

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN MONTESSORI SOCIETY

# MontessoriLife

SUMMER 2016 VOL.28 NO.2



## SIXTH-GRADERS

Should they be in a Montessori  
Upper Elementary program?

Page 46

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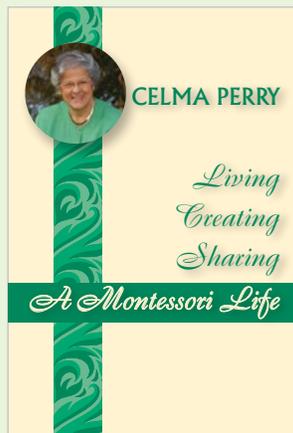
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# A Lifetime of Insights on MONTESSORI PHILOSOPHY

The depth behind the techniques.

By Celma Perry  
from Seton Montessori Institute



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## LETTER FROM The Editors

# Sharing Perspectives

**“Education can no longer be the giving of knowledge only; it must take a different path. The consideration of personality, the development of human potentialities must become the centre of education.” (Montessori, 1949, p. 2)**

As we linger in longer days, absorbing the fragrances of summer flowers and enjoying the pleasure of gardens replete with fruits and vegetables, the excitement of travel, or the peacefulness of time spent at home relaxing with a good book, it is interesting to remember that perspective influences how we perceive our world. Only occasionally do we consider how place, personal experience, and expectations for the future are shaped by our past experiences and where and how we live.

In this issue, consider our authors' perspectives through the looking glass of their ideas: the influence of words on children's feelings (page 30), the challenges of creating a Montessori environment at home (page 36), provocative questions from a contemporary philosopher (page 40), the importance of the 3-year age span in Montessori classrooms (page 46), and the far-reaching effects of family meals (page 60).

We encourage you, our respected readers, to share your own perspectives on *Montessori Life*. Contact us at [careyjones@amshq.org](mailto:careyjones@amshq.org) or [kathycarey@amshq.org](mailto:kathycarey@amshq.org).

*Kathy & Carey*



### Reference

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# The Power of Montessori to Transform the Future World of Work

By Richard A. Ungerer

Earlier this year, I spoke at a small convention in Italy convened by the Centro Internazionale M. Montessori di Perugia, in collaboration with the Fondazione Montessori Chiaravalle. The theme was “Kindness and Courtesy.” I began my presentation, “Kindness & Courtesy: Montessori through the Ages,” by talking about the many ways that Montessori children and young adults are engaged in caring for themselves and individuals of all ages, as well as animals and the environment. I emphasized key elements of Montessori education, including different needs and opportunities at each plane of development, the role of the teacher as a model, multiage grouping, and experiential learning. I underscored that kindness and courtesy are critical to preparing students for success in life beyond school, as they engage in work, citizenship, and lifelong learning. I also discussed the unique ways in which Montessori education prepares young people for the workplace of the future.

The speaker who immediately preceded me was Brunello Cucinelli, an Italian fashion designer renowned for his cashmere sportswear collections. When I learned that I would be meeting Cucinelli and speaking alongside him, I began studying his life, work, and views about “humanist enterprise,” to find a connection to Montessori education. While in Italy, I visited the small medieval hilltop village of Solomeo, home to Cucinelli’s factory, which employs over 700 individuals. His work has completely restored the village, and his company is “centered on people giving business a meaning that goes beyond profit and reinvesting to improve the lives of workers and to enhance and restore the beauty of the world... a world where work elevates human dignity” (De Vico Fallani & Naldini, 2011).

Reflecting on Cucinelli’s approach to organizing the workplace, I was brought back to the time from 1974 to 1988 when I served as president of the National Institute for Work and Learning, in Washington, DC, and had the privilege to work for Willard Wirtz, who had been Secretary of Labor under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. An integral part of our mission was to help our society see work as “purposeful activity,” and, to this end, we published a book called *The Boundless Resource* (Wirtz, 1975). Since that time, I have continued pursuing ways to transform the nature of work in our society, including my work at AMS. I believe that Montessori education can play a powerful role in this transformation, as it prepares children for a world of work embedded with humanistic values. I look forward to hearing from you about how we as Montessori educators can prepare Montessori students to be leaders for the workforce of the future.



**RICHARD A. UNGERER** is executive director of AMS. He welcomes your comments, questions, and ideas. Contact him at [richard@amshq.org](mailto:richard@amshq.org).

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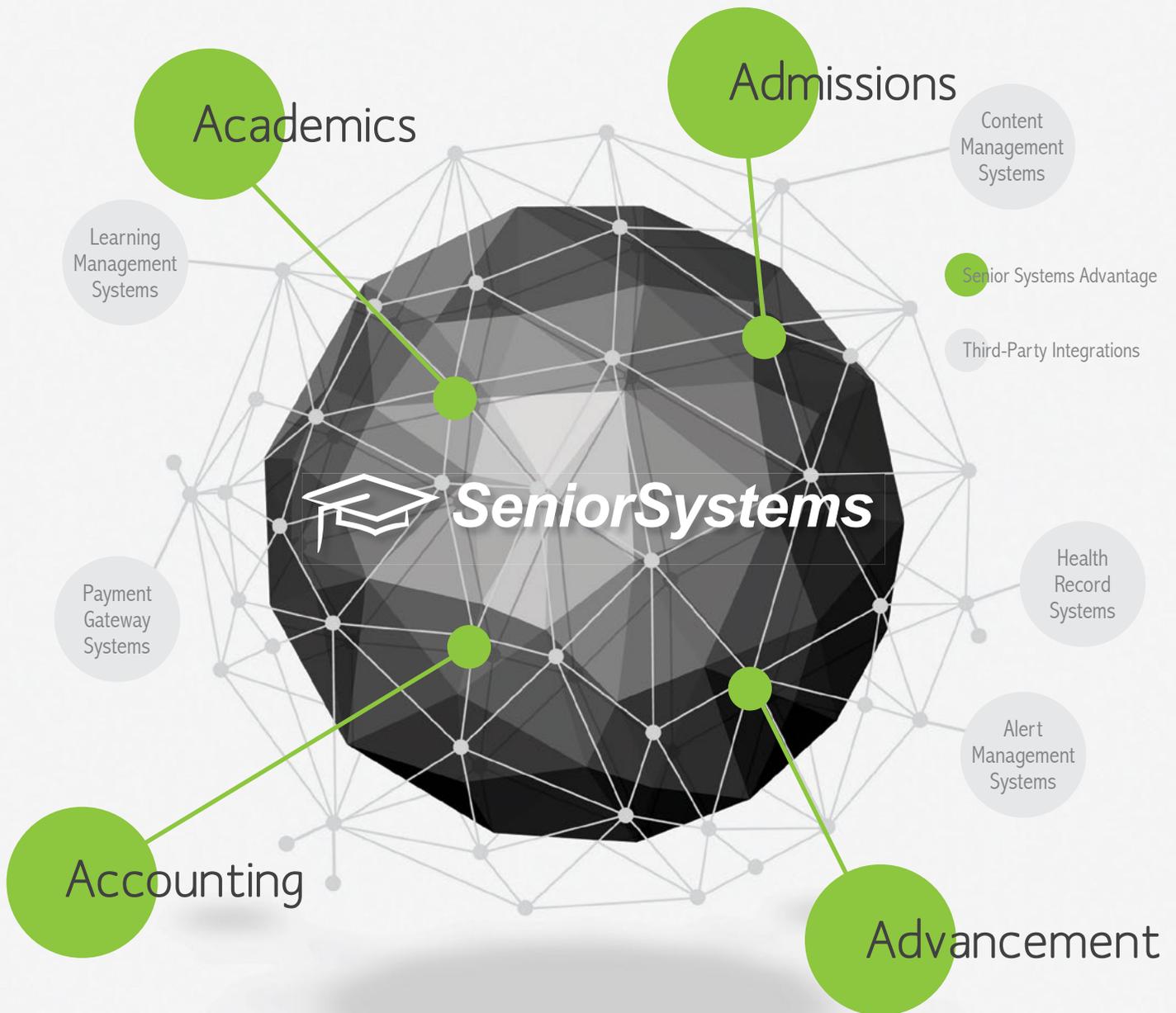
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# Montessori for All Children

In any given classroom, there are children with a wide range of needs: children who are gifted, those who are developing typically, and those requiring more specialized interactions to support their educational progress. Estimates of children with learning differences indicate that 15–20% of students in any school will demonstrate characteristics of learning differences, including the most common among these, the reading disorder dyslexia (Shaywitz, 2004, pp. 25–35). Approximately 5–7% of children demonstrate characteristics of ADHD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 8–9% have speech-sound disorders, and nearly 6% are severely language-impaired (National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders). About 2–3% of the population is diagnosed with intellectual deficits. One in 68 is on the autism spectrum (American Psychiatric Association, 2015). Some children display a combination of these differences.

