

PRESENTATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

INTRODUCTION

Presentations always begin with the teacher smiling and looking into the child's eyes. The teacher holds this visual connection long enough to ensure that she/he has the student's complete attention, and at the same time conveys that the student has the teacher's undivided attention.

As described earlier, a presentation refers to a step-by-step demonstration by a teacher of an activity and its materials. In this context, an activity refers to a lesson plan designed to help a student develop a skill or explore a concept. Each activity consists of a learning goal, materials, step-by-step presentation by the teacher, and possible extensions. An extension refers to a related activity that increases the complexity, range, or application of an activity that has been presented.

This section summarizes the basic elements of presentations and activities, outlines several special types that an elementary teacher can expect to do over the course of a typical school year, and highlights some issues and changes at the elementary level.



The NAMC manuals accompanying this guide contain activities designed to help students explore and develop skills in a number of subject areas, from language arts, history, and geography to math and the sciences. Each activity outlines learning goals, materials needed, step-by-step presentation, and possible extensions. Although some programs call learning activities “lesson plans,” in NAMC publications they are called activities in order to emphasize two important goals:

- The activity focuses not on the teacher, but on the student and the materials.
- The teacher takes on the role of someone who inspires, demonstrates, and facilitates, not lectures or directs.

BASIC ELEMENTS

During a presentation, the teacher introduces step-by-step the concept involved, establishes vocabulary, demonstrates material, and discusses related topics. The teacher presents the activity in a sequence that allows the students to focus on the activity's components and introduces the students to the possibilities associated with the activity, its material, and the topics involved. Whatever the presentation and activity focuses on, these elements are basic:

- Once the teacher feels that a student is ready to develop a particular skill or

explore a certain concept, the teacher offers a suitable presentation and activity. The teacher might also offer a presentation if the student expresses a direct interest — for example, if a student sees an interesting material on a shelf and wants to try working with it. (Note: The NAMC teaching manuals offer a general guideline of what year level a particular activity is presented to the average student. Please remember that it is the individual student's readiness which ultimately determines when a lesson should be presented—not his/her year level or grade.)

- The teacher invites a student to come to a presentation or to do an activity.
- Activities are considered the students' important work. Each activity takes place in an area temporarily defined as the student's work space, and other students and the teacher respect that space. The work space is usually defined by a work mat on the floor or on a table where the student has placed the work.
- The teacher presents each activity in sequence, including setting up and putting away.
- Whenever possible, after a presentation, the student works with the activity as many times as he/she likes. Exceptions at the elementary level could include certain science experiments where use of materials requires close supervision, but these can be kept to a minimum.
- When a student chooses to do an activity after a presentation, the student is responsible for setting up and putting

away the materials in their proper places and leaving the work space clean and tidy.

- So that the student (or students) can focus on an activity and its materials, it is important that the teacher is interrupted as little as possible when making a presentation. For this reason, the Montessori teacher from the beginning of the school year teaches students that presentation times are highly respected by everyone and that the teacher is not interrupted during presentations except by someone using an agreed-upon technique. For example, the student places her/his hand on the teacher's shoulder and waits in silence for the teacher to respond.

There are three special types of presentations and activities:

- vertical extensions
- orientation activities
- three-period lesson

Vertical extensions

A **vertical extension** is an activity that involves similar skills to an activity already presented, but takes a slightly different approach, focusing on another concept in which the student is particularly interested. Here is an example:

- Harim's teacher has noticed that while he continues to choose and work with the zoology nomenclature cards, he does not usually complete the activity before putting the cards away.

- One day, the teacher notices that Harim is fascinated with a bat he sees on a nature walk. The teacher follows up on this interest.
- The teacher offers Harim a nomenclature activity involving identifying and naming several different kinds of bats.
- The teacher offers Harim a language activity where he can use the names of the bats shown on the nomenclature cards.
- The teacher places in the library a book of photographs and information about bats, introduces the book to Harim, and encourages him to look at it on his own.
- If Harim continues to find bats fascinating, the teacher suggests that he carry out a small research project— for example, making an illustrated and labeled poster showing bats from around the world or showing the life cycle of one type of bat.

The teacher who takes care to present an activity when the student is ready for it and allows him/her to engage with the activity and its extensions can expect to see progress. However, each student develops in a unique way and at a different pace, depending on age, maturity, and personality. Some students develop slowly, and sometimes a student may not appear to be progressing at all in a certain activity. As long as a student is interested in an activity, the teacher does not try to change the student's focus.

