



■ 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.

Slow down

Caregivers working with under-threes have already developed fine and gross motor skills, language, cognition, and many other skills. Caregivers can move and think quickly and efficiently. Under-threes are just starting to develop all of these skills. To communicate to the children that the center is truly focused on them and their needs, it is important for Montessori caregivers to adjust their rhythm to the children's rhythm. Moving slowly and carefully both slows the caregiver to the pace of the children, who tend to look at and examine everything, and models careful and safe movement for everyone in the childcare environment. Another way caregivers can communicate careful and safe movement is by showing the children how to carry items carefully — one at a time, in both hands — and by always carrying items that way themselves.

Speak and listen with respect



Speaking and listening with respect is an important part of communicating with children the Montessori way. Just as with intervening, the respectful caregiver observes and listens before deciding what to say, how to say it — or whether to say anything at all. Montessori felt that children

most often forget what they hear and that having to listen to someone can disrupt a child's concentration. Montessori caregivers learn to stay back quietly and let the child have his/her own experience as much as possible. Here are some ways caregivers can show respect when they are speaking or listening to under-threes:

- Always speak slowly, quietly and clearly. One of the unique characteristics of the Montessori center is that adult voices are well in the background, not in the foreground.
- Bend or crouch down to look into the child's eyes while you are talking or listening to the child.
- Invite rather than command. Speak to the children as courteously as you would speak to a valued adult, using such words and phrases as "Please," "Thank you," and "May I?"
- Use correct words for things, not slang words or "baby talk." Remember that most toddlers and twos acquiring language skills love using "big words" and are interested in learning them.
- Feed an infant with very little speaking, so that the infant can simply focus on the pleasure of being held and receiving nourishment.
- Speak quietly and lovingly to the child especially when the child is showing unsuitable behavior or has made a mistake. Your quiet, loving attitude will influence the child to behave in the same way and not react with anger, fear or frustration.

- Listen without interruption when the child is talking.
- Let the child speak for her/himself. Try not to fill the child’s world with your words.
- Approach a child from the front, not from behind. If you need to wipe a nose or change a diaper, tell the child quietly what you’re going to do.
- Invite a child to participate in an activity, but do not force or cajole.
- Unless the situation is dangerous, ask the child for permission to take or move something the child is handling. Saying “May I?” shows respect for the child, the child’s work and the child’s personal space.
- With the exception of language activities, present activities with as few words as possible so that the child can focus on the materials and the task.
- Similarly, if a child is concentrating on an activity, stay back quietly until the child is clearly finished or seeks out your attention.

Use non-verbal signals for quiet and stopping

In case of emergency or sudden need, it is sometimes necessary to communicate quickly with the children in a center. Most Montessori caregivers work out non-verbal signals for quiet and for stopping. These signals should not be the same as the transition cues used to signal changes in the daily schedule, should not be easily confused with normal body movements,

and should be used only when needed. The signal often used for quiet in a Montessori center is to stand still, without speaking, and hold out your arms or hands with the palms up.

The signal used for stopping is usually more dramatic because it needs to get the attention of the children quickly. For example, on a park outing, two-year-old Kern picks up a sharp stick and starts to run with it. His caregiver claps her hands loudly twice. Because the caregiver has presented lessons showing that two loud claps always mean “Stop now” and has given the children opportunities to practice stopping quickly in body movement activities, Kern stops.

MAKE SOCIALIZING AN EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE

One of the major goals of the Montessori program is that each child learn and practice social skills. Montessori caregivers make socializing — interacting with others and practicing social skills — an everyday experience. Here are some ways caregivers can help children learn to socialize, from the time they first arrive in the center:

- Greet each child when he/she arrives and welcome them into the center. A child who feels welcomed as a valuable and loved member of a community is more likely to seek out others and interact with them.
- Address each child by name.
- Spend time every day talking with each child in your care.

- With infants, introduce socialization into the active times when they are not eating or sleeping. For example, hold the infant on your lap while you read a story to a toddler.
- With toddlers and twos, introduce social and language skills by initiating simple conversations. One way of starting a conversation is by commenting neutrally on something the child is wearing. For example, thirty-month-old Jamal's caregiver comments: "I see you are wearing red shorts, Jamal." Jamal might respond: "Yes, these are my favorite shorts. My grandpa gave them to me."
- Give older toddlers and twos real-life opportunities to practice the manners and social skills they have learned. For example, at open house or parents' day, invite the older twos to greet people at the door, show where coats go, and say goodbye to people leaving.
- At every age level, present activities that give the children practice in recognizing and naming emotions.
- For older twos, use group time as an opportunity for developing and practicing social skills. For example, introduce an activity the children can do together, such as taking turns shaking a jar of whipping cream to make butter.