For Montessori schools, the percentage of children with learning needs that require specific attention may be even greater due to Montessori's individualized programs, nurturing teachers, and emphasis on emotional intelligence as well as academic progress.

Montessori teachers are educated to meet the needs of students across a 3-year age span. However, many teacher education programs do not include instruction on working with children who have learning and/or behavioral differences. Montessori teacher education is a lengthy process, with broad content areas, and to learn each exceptionality in detail while at the same time mastering Montessori philosophy, techniques of classroom management, and the presentation of activities would be overload for most students. I believe teacher education programs should include an introduction to varying exceptionalities, but that will require expanding the scope of teacher education.

To this end, the AMS Teacher Education Action Committee (TEAC) has created a task force charged with providing a recommendation (including standards and procedures) for an AMS endorsement in special education. Members of the task force are Betsy Coe, Lisanne Pinciotti, Mary Schneider, Gina Lofquist, Natalie Danner, Mary MacIntosh, Jackie Cossentino, Ann Epstein, Pam Shanks, Pauline Novak, and myself. Currently, AMS executive director Rich Ungerer is acting as staff liaison.

**Montessori teachers are educated to meet the needs of students across a 3-year age span. However, many teacher education programs do not include instruction on working with children who have learning and/or behavioral differences.**



JOYCE PICKERING, MA, SLP/CCC, HumD, is president of the AMS Board of Directors. She is executive director emerita at Shelton School & Evaluation Center, in Dallas, TX. She is AMS-credentialed (Early Childhood). Contact her at [president@amshq.org](mailto:president@amshq.org).

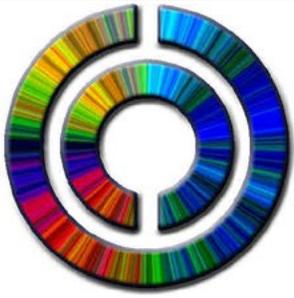
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Montessori education is for all children. However, successfully following each child requires an understanding of specific differences and the knowledge and experience to analyze how to meet the needs attendant to these differences. In Montessori's era, the children with special needs with whom she worked were called "defective." Today, with the individualized Montessori approach and a master teacher, these children should be perceived as talented and creative in their own right.

Dr. Montessori said, "The difference in reaction between deficient and normal children in the presentation of didactic material made of graded stimuli is plainly seen from the fact that the same didactic material used with deficient makes education possible, while with normal children it provokes autoeducation" (1967, p. 92). Her words underscore the importance of developing this AMS endorsement so that all children may benefit from the gift of a Montessori education. I welcome your input as we engage in this important undertaking.

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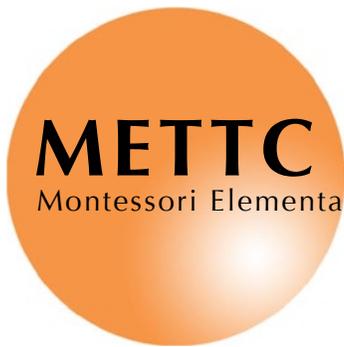
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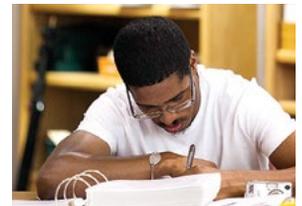
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# AMS Connection

NEWS FROM THE AMERICAN MONTESSORI SOCIETY COMMUNITY

## DISPATCHES



### THE MONTESSORI SCHOOL DRESHER, PA

Mindfulness coach Jacquie O'Malley has led sessions consisting of exercises related to breathing, listening, seeing, eating, gratitude, thoughts, and emotions, for school staff, children, and parents. Positive results have included: Children independently choosing mindfulness exercises throughout the day, to help them solve difficult situations; learning to pay attention to sounds outside their own bodies and practicing breathing to find their "anchor"; and learning to choose healthy, nonhurtful behaviors in response to feelings of anger, frustration, sadness, or worry. In Upper Elementary, children now use "Zentangles," mindfulness drawing exercises, to regain focus when transitioning to other work. (AMS-Accredited School)

### L. ROBERT ALLEN MONTESSORI LABORATORY SCHOOL HONOLULU, HI

L. Robert Allen Montessori Laboratory School recently piloted the use of Dreambox, a supplemental online mathematics program that allows learners to personalize their math learning experience, with some of their Primary students. Participating 5-year-olds soon demonstrated 100% proficiency in Common Core Standards for kindergarten mathematics, including counting and cardinality, number and operations in base 10, and operations and algebraic-thinking skills. All 4- and 5-year-olds are now using the program, along with a number of 3-year-olds who expressed interest. (AMS-Accredited School)

## Engineering Leadership

**OAK MEADOW SCHOOL, LITTLETON, MA** Oak Meadow School eighth-grader Avery Clowes's electrostatic generator project earned the First Place Engineering award at Broadcom MASTERS, a science and engineering competition for Middle School students. Additionally, he was selected by his fellow finalists to receive the Scott A. McGregor Leadership Award and to represent their class as a speaker at an awards dinner. (AMS-Accredited School)

*Avery Clowes of Oak Meadow School shows off his engineering marvel.*

### RICHMOND MONTESSORI SCHOOL RICHMOND, VA

Dylan Dhindsa, an eighth-grader at Richmond Montessori School, recently planned, organized, and marketed a school-wide blood drive. He went beyond his school community-service requirement, organizing to have a blood-mobile on campus and getting pledges from donors. (AMS-Accredited School)



*The American Montessori Society Living Legacy is an honor created by the AMS Scholarship Committee to recognize individuals whose exemplary achievements have had significant impact within the Montessori community. Each fall, Living Legacy nominations are made to AMS. The nominations are then sent to a committee that reviews applications through the lens of several criteria: breadth of influence in Montessori education and general education, service to AMS, and volunteerism. Final approval by the AMS Board of Directors is based on recommendations made by the committee. Donations to the AMS Living Legacy Scholarship Fund support future teachers in AMS teacher education programs. Since the inception of the award in 1993, AMS has awarded more than \$550,000 to 300 aspiring teachers, to help fund their studies.*

**She has inspired hundreds of adult students with a greater appreciation of Montessori's ideas about cosmic education and education for peace, and she has informed and promoted multicultural consciousness throughout the Montessori community.**

The AMS 2017 Living Legacy is **Alice Renton**, a highly esteemed member of the Montessori community, in both the United States and Latin America. Alice holds Montessori Early Childhood teaching credentials from both AMS and AMI and was among the first U.S.-educated Montessorians in Mexico. Her long career in Montessori education began, in 1965, at Escuela Montessori de la Ciudad de México, in Mexico City, where she taught. In 1972, she co-founded the Casa de los Niños, also in Mexico City.

After moving to Colorado, with her family, in 1977, Alice became a specialist in bilingual/multicultural approaches to Montessori education, developing and consulting with a variety of cross-cultural programs, including Head Start, migrant education programs in California, and dual-language Montessori programs. As an instructor and field consultant for the Montessori Education Center of the Rockies (MECR), in Boulder, CO, and as a guest lecturer at teacher education programs in Illinois, North Carolina, and Texas, as well as in Chile, Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, and Costa Rica, Alice specialized in the Sensorial area and in Montessori philosophy and Cosmic Education. From 1984 to 1992, she was the academic director for MECR, and, from 1993 to 1998, she

*Alice Renton: longtime Montessorian, teacher educator, bilingual/multicultural specialist, consultant, lecturer, and the AMS 2017 Living Legacy*

was a lecturer in Early Childhood education at Naropa University, also in Boulder.

In 1992, Alice founded the company In Other Words, developing and publishing materials and resource manuals to support second-language development in Early Childhood classrooms. In addition to developing curricula, she has published a number of articles in the *NAMTA Journal* and *Public School Montessorian* and has translated books by Aline Wolf and Celma Perry into Spanish.

Alice has presented workshops and keynote addresses at numerous AMS, NAEYC, and NAMTA conferences. She has also served the American Montessori Society in various capacities: She was a member of the AMS Teacher Education Committee and a co-founder of the Comité Hispano, coordinating its bilingual services. She served as an on-site team member for programs seeking AMS affiliation.

Alice is much loved, honored, and respected. She has inspired hundreds of adult students with a greater appreciation of Montessori's ideas about Cosmic Education and education for peace, and she has informed and promoted multicultural consciousness throughout the Montessori community.