When a student shows slow progress, the teacher gives the student opportunities to

repeat the activity and might invite the student to do an activity that involves similar skills, to see whether another approach might help. Since a student who learns something in one activity will likely apply that skill to another, the teacher sometimes plans vertical extensions for various activities.

Orientation presentations and activities

As described earlier, orientation presentations and activities introduce students to the classroom and are most often presented at the start of the school year. While they can be presented to an individual student, orientation presentations and activities at the elementary level are usually presented to a small group or to all the students at group time. These activities are designed to help new students adapt quickly to the routines in the class, learn about expectations for respect as well as manners and courtesy, develop independence, and become familiar with the classroom. Orientation activities can also serve as review for returning students or as a way of introducing returning students to anything that has changed since they were last in the classroom.

In the elementary years, most students are naturally drawn to create relationships and contribute to the school community, and many students are at the stage where they are sensitive to the evaluations of others. It is therefore especially important that the teacher start each year by giving presentations in activities that help new students become familiar with the important customs of the classroom — for example, how to move a chair quietly and carefully,



how to walk carefully around someone's work area, how to prepare and clean up after a snack, how to put materials away where they belong, and so on. Such presentations also give returning students opportunities for review and increase the likelihood that all the students can quickly contribute in positive ways to the life of the classroom.

It is important for the teacher to focus on the student who is engaging in an orientation activity and can model it for others. The benefits of this approach can be seen in putting materials away. Most students who have been shown and observed the complete cycle of activities (from getting a work mat, to putting a tray of materials back on a shelf) — especially if they have attended a Montessori early childhood program — will naturally put things away after an activity. It is important for the teacher to observe students for

signs that they have internalized the order and sequence of the day, then help those students follow through.

Students who put things away automatically often model behavior for other students, who then learn the task. The teacher thus focuses first on the students who are trying to put things away properly, not on the students who seem oblivious to order. For example, new student Tanis has put her materials basket away on its shelf and rolled up and put away her work mat, but appears unsure about where to put some coloring pencils with which she was working. Nearby, Felipe is starting to feed the fish in the aquarium, but across the room has left his geography materials spread messily over a work table. Before approaching Felipe, the teacher approaches Tanis and offers to help her finish the sequence. The teacher says, "I see that you've put away your mat and your

materials basket, Tanis. Do you need help finding the place for these pencils? If you like, I'll show you so that next time you can find it yourself." Once the teacher and Tanis have put the pencils in their proper place, the teacher again encourages Tanis: "There's where the coloring pencils go. Next time you can put them away by yourself."

There are at least two side-benefits for approaching Tanis before Felipe:

- The more that students like Tanis follow the full sequence of activities, the more likely it is that Felipe will learn by watching others.
- Because the teacher uses a normal voice, neither raised nor lowered, it is more likely that Felipe can hear the teacher even though she is not directing her comments at him. In this way, Felipe might be indirectly reminded that he needs to put his own materials away. Felipe also sees that the teacher is willing to offer help if he needs it.

Not all orientation activities are presented at the beginning of the year. An orientation activity may be presented whenever new areas of learning are being introduced to a student. An important part of such an orientation activity is to start with what the student knows about the materials involved. For example, the teacher might lay out new and interesting materials on the student's work mat, then simply ask the student about the possibilities she/he sees for the materials. The goal is to intrigue the student and inspire him/her to explore the materials after a presentation.

Another use for an orientation presentation

and activity later in the school year is as a refresher or reminder. Even when the teacher has introduced orientation activities showing customs and behaviors and applied them consistently from the beginning of the year, sometimes the teacher will need to repeat a presentation. For example, at the beginning of the year, Bindra's teacher presented an activity showing the sequence of preparing cream cheese on crackers as a snack. However, now Bindra's teacher sees several students not cleaning up after making the snack. The teacher assists the students with cleaning up, then the next day presents another orientation activity to all the students about how to set up the cream-cheese activity, do it neatly, and clean up afterward. It is important that such follow-up orientation not be presented in an angry way or as punishment or criticism. Bindra's teacher simply points out that it is time to review a particular activity so that everyone can enjoy working with it correctly. Then the teacher presents the activity in a matter-of-fact way, using a calm, interested tone.

Three-period lesson

As explained earlier, the three-period lesson refers to a three-step presentation usually used to introduce new vocabulary to a student. This presentation is most often provided to lower elementary students who are still developing vocabulary and becoming familiar with the Montessori learning materials at the elementary level. The three-period lesson consists of three parts, each giving the student a different opportunity: