



■ COMMUNICATING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN THE MONTESSORI WAY

In every center, caregivers care for the children and carry out activities according to the goals of the particular program. In the Montessori program, where everything represents a possible opportunity for the child's learning, how the caregivers care for the children and carry out activities depends on how the caregivers communicate with the children. Ideally, communicating with children the

Montessori way shows genuine appreciation and respect for the children and follows Montessori principles.

Communicating the Montessori way involves more than words and tone. It also involves attitude, body language and actions responsive to the children and their needs. For under-threes, responsive communicating helps each child develop trust in the caregivers, feel free to move and explore, and develop his/her own skills. How does a caregiver communicate with children in the Montessori way? The following list is not exhaustive, but gives ten important ways of communicating in a Montessori childcare center:

- Prepare the environment carefully.
- Use proactive guidance strategies.
- Intervene gently, quietly, and only when necessary.
- Give a directed choice.
- Use touch often.
- Slow down.
- Speak and listen with respect.
- Use non-verbal signals for quiet and stopping.
- Make socializing an everyday experience.
- Support competence and independence.

PREPARE THE ENVIRONMENT CAREFULLY

The carefully prepared Montessori environment communicates to the child that she/he can move and explore easily and safely. It also communicates that it contains attractive things that interest and challenge the child, motivating the child to move and explore and rewarding the child's natural curiosity. Since preparing the environment has been covered in more detail earlier, here are just a few examples of how you can prepare the environment to communicate important messages to the children:

- Build in control of error that challenges the children to learn to control their movements. For example, make sure that chairs and tables move easily if jostled.
- Make the children feel welcome and competent to make choices for their own

comfort. For example, choose furniture that is child-size and in a variety of shapes and sizes.

- Accept that a certain amount of untidiness is normal when children are learning. Locate practical life, sensory and art activities near child-size sinks so that the children can easily access the materials they need for cleaning.
- Ground the children in what is real before introducing them to fantasy. Offer real or realistic-looking objects for them to work with.
- Keep use of plastic materials to a minimum. Remember that young children learn by using all their senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell. Plastic, being odorless and generally hard and smooth in texture, does not offer the range of sensory stimulation provided by natural objects. Instead, as often as possible, present a wide variety of real objects appealing to all five senses. Examples: unusual vegetables and fruits, aromatic herbs, fabrics, child-size musical instruments, objects from nature.

USE PROACTIVE GUIDANCE STRATEGIES

Proactive guidance refers to communication strategies that many Montessori teachers have found effective because the goal is to guide, not force, children in positive ways as they develop. Instead of deciding how the child will develop, caregivers in a Montessori preschool act as guides for the children. Using proactive guidance strategies rather than praise or punishment, the caregivers

communicate to the children when they are not acting suitably, compliment them when they are, and show the children that there are many alternatives to unsuitable behavior. Here are a few examples of ways you can communicate what is suitable behavior to young children:

- Let the children know that you notice and appreciate their suitable behavior. When the child behaves suitably, use **positive interaction**, a communication strategy consisting of quiet, simple statements or physical responses that let a child know that he/she has been noticed and acknowledged. Positive interaction does not involve cheering and clapping or reward and punishment. The reinforcement can be as simple as a smile or a quiet observation, such as “I see you put that mat away, Janey” or “Amid, you are turning those pages very carefully” or “Ben, I hear how quietly you closed that door.”
- Communicate to the children that cooperative behavior, not competition, is the norm. Do not encourage the children to run races or to be the first in line.
- Make every effort not to reward unsuitable behavior with direct attention. For example, try not to react immediately when a child screams in anger or throws him/herself on the floor in a rage. Instead, acknowledge the behavior and help the child identify the feelings behind it: “I hear that you are feeling angry” or “I see that you are crying. Are you feeling sad?” Then calmly look for opportunities to direct the child to more suitable behavior.

- Show the children that playing cooperatively can be fun. Develop a repertoire of constructive cooperative games and play them regularly with the children.

Intervene gently, quietly, and only when necessary

Another important way Montessori caregivers communicate is by intervening gently, quietly, and only when necessary.

- Unless a child is in danger, wait before intervening in the children’s social interactions. Give the children time to solve their own problems and settle their own differences.
- If possible, prevent unsuitable behaviors by gently and quietly distracting or redirecting. Sometimes just holding an interesting object or placing yourself calmly on the floor between two infants or toddlers and engaging with them defuses a situation. Another proactive guidance strategy, referred to as **gluing**, involves keeping a child who is restless or disturbing others close by for a period of time before inviting the child to choose a more suitable activity. This strategy is particularly effective for toddlers and twos who are new to the childcare center or have been disturbing others. However, the Montessori caregiver’s goal is to guide the child as soon as possible to something that engages the child and allows him/her to move and work independently of the caregiver.
- When the children are absorbed in activities, communicate that their work is important to you as well as to them.

Intervene as little as possible. Observe the situation before you decide when, whether and how to intervene. For example, 18-month-old Marta is trying to place the last wooden block into a box. The box keeps sliding so that Marta can't get the last block in. Marta's caregiver observes from a distance, and sees both that Marta is trying to solve the problem and that Marta is becoming frustrated. The caregiver quietly approaches Marta and holds the box steady so that Marta can fit in the last block. As soon as the last block is in, Marta dumps all the blocks out and starts fitting them in again. The caregiver quietly removes herself from the scene.

Give a directed choice

As much as possible, offer a **directed choice**, giving a child the opportunity to choose between two equally attractive and positive actions or objects. This way of communicating shows the child that you have confidence in her/his ability to make choices and gives the child experience in expressing preferences. For example, do not ask the child "What do you want?" (Possible answer: "My pail from home.") or "Do you want the red pail?" (Possible answer: "No, no, no.") Instead, offer two choices with similarly positive outcomes. For example, say: "Sami, do you want the red pail or the blue pail?" or "Tina, would you like to stay here and keep working on this puzzle or go outside and paint rocks?"

Use touch often

Research conducted throughout the last half of the twentieth century has confirmed one of Montessori's ideas about what helps children's brains develop — that for young

children, infants especially, touch is an important form of communication. Touch in the form of cuddling and stroking has long been used to communicate caring and comfort to young children. Such touching has a calming effect on most young children, allowing them to experience the people, things and sensations around them. With every experience, more neural pathways are established in the child's brain.

Montessori caregivers can find many opportunities for touching under-threes. For infants, diapering presents an ideal opportunity to stroke the infant's body. The caregiver could also make a special time each day — after feeding, for example — to massage the infant's body. Touching the infant can also provide an opportunity for a language activity, where the caregiver names each body part or quietly sings a body song to the infant. For older infants, toddlers and twos, who are very physical in their relationship with the world, touch can also be a communication of caring and comfort. A toddler may climb up into a caregiver's lap to look at a book and a two-year-old may lean against a caregiver's leg while chatting.

However, caregivers need to remember that not all young children welcome and respond to touch in the same way. To use touch as an effective way of communicating, the caregiver approaches gently and quietly, observes the child's reactions to gentle touch, and learns each child's preferences. For example, an infant may dislike being undressed and may prefer being wrapped in a blanket while being massaged, and a two-year-old may like having his back rubbed while he goes to sleep.