# Peace through Service

By Kira Hinkle

Maria Montessori writes of the importance of “the outing” as a crucial foundation in the education of the child. She articulates, “There is no description, no image in any book that is capable of replacing the sight of real trees, and all the life to be found around them, in a living forest” (1997, p. 19). For Montessori, it is the experience of being immersed in the realities of our world that bring the child’s Cosmic Education to life. Through these outings, the child sees that “something emanates from those trees which speaks to the soul, something no book, no museum is capable of giving” (1997, p. 19). This deep connection between child and forest can be applied across all disciplines and lies at the heart of Cosmic Education. Just as the child needs to spend time in the forest in order to truly learn about botany, so does the child need to serve within his community in order to truly learn about humanity.

Through my own experiences as an educator, I’ve seen that nothing so clearly demonstrates a child’s deepened knowledge as a result of “the outing” than student opportunities in service learning. From a 6-year-old carefully spreading and assembling a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich for our soup kitchen to a 17-year-old triumphantly hammering the final nail into a newly constructed wheelchair ramp, children of all ages have grown as they explored their souls by interacting with the communities that surround them; I’ve been privileged to serve alongside them. Service has become not just a fundamental part of my class curriculum but a fundamental part of who I am. Serving others in my community and sharing that passion with my students nurtures my spirit and feeds my personal commitment to education. It is not only important that my students spend time in the forest but vital that I, as a teacher, visit the woods as well.

Storytelling becomes an inevitable and vital aspect of these outings when our children are exposed to authentic experiences. Just as our students respond immediately with focus and concentration to authentic work, they respond with focus and concentration to authentic people. When students hear the stories of others, walls break down and boundaries are eliminated. The stories place the volunteer and the community receiving support on even ground, allowing for real partnership and real change. Finally, these stories have



KIRA HINKLE is a Lower Elementary teacher at The New School Montessori, in Cincinnati, OH. She is a member of the AMS Peace Committee, serving as both treasurer and Peace Table administrator. She is AMS-credentialed (Elementary I). Contact her at [kira.h@newschoolmontessori.com](mailto:kira.h@newschoolmontessori.com).

the power to alter hierarchical structures that are built into society and which perpetuate social inequality.

A few years ago, I invited a friend to share his story with our Lower and Upper Elementary students. He had struggled with homelessness throughout much of his adult life. As he sat in a circle with our students and talked about his struggles, he radiated authenticity and joy. Our children hung on every word, awestruck. He shared many stories that day, but the one that sticks with me was his tale of panhandling, and the feeling of invisibility that washed over him as people refused to look him in the eye as they passed him on the street. As he prepared to leave, one of our Upper Elementary students approached him, with tears in her eyes, and simply said, “I see you.”

Maria Montessori emphasized that the pathway toward a peaceful world lies in the education of our children. The opportunity for our students to serve the greater community is an opportunity to create the peaceful world she envisioned. The more we allow our students to experience humanity in action through authentic service work, alongside people of all backgrounds, the more we bring Cosmic Education to life. Outings allow our students to immerse themselves in and experience the realities of our world—and to see the invisible.

*Join members of the AMS Peace Committee for the upcoming AMS Peace Retreat, “Implementing Meaningful Service Learning in a Montessori Classroom.” It will be an in-depth look at what service learning is, how to develop it, and the ways that it can galvanize and enrich you and your students.*

**OCTOBER 6–9, 2016**

*Solomon Episcopal Conference Center, Loranger, LA*

*For more information or to register, visit [amshq.org/PeaceRetreat](http://amshq.org/PeaceRetreat).*

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**Reference**

Montessori, M. (1997). *From childhood to adolescence*. Oxford, England: ABC-Clío.

## DISPATCHES

**THACHER MONTESSORI SCHOOL  
MILTON, MA**

Last fall, Thacher Montessori School students learned Indian drumming from musician Loire Cotler. Earlier, music teacher/Blue Man Group band member Victor McSurely had taught students relevant vocalizations and practiced pieces with staff. Loire and Victor then wove performances by masters, apprentices, and staff/student audiences into a whole-school event. (AMS-Accredited School)

**KINGSLEY MONTESSORI SCHOOL  
BOSTON, MA**

Kingsley Montessori recently expanded their facilities to include two innovation centers, a library and digital-media center, and project studios. The additions are aimed at enhancing the school's integrated program, supporting the flow of Montessori, and transforming the Elementary building into a 21st-century learning environment. (AMS-Accredited School)

**WESTMONT MONTESSORI SCHOOL  
MENDHAM, NJ**

To support Westmont's yearlong study of Australia, the school celebrated "Australia Spirit Week," with a special activity each day. For example, on "Marsupial Monday," everyone came to school with as many pockets as possible on their clothing, marsupial songs were sung during music, and the pouched creatures were discussed during circle time. (AMS-Accredited School)

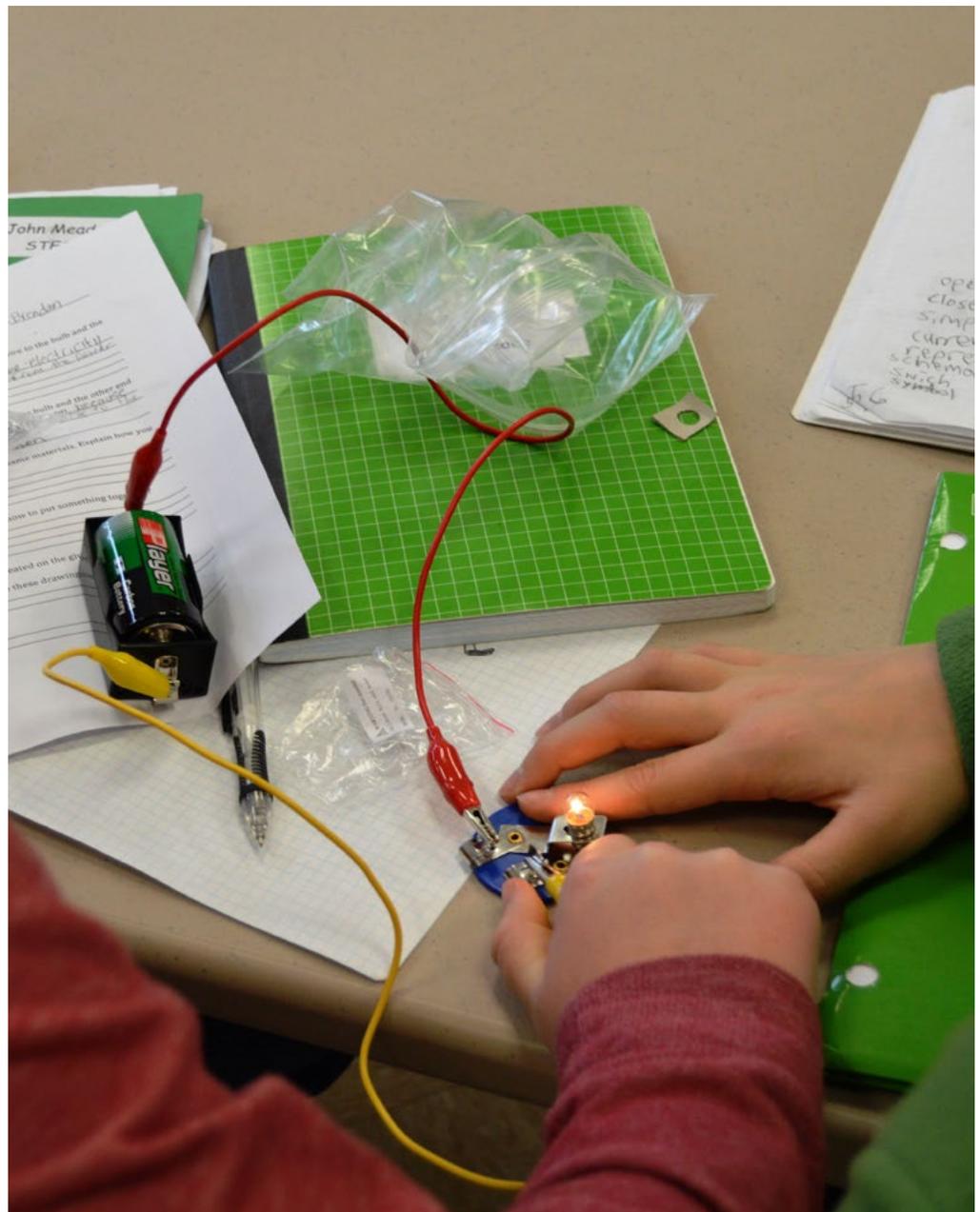
**MONTESSORI SCHOOL OF  
BOWLING GREEN  
BOWLING GREEN, OH**

Research has shown that work with hands-on, concrete didactic materials benefits adults with memory loss. At the Montessori School of Bowling Green, a program is underway connecting Upper Elementary students to older adults with mild to moderate cognitive impairments. The Montessori students share with the elderly participants their work, such as measuring angles in geometry using 3-dimensional shapes, and together they complete the lesson. (AMS-Accredited School)

