written" with the movable alphabet. Writing with a pencil is a different stage of development and best occurs spontaneously when the child has been prepared physical, emotionally, and mentally.

From the very beginning of "writing" the movable alphabet gives a child the opportunity to express his own thoughts. So we do not give pictures or objects of simple words, such as "cat", "dog", etc., for him to lay out and then write with the movable alphabet. We might ask, "What did you see on the way to school this morning." Or something else that we have already discussed with that child in casual conversation or news time.

## **THE CHILD'S WORK**

### **A Children's House, Casa dei Bambini**

As in a real home sometimes a child is hungry or tired. A snack can be available at any time and I have often given a lesson, when a child was ready to fall asleep, on how to roll out a mat in a quiet corner and take a rest. When a child arrives in school hungry, or sleeps all morning, this is important information to share with parents.

### **Real Practical Life**

Dressing, undressing, resting, preparing food, preparing tables and chairs for lunch, these are all important work for the child. So they should be carried out by children during the three-hour work period. For example, taking off outside clothing and putting on inside shoes should not be done by parents dropping off children; it is the child's work. Cleaning up after lunch is also important for the children to have the choice to do or not. When the adult redoes this work, cleaning furniture or the floor, laundering placemats and napkins, this should be done when the children are not present. Otherwise it gives the message that the children's attempts were not good enough.

*Note:* practical life at the 6-12 level is not only a choice but it becomes a responsibility. This child is interested in fairness, everyone sharing the work. There is so much academic work at this level that we need to keep reminding ourselves that practical life work is still very important, for mental, physical, social reasons. Since this age is actively studying the needs of humans, practical life should be real and connected to these needs of food, shelter, transportation, and clothing.

### **When a child requests a lesson**

When a child asks if he can have a lesson that is a year or so beyond his stage of development, the answer is always "Yes!" followed by "First you will do this, and this, and this." (Pointing to a few things he will need to learn first). "Would you like a lesson on this?" (Pointing to the first in the series). If we were to respond, "No. You are not ready for this." The child, who has no concept of the

passage of time or that things change in the future or that his abilities will change, will only hear. "No." This is very sad.

### **Busy work is different than productive work**

Never say to a child, "You need to find something to do." Because he will be forced to select just anything within reach, usually something that is probably too easy and provides no challenge. As I have mentioned we call this *busy work*. It is very important that work is chosen to fulfill a developmental need and inspire concentration. A new child often discovered this wonderful feeling through a practical life activity. Then we do everything to help him keep this feeling in all following work.

The Montessori teacher should have detailed records of what a child has done in each area (basic training or preliminary exercises, practical life, sensorial, all culture areas, language, math) so that she has a list of possible lessons to give each child each week. It is a very important skill to know what to present or invite a child to do. If she child is forced to get busy on "anything" it is quite likely that he will select busy work, the opposite of what we want for the child.

### **Watching others**

In studying the concentration graph examples by Montessori it is clear that contemplating the work of others, or kindness, are also plotted high on the graph. Sometimes we think that the only valid experience in the Montessori class is when children are moving, or at least their hands are moving. I give examples of this in my book "Montessori and Mindfulness."

## **MISCELLANEOUS QUESTIONS**

### **What materials/skills are required for the 3-6 and other levels?**

#### *Age 0-6*

There are no requirements for children, not skills that must be mastered, at this age. Activities are offered, children are invited. Even if a child does not choose everything offered to him he will observe other children enjoying all of the work available. Seeing this enjoyment and observing others enjoying a wide variety of activities is more important than being required to participate in everything.

#### *Age 6-12+*

The requirements at this age depend on the country or state. In my experience this work takes about two hours a week. For the rest, just as in the casa, everything is offered, nothing else required. We can suggest subjects of research for example, but we do not require it.

The skill of the teacher is in presenting all of the work but then observing to find a child's interest and then feeding the curiosity and showing the necessary skill. Even though at this age children will decide sometimes to work together keep the 3-hour concentration graph in mind and protect deep concentration.

Here is how learned in my training, and went on to handle those state requirements:

The teacher must look at the extensive list of requirements for each grade (in the US this means first grade, second grade, through 6<sup>th</sup> grade) and select the very basic accomplishments for each grade.

This should be no more than one page for each grade. These lists are easily accessible to the children, giving them an overview of what he will be required to master in his 6 years.

Then, the teacher meets with each child once a week, or less often as children mature, going over this list and selecting something from the requirements, then discussing suggestions from each of the five areas in the 6-12 curriculum, and making a plan that the child writes down in his own handwriting. Then each child experiments with ways to complete his list – adding things that were not on the list but he did, and carrying over things he meant to accomplish but did not, to the next week. These are valuable time management and responsibility skills.

This is the best record keeping. If this is done then the child's journals can be a beautiful record to be kept forever. The child chooses what and when to record something important to him in a journal and the work is beautiful and carefully, usually with decorated margins.

