

# ■ THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

## INTRODUCTION

The teacher plays a vital role in putting the Montessori method into practice. As the previous sections have discussed, the teacher needs to know about the method, including its history and its special terms, be aware of the typical growth and development of children, and be able to implement the ideas, materials, and techniques of the method when working with students. These sections have provided numerous examples of tasks that the teacher typically carries out, including designing the environment, making presentations, phasing in students at the start of the school year, and making sure that each day meets as many of the students' needs and interests as possible.

This final part of the guide looks in more detail at the teacher's various roles, including the one of handling discipline in the classroom. The Montessori teacher strives to carry out discipline in the best sense of the word — both modeling appropriate kinds of behavior for the students and guiding them to appropriate kinds of behavior. The following sections discuss the various roles of the teacher and give examples whenever possible:

- guide
- model
- observer
- record-keeper

- parent ally
- professional

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## GUIDE

The Montessori teacher's goal is to guide and facilitate, not force her/his own ideas of what students should learn, and when. Acting as a guide for the students involves more than using certain words and a particular tone. It also involves awareness, attitude, body language, and actions that reflect the principles of the Montessori method.

Previous sections gave some examples of non-intrusive strategies, such as gluing, that the teacher can use to manage situations with minimal interruption to students. This section gives some examples of **proactive guidance**, communication strategies that many Montessori teachers have found effective because the goal is to guide, not force, students in positive ways as they develop. Of course, this section cannot cover every eventuality the teacher might face when working with students. Each new teacher will need to take the time to develop and practice the guidance strategies with which he/she is comfortable and tailor them to the students in the classroom. And each experienced teacher will need to take time to regularly assess

his/her strategies and make sure that they guide the students in a way consistent with the Montessori method.

The teacher has many resources for learning more about guidance strategies compatible with the goals of the Montessori method, including Montessori conferences and workshops. Also, many school boards and colleges offer student psychology and management courses to the general public. Some Montessori teachers form local support groups that allow them to discuss issues, exchange ideas, and perhaps even role-play difficult situations. The goal is for each teacher to stay aware of the Montessori method and do her/his best to follow its principles while working with students.

Rather than react constantly to what the students do or say, the Montessori teacher strives to act proactively, consistently presenting the students with examples of positive behavior and activities in a carefully prepared and designed classroom environment. Through proactive guidance, the teacher repeatedly shows that each student can choose behavior from a variety of positive possibilities. Although it is not unique to Montessori programs, proactive guidance best describes the approach that Montessori wanted teachers to take when working with the students.

As other sections have discussed, it takes time, commitment, and patience for the teacher to guide students toward learning to make good choices for themselves. Guiding a student means intervening only when the student has not made a suitable choice, one that suits the student's skills, interests, and abilities and does not disturb

others. There are, of course, times when students don't make suitable choices and the teacher does need to intervene. Intervening means that the teacher involves him/herself in a situation and tries to change what is happening. Most intervening happens as a result of a student acting in an impolite or disorderly way. The student might use materials in a careless way, talk in a way that disturbs others, or try to hurt another student.

The role of the teacher is to guide the student to positive kinds of behavior. The teacher can choose from a number of appropriate guidance strategies like these:

- redirecting
- reviewing
- time-out and sitting-out
- more responsibility
- strategy meeting with the parent

## Redirecting

**Redirecting** involves giving a student a quick message designed to help the student choose another way of behaving in the moment. In the first weeks of a program, when the new students are still learning the rules of the classroom, redirecting often consists of the teacher making gentle reminders. In these situations, effective communicating might involve the teacher quietly approaching the student, crouching down beside the student, and whispering the message. Usually, being whispered at catches a student's attention completely, focusing his/her attention on what the teacher is

saying and thus already redirecting the behavior.

Another important part of redirecting involves showing respect for the student. Many redirecting messages concern the designed environment. A student might be using a material in a way it was not intended, or a student might neglect to put away a work mat after working on an activity. Even though maintaining the designed environment is important, it is equally important for the teacher to treat the students with respect when redirecting. Authoritarian messages like “You aren’t doing what I said” or “You can’t do that in this classroom” try to impose the teacher’s will on the student, not help the student make other choices.



The teacher who assumes that the student truly wishes to cooperate finds courteous ways of communicating that acknowledge the student’s skills and offer the student a pleasurable opportunity to make different choices. These and other redirecting messages work best when the focus is kept on the behavior, not on the student. Starting a redirecting sentence with “I” rather than “you” reminds the teacher to focus on how he/she feels about what the student is doing rather than on attaching blame or making judgment on the student. For example, Claire says “Kai, I’m feeling sad because this material has been broken and can’t be used anymore today.” Then Claire reiterates her feelings about what the student has been doing: “Kai, I feel upset that you kept trying to force that box closed when I asked you to stop.”

Here are some other examples of how the teacher can redirect:

- As Damon carries his chair, it makes a loud banging noise against several tables. Claire crouches beside Damon and whispers, “Damon, I wonder whether you can move that chair without making even a tiny sound. Let’s listen.”
- Margeet has put away her art materials in their proper places, but left her work table grimy. Claire says, “Margeet, I noticed that you made that table shine yesterday when you cleaned up. Let’s see how you can make it shine today, too.”
- Claire notices that instead of using the watering can to water the plants, Paulo is pretending to drip water on another student. Rather than focus on Paulo’s