# Supporting STEM Initiatives

**ANDOVER SCHOOL OF MONTESSORI, ANDOVER, MA** The Roger M. and Michelle S. Marino Charitable Foundation awarded Andover School of Montessori a \$1,500 grant to be used for the school's STEM initiative. The funds enabled the school to purchase "Engineering Is Elementary" kits, developed by the Museum of Science, Boston; the kits provide engineering design challenges, ranging from electrical to environmental to chemical, and will enhance the curriculum for students Children's House through Elementary. (AMS-Accredited School)

*An "Engineering Is Elementary" kit, in use by a student at Andover School of Montessori*





## Scientists for a Day

**LEXINGTON MONTESSORI SCHOOL, LEXINGTON, MA / CAMBRIDGE MONTESSORI SCHOOL, CAMBRIDGE, MA** Lexington Montessori Middle School students and Cambridge Montessori School 7th- and 8th-graders traveled together to the Biogen Idec Community Lab in Cambridge, MA, to analyze medicine samples for contamination. Using a spectrophotometer, students tested different potential medicines to determine if they were clean or contaminated, the same work conducted by scientists to ensure the safety of drugs before release to market. (AMS-Accredited Schools)

*Students at Lexington Montessori and Cambridge Montessori collaborate to test medicine samples.*

### **NEWTON MONTESSORI SCHOOL NEWTON, MA**

Third-year students in Newton's Lower Elementary program are learning about the world of work. They completed inventories to identify their skills and interests, then filled out job applications for internship positions advertised by school staff. The students are now finding joy and satisfaction working 30 minutes a week in such positions as tour guide, playground assistant, and art intern. (AMS-Accredited School)

### **INLY SCHOOL SCITUATE, MA**

Inly School has made February "Leave Your Mark" month. This year, during these 29 days of community service and giving, students performed small acts of kindness, families stocked shelves at food pantries, and the school coordinated "Fill the Truck Fridays," collecting donations of canned goods, clothing, and pet supplies, for delivery to different organizations. (AMS-Accredited School)

### **MOUNTAINTOP MONTESSORI CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA**

Changes are afoot at Mountaintop Montessori: In addition to having recently opened a new academic building to serve Elementary and Middle School students, the school is celebrating Wendy Reinsch Fisher at the end of her tenure as head of school and preparing to welcome Patricia Colby as the new head, in July. (AMS-Accredited School)

### **MONTESSORI CHILDREN'S HOUSE REDMOND, WA**

This winter, in their work toward becoming active participants in their community, Montessori Children's House students gathered personal care items for Mary's Place, a homeless shelter in downtown Seattle that serves women and children. Elementary students partnered with a local grocery store and were able to gather more items in one day than they previously had over the course of a month. Select students from the Elementary program hand-delivered the items to the shelter, where they also got a tour of the facility, an experience that increased the students' social awareness of real-world issues. (AMS-Accredited School)

**THE BOYD SCHOOLS  
MULTIPLE LOCATIONS, VA**

LePort Schools is integrating The Boyd Schools into their community of 22 Montessori schools. The Boyd Schools is a group of 7 AMS-accredited Montessori schools in Northern Virginia. LePort plans to expand program offerings, adding more Infant and Elementary classrooms and opening Montessori immersion programs in Spanish and Mandarin. (AMS-Accredited Schools)

**WOODLAND HILL  
MONTESSORI SCHOOL  
RENSSELAER, NY**

WHMS Middle School students presented autobiographies of astronomers from throughout history, including Jill Tarter, Stephen Hawking, and Tycho Brahe. Students created models and representations to bring the astronomers to life and learned that not all of the assumptions made by the astronomers were correct. (AMS-Accredited School)

**BRICKTON MONTESSORI SCHOOL  
CHICAGO, IL**

Inspired by the 1937 International Montessori Congress, which carried the theme "Education for Peace," Brickton holds an annual "Mix It Up Day," in which students in Children's House through Middle School work collaboratively on events that unite them as a community. This year, in addition to dancing, caroling, and taking part in relay races, students cooked and shared a common meal, prepared "pick-me-up" cards for a local hospital, and enjoyed a one-woman show about the life of astronaut Sally Ride. (AMS-Accredited School)

**DISCOVERY MONTESSORI SCHOOL  
JACKSONVILLE BEACH, FL**

Discovery Montessori School has implemented a Forest Kindergarten element as part of their curriculum. Once a week, kindergarten students have an opportunity to explore and engage in lessons in a nature preserve near campus, an experience that provides a foundation for ecological awareness and conservation. (AMS-Accredited School)

**BUNCHE MONTESSORI EARLY  
CHILDHOOD CENTER  
FORT WAYNE, IN**

Students at Bunche Montessori Early Childhood Center found an abandoned kitten. They named her "Pumpkin" and cared for her, including feeding her a special formula to help her grow strong, until she was able to survive on her own. Pumpkin now lives with Heather Fry, the lead teacher in the classroom that helped care for her. Heather gives the students regular updates and brings pictures so they are able to see Pumpkin's progress. (AMS-Accredited School)

**MONTESSORI SCHOOL OF  
LONG GROVE  
LONG GROVE, IL**

Don Pfister, who in the past few years has unearthed a nearly complete allosaurus skeleton, in Wyoming, recently visited Montessori School of Long Grove, invited by lead Elementary teacher Chris McDowell. Students had a chance to handle dinosaur bones and other fossils, ask questions, and demonstrate their own work on a prehistoric timeline project. (AMS-Accredited School)

**WILMINGTON MONTESSORI SCHOOL  
WILMINGTON, DE**

At Wilmington Montessori School, Primary students have been exploring the intersection of STEAM (science, technology, engineering, the arts, and mathematics) and nursery rhymes. Combining the two in the school's "maker studio" ensures that children are exposed to these rhymes and allows them to experience language in a new way. (AMS-Accredited School)

*Anniversaries*

Congratulations to the following AMS-member schools on achieving a significant anniversary milestone. We wish them continued success in the future.

**50TH ANNIVERSARY**

Rogers Park Montessori School  
Chicago, Illinois  
Debbie Senoff-Langford, Principal

The Springs, A Montessori School  
Springfield, VA  
Daniel Clifford, Head of School

**45TH ANNIVERSARY**

The Montessori School  
Dresher, PA  
Laura Stulb, Head of School

**35TH ANNIVERSARY**

Madison Montessori School  
Madison, NJ  
Terry Armstrong, Head of School

**25TH ANNIVERSARY**

Montessori Children's Community  
Sewickley, PA  
Terri Modic, Head of School

**20TH ANNIVERSARY**

Maple Grove Montessori  
Burr Ridge, IL  
Alexandra Kessler, Director

If your AMS-member school or AMS-affiliated teacher education program will soon be celebrating a 5-year, decade, or quarter-century anniversary, we want to know about it! Contact Carey Jones at careyjones@amshq.org. Please include your organization's name, location, and head of school or program director, and put "Anniversary" in the subject line of your e-mail.

*School Accreditation News*

AMS accreditation is a designation that an AMS member school meets a well-defined standard of excellence. Congratulations to the following schools that recently earned accreditation (or were reaccredited).

**AMARE MONTESSORI (SATELLITE  
OF MONTESSORI ACADEMY)**

(Initial Accreditation)  
Clarksville, TN  
Jaime Yeager, Head of School

**BRIXHAM MONTESSORI FRIENDS  
SCHOOL**

(Initial Accreditation)  
York, ME  
Alica B. Johnson-Grafe,  
Head of School

**CHILDREN'S TREE MONTESSORI  
SCHOOL**

(Initial Accreditation)  
Old Saybrook, Connecticut  
Marcy Martindale, Head of School

**COUNTRYSIDE MONTESSORI  
SCHOOL**

(Reaccreditation)  
Charlotte, NC  
Dolores Murgolo,  
Interim Head of School

**HILL COUNTRY MONTESSORI  
SCHOOL**

(Reaccreditation)  
Boerne, TX  
Steven Whewell, Head of School

**KENNEBEC MONTESSORI SCHOOL**

(Reaccreditation)  
Fairfield, ME  
Rebecca Green, Head of School

**MONTESSORI ACADEMY**

(Addition of an Accredited  
Infant Program)  
Brentwood, TN  
James R. Bernstorff, Head of School

**MONTESSORI ACADEMY  
OF ARLINGTON**

(Addition of an Accredited  
Infant Program)  
Arlington, TX  
Pamela Dunbar, Head of School

**MONTESSORI SCHOOL OF MCLEAN**

(Addition of an Accredited  
Toddler program)  
McLean, VA  
Meredith Wood & Thomas  
Le Grand, Heads of School