What I do NOT recommend is a child looking at the clock and recording his work all day. This interrupts the "flow" of one work inspiring the next throughout the work period, interrupting concentration. Adele Diamond refers to this practice in the "flow" chapter of "Montessori and Mindfulness." Also, when this kind of journaling is required from the time a child enters the 6-12 class it reinforces ugly handwriting because rather than learning to write beautifully because a child is being required to write too much too early and badly.

*The elementary school period presents itself . . . as a continuation of the 'Children's Houses' . . . We see a child occupied for seven or eight consecutive days with the same work. Another child becomes interested in the potentialities of the arithmetical frame, and perseveres with the same work for days, until his knowledge of it has matured.*

—Montessori, *Advanced Montessori Method, Volume I*

### **What about field trips?**

*Before age 7*

At this age we "bring the world into the children's house" and very very rarely take a group of children out into the community. This is something that parents need to understand since field trips are often the most interesting parts of non-Montessori preschool experiences.

*After age 7*

At this age "going out" into the community and the natural world is a very important part of the work. Not as a whole group but for important reasons. These excursions are usually inspired by the work of the children, and the "going out" details arranged by the children themselves.

### **What do we do when a child hits another child?**

First of all we do not want to create a victim-aggressor situation. When a child hurts another we want to give the same sympathy to both because we see both as perfect human beings even though one child has stepped temporarily out of the role. So in approaching the pair you might say, "You must feel very bad that you hurt your friend." And "You must feel very bad that your friend has hurt you." This usually has a very good response because we are verbalizing what both children really feel.

Then we figure out what caused the anger, remembering, when we have discovered that it is not hunger or fatigue or some temporary emotional problem, that "work is the normalizer"



## **What do we do when one child is always, every day, causing problems and he has been there for some time?**

What we should do is beware of the “bad child” syndrome that I have been observing for years in Montessori classes and other classes.

I sometimes ask an audience at a talk when someone asks this question, “How many of us have had the experience of feeling that it is always one child, always the same child, who is the cause of most of the difficulties in my teaching.” Many hands go up.

Then I ask, “And how many of us have figured out that if that child is removed from the class, the family move away or something, that another child steps into this role?” Unfortunately at this point there are still hands raised, and sometimes uncomfortable laughter.

Then I say, “This ‘bad child’ role is probably a creation of the adult, not the child.”

What we do NOT do is use TIME OUT. No matter how sweetly it can be offered, when there is no choice it is humiliating and causes more anger than healing. As I always suggest, put yourself in the child’s shoes and imagine how you would feel in the same situation, when someone tells you it is time for you to separate yourself from the group and get yourself together. We can offer solitude by asking a child if he would like to lie down and rest, or if he really feels like being alone for a little while – just as we might have this need. But we never say, “You need a time out!”

If a new child has not yet discovered the joy of concentration or is not able to make an intelligent choice of work, or maybe had a bad start of the day and cannot settle down, we invite that child to be with us, to help us, to watch another’s lesson. This way he is kindly removed and usually very grateful to be with us or learning by watching others. The goal is to help him see how interesting and enjoyable working is by watching others.

Once more I will repeat, work is the normalizer, work that involves the hand and the mind working together on an intelligent purpose, work that is real and important and appropriate for the stage of development of the child, work that is chosen by the child out of real interest and is enjoyed. And deep concentration on this work is our greatest tool as teachers, our greatest gift to children and to our world.

*... when the cycle is completed, the child detaches himself from his internal concentration; refreshed and satisfied, he experiences the higher social impulses, such as desiring to make confidences and to hold intimate communion with other souls.*

— Montessori *Advanced Montessori Method Volume I*

## **Summary**

Of course we went much further into detail in many areas, on the use of materials, especially there was a lot more about language and practical life, and there were many very good questions, but what I have written above was general in most situations.

Over the years I have shared this and a lot of other information in my books. They contain information I have shared with parents and teachers since my first year teaching in San Francisco in 1971. I hope they will be useful to you. Here are the titles:

*The Joyful Child: Montessori, Global Wisdom for Birth to Three* (based on the AMI 0-3, Assistants to Infancy, program – translated into many languages. This book was created with the help of Dr. Silvana Montanaro who also wrote the introduction)

*Child of the World: Montessori, Global Education for Age 3-12+* (an overview of AMI practice at the 3-6 and 6-12 levels)

*The Universal Child, Guided by Nature* (based on the presentation given at the AMI congress in Portland, Oregon, USA

(The only one translated into Spanish so far)

*El Nino Universal, Guiado Por La Naturaleza*

*Montessori and Mindfulness* (based on the presentation given at the Prague AMI Congress)

*No Checkmate, Montessori Chess Lessons for Age 3-90+* (about parents sharing their lives with children at home, chess just one example)

*The Red Corolla: Montessori Cosmic Education* (mostly for age 3-6)

The lectures given at the first AMI 3-6 diploma course in Morocco, plus a glossary of Montessori terms, and two articles on Cosmic Education previously published in AMI journals