SUPPORT COMPETENCE AND INDEPENDENCE

Communicating the Montessori way also means acknowledging and encouraging competence and independence in the children. In the process, the children will

feel that they are important and needed members of the childcare center community. The Montessori caregiver gives the children as many opportunities as possible every day to develop competence and independence. Here are some examples:

- Do not separate the practical life routines of the center from the children, but involve the children in caring for their physical environment. For example, walking toddlers and older infants can set the table for lunch, scrape their own plates, and sort plates, glasses and cutlery into bins for washing.
- Acknowledge each child's developing abilities and skills. As much as possible, do not carry or transport children who can walk by themselves. This means planning walks and outings that are not long and complex, but suit young children's pace and allow ample time for exploring.
- Present each activity as a whole that involves the child in setting up and putting away. Take an infant with you as you return materials to their shelves. Give the toddler something to carry as you set up an activity. Invite the two-year-old to wash the paintbrushes after an art activity. When the children experience setting up and putting away as part of every activity, they will gradually begin setting up and putting away as part of every activity they do.
- Practice competent handling of fragile or breakable objects. For children new to the program, or for children just becoming coordinated enough to hold

objects, use group time to practice handling and passing around first ordinary objects such as utensils, bowls and baskets, then more fragile objects such as a tiny drinking glass, a fresh flower, or a small box made of paper.

- As soon as the infant can walk or stand for long periods, diaper with the child standing up. To help the child become conscious of personal needs, invite him/her to bring you a diaper when the need arises.
- When diapering a child standing up, gradually encourage the child to take over much of the routine. For example, start by pulling gently downward on the child's pants. If the child starts to pull down the pants, gently remove your hand and comment on the child's action. For example, say: "I see that you are pulling down your own pants, Colin. You got them down to your ankles today." Encourage the child to help put on the fresh diaper.

An important part of supporting competence and independence is knowing when a child is ready to move on. Sometimes caregivers become attached to children who have become competent and independent and are well tuned to the rhythms of the childcare environment. These children are often leaders or helpers in the center. The younger children look up to them, watch them and learn from them. The presence of these children makes things easier for the caregivers and the other children.

Montessori caregivers need to develop criteria for judging when a child is ready to

move on to another level in the childcare program, and watch for them. With regular observations, the caregivers stay aware of each child's needs, develop an awareness of when the child is ready — or close to ready — to move on, and help the child move ahead confidently and happily.

How do caregivers know when a child is ready to move on? Let's say that in your center, although there is much overlap and interaction between sections, the space is divided into two sections — one for infants and one for toddlers and twos. Usually, infants are moved to the toddlers and twos section when they reach one year old.

An infant who has developed some coordination and a degree of independence may be ready to move on to the toddlers and twos area even if he/she is not yet a year old. What can you watch for? Usually such an infant can sit unsupported, crawl or move wherever she/he wants to go, drink out of a cup and feed herself/himself with a spoon. The infant has also become competent at most of the activities presented to infants in your center. Sometimes infants causing disruptions in the infants area are showing that they are ready for more challenging activities.

The same applies to judging when a two-year-old is ready to move on to a Montessori preschool for three- to six-year-olds. Most preschool teachers agree that whether or not you feel the child is emotionally or physically ready, it is best to move the child into preschool when he/she turns three. However, many twos who have been participating in a Montessori program for infants, toddlers and twos are ready to move into a preschool before their third



birthdays. What can you watch for? Usually these children have developed competence and independence in many ways. For example, they can set and clean a table, sweep a floor, dress themselves, put things away without being asked, know where everything is kept, work for periods of time on their own and have worked through many of the presented activities for their age group. Many teachers find that some two-year-olds who are ready to move on become disrupting forces in the center. It may be increasingly difficult to engage them in activities. They may be acting out frustration. For these children, being moved

into a new setting with new challenges and older children to emulate often solves such problems.

SPECIAL NOTE ON TOILETING

This special section on toileting incorporates many of the ideas and techniques discussed about communicating with young children the Montessori way, from preparing the environment and using proactive guidance strategies to intervening only when necessary and supporting competence and independence. This