**MONTESSORI SCHOOL OF WAUKESHA**

(Initial Accreditation)  
Waukesha, WI  
William R. Walsh, Executive Director

**MONTESSORI SCHOOL OF  
WESTMINSTER**

(Initial Accreditation)  
Westminster, MD  
Jodi Lupco, Head of School

**SHINING STARS  
MONTESSORI SCHOOL**

(Initial Accreditation: Early  
Childhood and Lower Elementary  
levels)  
Washington, DC  
Regina Rodriguez, Executive Director

# Calendar

## AMS ANNUAL CONFERENCES

**2017** March 9–12 Town and Country Resort & Convention Center, San Diego, CA

**2018** March 22–25 Sheraton Denver Downtown, Denver, CO

**2019** March 21–24 Marriott Wardman Park, Washington, DC

**2020** March 12–15 Hilton Anatole, Dallas, TX

## AMS SUMMER SYMPOSIUM FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

July 24–27, 2016  
Louisville, KY

## AMS PEACE RETREAT

October 6–9, 2016  
Loranger, LA

## AMS WEBINARS

Webinars take place 7–8:30 PM (ET). Each can earn you 1.5 hours of continuing professional development (CPDs) that qualify toward the AMS professional development requirement.

### Thursday, June 16

“Cosmic Extensions for the Early Elementary Years”  
Presenters: Heidi Larson, Beth Woerber

### Thursday, September 15

“Building the Self: A Toolkit for Self-Regulation”  
Presenter: Seth Johnson

For the most up-to-date list of AMS live webinars, as well as information about AMS on-demand webinars: [amshq.org/webinars](http://amshq.org/webinars)

# TEP Affiliation News

The American Montessori Society warmly welcomes our new AMS-affiliated teacher education programs, as well as those that have recently renewed their affiliation:

## DUHOVKA MONTESSORI TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM

Elementary II (now Elementary I–II) (addition of an age range)  
Prague, Czech Republic

## HOUSTON MONTESSORI CENTER SECONDARY I–II

Prague, Czech Republic (new additional location)

## MONTESSORI INSTITUTE FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

Infant & Toddler, Early Childhood (renewed AMS affiliation)  
Wilmington, DE

Details about these and all of our AMS-affiliated TEPs can be found on pages 56–57.

# Grants & Awards

The **Ursula Thrush Peace Seed Grant** is an annual award given to Montessorians who have formulated projects that foster education for peace. This grant was created by the American Montessori Society Peace Committee to honor the memory of Ursula Thrush, whose dedication to fulfilling Maria Montessori’s vision for peace through children opened doors to many Montessori educators, inspiring them to include peace education in their classrooms and communities. In 2016, the AMS Peace Committee awarded 14 grants. A total of \$6,450 was divided among the recipients.

Applications for 2017 Peace Seed Awards will be available fall 2016 at [www.amshq.org/Awards](http://www.amshq.org/Awards).

This year’s grant recipients are:

## NANCYE BLACK AND ANNA CLARKE, LAKELAND MONTESSORI SCHOOLS, LAKE WALES, FL (\$500)

Nancye and Anna will build a free, collaborative, online community of Montessori educators, including a website where their students will work with a class of international students to collaborate on set projects.

## TERESA CARLTON, DOTHAN MONTESSORI SCHOOL, DOTHAN, AL (\$100)

Teresa will use the funds to create a Peace Library at her school.

## MA. FE RHODORA ESPINOSA-KAHNY, CALIFORNIA MONTESSORI PROJECT, ELK GROVE, CA (\$250)

The grant money will pay for Sensorial materials to be used in a Peace material training workshop.

## MELANIE GREELY, CHANTILLY MONTESSORI, CHARLOTTE, NC (\$150)

Melanie will use the grant to design and implement a peace curriculum at her school, including a Peace Seminar and PeaceX program, and to subsidize professional development around peace.

## ZEHAVIT GROSS, SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY, RAMAT GAN, ISRAEL (\$800)

Professor Gross will create a seminar for both Arab and Jewish students that focuses on peace education, tolerance, and conflict resolution.

## NANCI QUARTOFIERRO, MOUNTAIN VIEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, MOUNTAIN VIEW, HI (\$400)

The grant will go toward purchasing peace materials to implement lessons from Sonnie McFarland’s book *Honoring the Light of the Child*.

## ERIN HAYES, SELKIRK MONTESSORI SCHOOL, VICTORIA, BC, CANADA (\$950)

Erin’s grant will enable a local First Nation author/artist to teach Selkirk’s children about peace.

## LISA KLUS, MERCY MONTESSORI CENTER, CINCINNATI, OH (\$550)

Lisa will use the funding to build raised garden beds at her school, with a plan to share the harvested foods with a local food pantry.

## GRETA MCKINNEY, MARTIN LUTHER KING MONTESSORI SCHOOL, FORT WAYNE, IN (\$300)

The grant money will fund a “conflict resolution corner,” with a peace seat for each classroom.

## SIZA MTIMBIRI, KINGSLEY MONTESSORI, BOSTON, MA (\$900)

Siza’s award will underwrite a Montessori program in Zimbabwe, paying for library books, classroom materials, and Montessori videos.

## KATE ROBINSON, MONTESSORI CHILDREN’S SCHOOLHOUSE, HAMMOND, IN (\$200)

The grant money will enable Kate to introduce the Montessori peace table to six non-Montessori Early Childhood public-school classrooms and do follow-up visits.

## TAJALI TOLAN, ROCK PRAIRIE MONTESSORI, JANESVILLE, WI (\$300)

Tajali will use the money to author two books in the Children’s Global Peace series—one on social and emotional literacy and the other on understanding feelings and needs.

## PATRICIA YONKA AND ALICE IDDI-GUBBELS, THE LA’ANGUM LEARNING CENTER, BUMBOAZIO, GHANA (\$850)

Patricia and Alice will produce a Peace Rose pamphlet that will tell the Mamprusi Universe (creation) story to La’Angum students.

## MARY ZAJAC, PENN-MONT ACADEMY, HOLLIDAYSBURG, PA (\$200)

Mary will use the funds to implement a Peace Garden at Penn-Mont.

## Dissertation & Thesis Awards

The American Montessori Society offers annual awards for graduate-level work (for outstanding doctoral dissertations and master’s theses) that furthers public understanding of Montessori education. This year, three awards were given.

## DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

*First Place, \$1,000*

Kimberlee Belcher-Badal, “Policy Reservations: Early Childhood Workforce Registries and Alternative Pedagogy Teacher Preparation”

## MASTER’S THESIS

*First Place, \$750*

Jennifer D. Leung, “Montessori Classrooms in Australia: An English as an International Language Perspective”

## MASTER’S THESIS

*Second Place, \$250*

Linda Engelhart, “The Child and Nature: Reintegrating the Whole”

Submissions for 2017 research awards (for research completed November 2, 2015, through November 1, 2016) will be accepted through November 1, 2016. For more information about AMS thesis and dissertation awards, go to [www.amshq.org/Awards](http://www.amshq.org/Awards), or contact Phyllis Povell at [wwprof@optonline.net](mailto:wwprof@optonline.net). All submissions should include a hard copy plus a Word document on a disk or flash drive, and should include the submitter's postal address, email address, and phone number.

## Miscellaneous

### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EVENTS

If you are an AMS credential-holder looking for opportunities in your area to help you satisfy the AMS professional development requirement, check out the Local Professional Development Events listings on the AMS website (you can also suggest events to be added): [amshq.org/ProfessionalDevelopment](http://amshq.org/ProfessionalDevelopment).

### SEND US YOUR PICTURES!

We're looking for captivating photos for *Montessori Life* and

will pay up to \$25 for photos used in feature articles and up to \$200 for those used on the cover. We are interested in pictures showing students from AMS-member schools actively engaged in Montessori environments. Diversity in race and age is a plus. Email your high-resolution photographs to Carey Jones at [careyjones@amshq.org](mailto:careyjones@amshq.org).

All photos must be accompanied by signed AMS photo releases for all subjects depicted. Release forms and submission rules are

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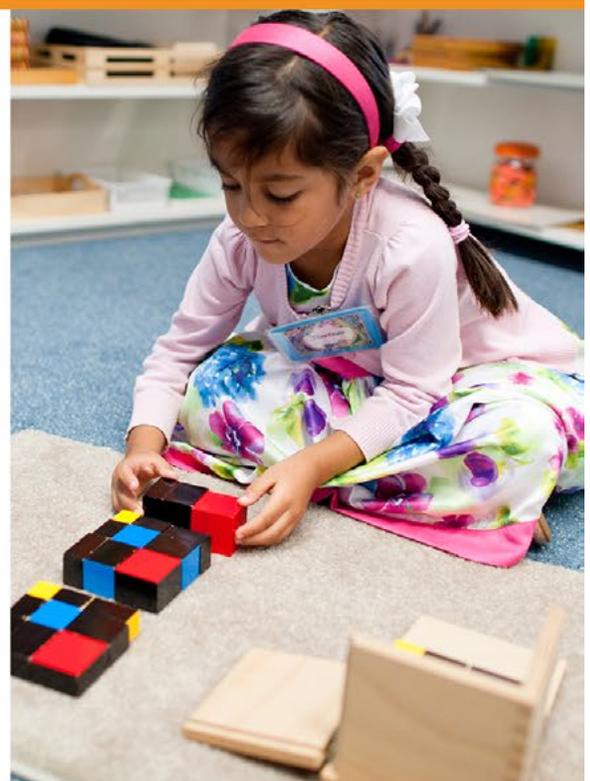
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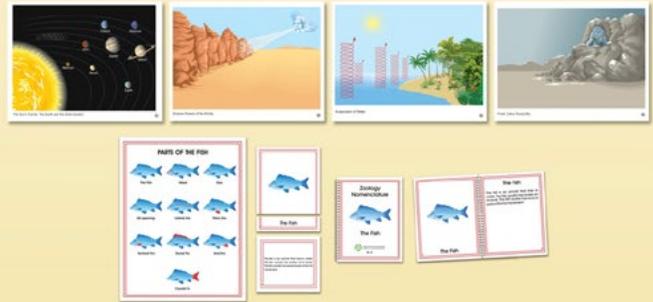
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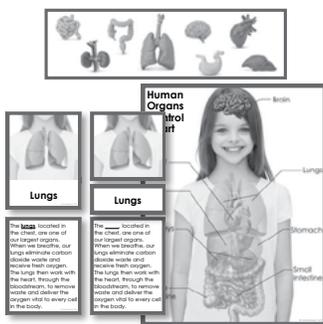
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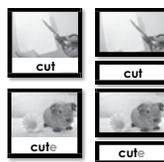
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# WHY “YOU’RE OKAY” IS NOT OKAY

A DISCUSSION OF RESPONSES AND REACTIONS

*By Olynda Smith*

It’s likely you have witnessed this scenario: A child takes a minor tumble or drops his snack and begins to get upset. He looks to his parents, who give him a quieting “You’re okay” before turning their attention away. The child continues to be upset, and the parent repeats the insistence that she is okay. There are a variety of reasons a parent might tell an upset child, “You’re okay”: to comfort and reassure, to avoid a meltdown, or to toughen up the child. It may also be that because this saying is so prevalent, parents assume it is a good practice and adopt it with their own children. While I hear adults

using “You’re okay” almost everywhere—playgrounds, museums, playdates, the library—I have not witnessed it in Montessori environments. There are good reasons that most Montessorians do not use this phrase.

I want to share with you why this little phrase can be so harmful and why I strongly believe that it is in the best interest of our children to avoid using it. While saying “You’re okay” to an upset child is sometimes effective in stemming the tide of tears, it comes at a price most thoughtful parents will not be willing to pay once they understand it.

How we respond to a child when he is upset has a huge impact on his emotional intelligence. Our EQ (emotional quotient or emotional intelligence quotient) includes our self-awareness, self-acceptance, impulse control, and empathy (Markham, 2012, pp. 92–93). These are qualities that Montessorians work to cultivate in the classroom and that most parents hope

impede our children’s ability to know and express themselves emotionally.

Learning how to talk about what is not okay is also essential for healthy brain development. When we encourage children to talk through what is wrong, we help them to engage and develop connections between the right and left hemispheres of the brain. This integration of the hemispheres is essential to our health and happiness. In *The Whole Brain Child*, neuropsychiatrist Daniel Siegel and parenting expert Tina Bryson say, “In order to live balanced, meaningful, and creative lives, full of connected relationships, it’s crucial that our two hemispheres work together” (2012, p. 18). These connections are made when we talk about our emotions: We feel those emotions in the right hemisphere, but to put language to them, we have to engage the left hemisphere. When we do this regularly, we create a capacity to find balance after upset in the short run and a more integrated brain in the long run. “In fact, research shows that merely assigning a name or label to what we feel literally calms down the activity of the emotional circuitry in the right hemisphere” (Siegel and Bryson, 2012, p. 29). In other words, if our goal is to help our child restore calm, the quickest and healthiest thing we can do is listen to him, help him name what is wrong, and let him tell us the story of how it happened. When we do this, we accomplish the short-term goal of calming him down and often avoid the spiral into a tantrum. We also give him tools and the neurological framework to be able to fully feel, honor, and work with his emotions in a healthy way. When we default to “You’re okay” mode, we fail to support him in developing a brain that supports future health and happiness.

And in some cases, saying “You’re okay” to an upset child may actually make her more upset because trying to reason (a left-brain activity) while experiencing a flood of emotions (a right-brain activity) is simply not a very effective strategy. “Steady denial of feelings can confuse and enrage kids...[and] also teaches them not to know what their feelings are—not to trust them” (Faber and Mazlish, 1980, p. 2). Ideally, parents and teachers can first connect with the child through compassionate listening and body language, letting the child know he is safe and that we feel for him. Once we connect and help the child tell his story, usually he will relax. And then, after he has calmed down, we can be more effective in our attempts to problem-solve, set boundaries, or give information. It is “crucial to keep in mind that no matter how nonsensical and frustrating our child’s feelings may seem to us, they are important to our child. It is vital that we treat them as such in our response” (Siegel and Bryson, 2012, p. 24).

## How we respond to a child when he is upset has a huge impact on his emotional intelligence.

to cultivate in their children. The most effective way to cultivate emotional intelligence is to learn to understand, accept, and work with one’s emotions. This also contributes immensely to a person’s happiness, health, and success. As Dr. Laura Markham states, “The ability of a human being to manage his emotions in a healthy way will determine the quality of his life—maybe even more fundamentally than his IQ. Even a child’s academic success is determined as much by EQ as by IQ” (2012, p. 95).

EQ is like IQ in that we are born with an innate starting point, and it can be strengthened or diminished with nourishment or neglect. Adults can nurture a child’s EQ by helping him talk through his emotions and by listening when he works to explain what he feels. Any moment a child is telling us or showing us that she is not okay is a moment we can use to help build her EQ. And conversely, each time we tell a child she is okay when she is telling us she is not, we diminish her EQ and lose a precious opportunity to help her build her self-awareness, self-acceptance, and empathy. By falling back on “You’re okay,” we actually

When we encourage children to talk about their feelings and to recount their experiences, we also help them cultivate authenticity. Research professor Brené Brown writes that the ability to be authentic—to have the courage to speak your heart and be seen fully—is a key to wholehearted living. “Owning our story and loving ourselves through the process is the bravest thing we will ever do” (2010, p. ix). In her research, she found that people who dared to be vulnerable in this way lived lives full of joy, creativity, connection, and meaning. When we discount a child’s experience, we send her the message that her story isn’t worth telling. When we stop and listen to how she is feeling, we let her know that her experiences and perspective matter. By giving a child many positive experiences of being truly seen by people he loves and trusts, we help him cultivate the courage to be authentic and vulnerable.

Children who have a high EQ, strongly integrated brains, and a deep trusting connection with their parents and other adults will have fewer tantrums, will find calm again more quickly after traumas, and will be able to communicate their needs and emotions more clearly. All of this can make parenting both easier and more enjoyable!

It can be hard to allow ourselves to feel our own emotions, making it difficult to listen and empathize when our children are experiencing strong emotions. But to help our children cultivate their emotional intelligence, we as parents have to raise our own emotional intelligence quotients. This is the gift that the work of parenting constantly offers us—our children give us the inspiration to heal and grow. As Montessori observed so long ago, “It is clear that nature includes among the missions she has entrusted to the child, the mission of arousing us adults to reach a higher level...to a higher plane of the spirit...” (Montessori, 1995, p. 286). As we adults become more comfortable with our emotional lives, it will be easier to have a more refined approach to our child’s upsets. Also, as we grow, our children will start to mirror our growth—literally. “As children develop, their brains ‘mirror’ their parent’s brain” (Siegel and Bryson, 2012, p. xii).

## WHAT WORKS

In a nutshell, what works is to treat each moment of a child’s distress as a teachable moment. When your child is expressing that she is hurt, angry, frustrated, or scared (or—on the other hand—happy, excited, or elated), stop and listen. It doesn’t matter if you think she isn’t really hurting. Treat it seriously. Get down to her eye level and give her your full attention. Some

comforting physical contact, like a cuddle or rub on the back, may help.

Next, show you are listening by reflecting back to your child how you think he is feeling. “I hear that you are mad right now!” or, “You are sad. It can be disappointing to have to leave a party before you are ready.” If he is not able to clearly express himself and his feelings, take an educated guess. “I see you are stomping your feet, and the look on your face makes me think you are feeling frustrated.” This step can be especially helpful for younger children, as it offers language that supports their ability to understand and express themselves. It can also help an older child to start talking about what it is that is bothering him. For example, “You seem sad right now” can open the conversation more easily than “How are you?” It is important not to assume you know how a child feels but to use language that shows your empathic process. “You look upset. I saw you fall. It can be scary to fall so suddenly.” Invite the child to tell her story or to show you how it happened: “Can you tell me what happened?” or “You fell! Can you show me where you scraped your knee?”

Finally, ask the child what he needs. “Do you need a hug or a drink of water?” If it is an older child and the problem-solving is more involved, wait till the child is calm and collected again. Your calm presence throughout the process will communicate “I am here with you, and you are in no danger.”

When we take the time to skillfully respond to children who are upset, we help them integrate their brains, develop their emotional intelligence, and practice communication skills that will last for a lifetime. We also give them the priceless gift of being compassionately witnessed during a challenging moment. We are there to support them, even if we don’t understand what the big deal is. (If it is a big deal to them, it is a big deal to us.) That kind of compassion is contagious: Children exposed to it will have an easier time blooming into their own authentic selves and will be more likely to respond to others in need with the same presence and compassion.

OLYNDA SMITH has 7 years of experience teaching in a Montessori classroom (Early Childhood). She is also an E-500 Yoga Alliance-certified and an Anusara-certified yoga teacher. Contact her at [olynda@wildheartyyoga.com](mailto:olynda@wildheartyyoga.com).

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## GALLERY

1 Mukilteo Montessori, Mukilteo, WA 2 Ross Montessori Charter School, Carbondale, CO 3 School in the Hills, Austin, TX 4 Philadelphia Montessori Charter School, Philadelphia, PA 5 Richmond Montessori School, Richmond, VA 6 Acton Montessori School, Acton, MA 7 Cambridge Montessori School, Cambridge, MA 8 Reston Montessori School, Reston, VA 9 Summit-Questa Montessori School, Davie, FL

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# Realistically Applying Montessori in the Home: One Parent's Story

By Jocelyn Tatum

**I am high-energy and generally not patient. But my son and I share a passion for cooking, and while it takes longer for him to help and makes a huge mess, I engage him, because it makes him feel important and proud.**

In my profession as a journalist, I was taught never to assume anything. Also, fellow parents told me parenting would come naturally and to be wary of all the parenting books out there, since they tend to contradict each other. But I wrongly assumed that, before the age of 4, children were just tiny beings who merely needed love and attention. I had no idea their capabilities and intellect started at such a young age.

Then a 24-year-old part-time nanny named Lindsay walked into our lives, when our son, Jet, was 6 months old. She taught in a Montessori environment while completing her college degree in Child Development. While my husband and I had heard of Montessori, we didn't know much about it. We would come home from work and find Jet's room rearranged. Soon small baskets arrived with realistic (not cartoony) animals, bugs, and tactile items, followed by small containers for him to open and spools with thread. At 7 months, Jet had learned to unscrew water bottles. Lindsay also read to him habitually, which I believe laid the foundation of his passion for reading.

We were amazed by her ambition but not sure if it would make a difference. At 11 months old, Jet began walking, and soon she had him carrying his dirty laundry to a small basket we bought for him. At that point, I became a firm believer in Montessori.

When Jet turned 18 months old, we enrolled him in Montessori Children's House, in Fort Worth, TX, for 5 hours a week. He thrived as he helped his teacher in the garden, studied butterflies, took scraps out to the composter, and learned about life cycles. I was further convinced of the benefits of Montessori.

But there was one problem: consistency. Lindsay was only with us a few hours a week (I worked part-

time). Each time she left, the shelves and baskets quickly fell into chaos. We were always busy during the week and bad about keeping it up on weekends, especially because we knew Lindsay would return on Monday to restore order.

After 2½ years, our Mary Poppins left for good, and I was a mess. I cried for 3 weeks. I missed her and realized just how much I had relied on her for advice on raising my child the Montessori way. Though she sent me articles on how to apply Montessori in the home to match the child's level of development, I learn better when shown. This spurred me to do my own research. I attended seminars at Jet's school on toileting and productive communication. I read books: *Montessori from the Start: The Child at Home, from Birth to Age Three*, by Paula Polk Lillard and Lynn Lillard Jessen, and *The Absorbent Mind*, by Maria Montessori. I practiced organizing Jet's art studio into categories and worked hard to let him exercise his independence while I patiently drank my wine. From Delores J. Erby (*A Montessori Manual for Parents of Preschoolers*, p. 16), I learned that "a small child works slowly, deliberately, joyfully. He must have time enough to complete his projects, so the adult has to learn patience and respect this lack of hurry."

I am high-energy and generally not patient. But my son and I share a passion for cooking, and while it takes longer for him to help and makes a huge mess, I engage him, because it makes him feel important and proud. Jet has his own step stool and moves it around, to each "station" in the kitchen. In the morning, he helps make smoothies with fruit, oatmeal, almond butter, and kale, or he scrambles eggs and makes toast. He measures out

my coffee beans (two tiny fistfuls) and grinds them for me. There are often coffee beans all over the floor, but I (an avowed neat freak) am trying to learn to relax. If I had never been introduced to Montessori, I would have kept him out of the kitchen while I cooked, just as my mother and grandmother did with me. My husband and I have also given him tasks, like feeding his own fish, taking out the trash, washing his own dishes, and walking and feeding his dog. You should see the smile on his face.

“Respect your child’s individuality,” Erby writes in her manual (p. 14). There is a fine line between breaking a child’s will and redirecting him. I want my child to have a strong will; I believe it fosters independent thinking. Giving Jet choices within reason while not telling him what to do all of the time is a difficult balance to achieve, but we try our best. For example, he doesn’t have to sit at the dinner table, but if he chooses not to, he may sit at a small table next to us so we can all engage in conversation. He can choose his favorite green as a side for dinner; it’s not okay to eat just bread and cheese. Having a choice brings him so much joy (and gets the greens down). Now, at age 3, he eats smoked salmon, sashimi, and raw kale. His favorite drink is kale, spinach, and apple juice. Patience pays off.

“Arrange the child’s room neatly and simply... too much stimulation can be as undesirable as environmental deprivation,” Erby says (p. 17). I’ve been to houses where children have way too many toys in incoherent piles all over the house. They don’t know what to do with the piles and ultimately lobby for yet another trip to the toy store, which they usually get. Our house would be the same way had Lindsay not helped us to understand Montessori. She kept out a limited selection of toys and would switch them weekly to keep him interested. Because of this, Jet always thought he was getting something new when, really, much was recycled.

Jet’s toys—puzzles, plastic bugs, pretend grocery store items, blocks, art supplies, Legos, and train sets—are in his room, stored in separate bins within his reach. He knows where everything is and knows that he must put one bin’s contents back before he starts a new project.

Do I stick to this rule daily? No. This morning we were rushing out the door to school because we couldn’t find his “lovey” for naptime. I didn’t have the patience to watch him pick up his race cars and remind him to focus, so I did it for him and out we went. The morning before was the same. I am sure he is confused by this inconsistency, but I also know that life isn’t a textbook.

“Sit down at the child’s side and make sure you have his undivided attention” (Erby, p. 17). This is

so difficult to do in today’s world, which is filled with many distractions—work, email, social media, television, laundry, dishes, and smartphones. I will be honest: Sometimes playing race cars for an hour kills my knees and bores me to tears, so I pick up my phone and check Facebook and email. (I prefer Legos myself, but race cars are often my son’s choice.) Over time, I have watched Jet’s behavior change when he had my undivided attention. He does not act out when I listen to him and look him in the eye. One afternoon, just a few months after he had been potty-trained, I was stuck on a work call longer than I had intended. Jet purposefully urinated on our hardwood floors to tell me: “Mom, I need you to get off the phone now and play with me.” He is usually right. There is a time for work and a time to spend with my child. That was not a time for me to be working.

Erby also suggests inviting the child to imitate what the parent does, whether in the kitchen or folding laundry. She advises staying close at first to offer assistance and then letting the child act alone. Since I am a control freak, this is a challenge, but I have a boy who is careless and fearless. I think if I let him finish cutting that carrot his finger will be gone. On snow skis, just weeks after turning 3, all he wanted was to tuck and beeline down the bunny slope, no matter how many times he crashed. So, I find a balance that works for both of us. I let him peel the carrot on his own and help guide his hand over the knife, scooting his little fingers out of harm’s way. I also wait for him at the bottom of the bunny slopes to slow the crash.

“Parents must develop the power to observe, to enjoy, and to accept their child” (Erby, p. 12). Annie Dillard once wrote that how we spend our days is how we spend our lives. We are so caught up in being productive that we forget to be present (2013). We forget to stop and enjoy the world around us, including our children, and may one day realize we have floated through a life largely un-lived and unexperienced. Montessori makes parenting fun and has challenged me to slow down and experience my child with joy. It has allowed us as a family to enjoy our child, and, in turn, for him to enjoy us. Though finding the discipline to stay consistent is hard, and we’re not always perfect, practicing Montessori in our home has helped our family to flourish, not merely float.

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**He measures out my coffee beans (two tiny fistfuls) and grinds them for me. There are often coffee beans all over the floor, but I (an avowed neat freak) am trying to learn to relax.**



# AN EXCHANGE WITH CHARLES EISENSTEIN

By Peter Piché

Charles Eisenstein is a public speaker, self-described “degrowth activist,” and the author of several books, including *The Ascent of Humanity*, *Sacred Economics*, and *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible*.

He says of himself:

*I was born in 1967 and was a very sensitive, intellectual, and dreamy child. I was always consumed by questions like, “Where did I come from?” “Why am I here?” [and] “Where am I going?” So, of*

*course, embedded as I was in a culture that sees science and reason as the source of truth, I tried to “figure out” the answers...*

*Crises in health, marriage, and money forced me to let go of a “life under control.” In my helplessness, I accepted help, discovering a generous universe that has always met my needs, somehow, in unexpected ways...*

*My main interest now is in exploring the boundaries of what is “possible” according to our received beliefs, received habits, received technologies, and received ways of knowing. For humanity to take that Next Step, we are going to have to violate what is politically practical, socially practical, and even technologically practical. ([www.charleseisenstein.net/about-charles](http://www.charleseisenstein.net/about-charles))*



Charles Eisenstein



Peter Piché

**PETER PICHÉ:** When I first read your book *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible* (2013), I came across a passage in the chapter entitled “Hope,” in which you talk about how, during your children’s 3 years in a Montessori Children’s House, you gained a feeling of confidence that there was a golden glow planted inside of them. You write that perhaps a year or two in a noncoercive, peace-cultivating, respectful place may not be enough “to overcome the brutal apparatus of separation that governs modern childhood...” but that “maybe to be in a sanctuary of love and respect every day for one or two years during such a formative stage imprints a person with a tendency toward compassion, security, self-love, and self-respect” ([www.charleseisenstein.net/back-to-play](http://www.charleseisenstein.net/back-to-play)). Now that your children are older, do you think those seeds have blossomed, or do you think the “apparatus of separation” conditions it out of children when they go to traditional schools?

**CHARLES EISENSTEIN:** I think having had that formative [Montessori] experience inoculated them against fully accepting the norms and assumptions of society that tend to conflict with those of Montessori education. When I wrote the passage you referred to, I was also thinking about all the children in that class, many of whom went on to traditional and/or standard education. At least they had an experience for a time that was noncoercive, where they had freedom to choose their own activities. Having had that experience, it becomes harder to believe the world is “just like this.” There is a latent knowledge, especially if you’ve been in an environment that nurtures the type of experience found in a Montessori setting, that says, “It’s not supposed to be this way,” when education becomes oppressive. My children had many experiences of freedom and noncoercion and choice throughout their childhood, but of course they’ve also been subject to some of the pressures of society, so I can’t say for certain that this was because of Montessori school, but I strongly remember it as a “golden era.”

**PP:** In a study of 1,000 three-year-olds, Caspi et al. (2003) found that the personality traits exhibited at age 3 were essentially the same at age 26, even after profound life changes. This lends much weight to the importance of those first years in a person’s life. You wrote a handbook ([www.charleseisenstein.net/the-deschooling-convivium](http://www.charleseisenstein.net/the-deschooling-convivium)) on “deschooling.” What does deschooling mean to you?

**CE:** Deschooling is designed to undo the habits formed by schooling: giving away your intellectual authority to someone else; trying to please authority; asking permission or waiting for the curriculum of life to be presented to you; or gaining self-approval through competition,

getting a better score than someone else, or through approval granted by institutions. A lot of the habits have to do with the relationship to authority. These are the meta-lessons that we learn in school. For anyone who has been through public schooling, it takes some work to deprogram these habits.

**PP:** What you just said reminds me of a curriculum that I really loved called Non-Conformists in Human History, which basically frames all the leaders enshrined in history as people who followed their own program, not the program designed for them.

**CE:** Yes. What you tend to learn in school is that the way to be successful is to try really hard to follow the institution’s program—to excel on the axis of success and failure that’s presented to you. You will become extraordinary in the future if you get A-pluses and then go to the best university, graduate summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa, then go to the best graduate school and graduate at the top. People who do this will be the most successful, and those who do just okay will be moderately successful, and those who flunk out will end up in the gutter. That’s what school implicitly teaches—but as that curriculum you referenced demonstrates, it’s probably the people who don’t comply with that whole system who end up truly innovating.

**PP:** I agree—and yet you went to Yale and got two degrees, one in mathematics and one in philosophy. What value has traditional schooling in that sense had for you?

**CE:** I had some good teachers. I’m not saying that the entire enterprise of education is worthless. I’ve read some great literature; I was exposed to interesting ideas and philosophies; I studied mathematics. These are valuable studies that have helped me on my path. I won’t say having a degree from Yale opens doors for me—because I haven’t tried to go through those doors—but the prestige of having that degree does help my work, because I can’t be easily dismissed or written off: “Charles went to Yale, so he must not be too stupid.” I hesitate, though, to resort to flaunting my university education because if I’m then saying you should trust me because I have a degree in mathematics from Yale, then I’m also saying, in general, that you should trust people who have advanced degrees from fancy institutions. But mostly what those institutions are telling you is very conventional. They don’t help people break free from the narratives that run our civilization. In fact, those institutions are key in maintaining the narratives that run our civilization. That’s their job, actually.



**I think having had that formative [Montessori] experience inoculated them against fully accepting the norms and assumptions of society that tend to conflict with those of Montessori education.**

**PP:** I'd like to talk a little bit about private schools and elite colleges, which seem to be available only to so-called "high achievers," or to the wealthy. The schools accept a certain percentage of students in need, but by and large, these are institutions for the haves, not the have-nots. The majority of Montessori schools in the United States are private. I've worked in private Montessori education my entire career. It annoys me that the best education is not more widely available. Where do you believe a more just, beautiful world comes from in education? Are the people living in relative comfort really going to be the change-makers? Will their children become change-makers?

**CE:** I don't think that going just to a Montessori Early Childhood program is going to [help children] change very much about the world we live in. I think it's helpful, but I think that if they spend their entire childhood in Montessori education or other forms of education that challenge the apparatus of separation (so-called "democratic schools" or "democratic free schools," Waldorf schools, or other nature-based schools), then regardless of their middle-class or upper-class background, they will be less likely to be wholehearted participants in the world-destroying machine and in the exploitative institutions of our culture. It is less likely that you're going to conform to the life-denying values of "the system" if you haven't gone through the system's schooling, so it does prepare people to be agents of social and political change. You could try to write off private Montessori schools and other schools like them, but to do that you must write off the educational philosophy behind them. Two or three years of Montessori education are not going to reverse societal conditioning. But assuming that this formative preschool experience can be reinforced and continued, regardless of your social class, it will empower you to be a change agent.

Now, it's a shame that people outside the upper or middle class don't have as much access to Montessori education. I would love to see Montessori education even more widely available to all people, but I don't think you can say that it's simply a way to maintain a system of privilege in our society. I'm happy if anyone is getting a Montessori education, regardless of their class, and I'd like to see more people get Montessori education. I would love to see people with wealth set up schools in places where there are no good alternatives to public education, such as in inner cities, or in Appalachia. That said, it really cannot be done through the charter school movement, when charter schools are held to the same testing standards of the public system. At the current moment, I don't see how it could happen

within the public school system, unless there was massive, massive reform in public schools. I think we'd be better off without any public schools at all. People consider it a civic virtue to send their kids to public school, but look at the history of public education. It was, and has been, a technology of social control. It has taught people to obey authority and to submit to tedious work, to become willing functionaries in the system. I think we'd be better off with a clean slate. For many parents, school basically just serves as a babysitter.

**PP:** A lot of people hearing that are going to say: How do we do anything differently? It's not possible to undo all this complexity in the system. What would the children do?

**CE:** Well, children would play all day. What I like about Montessori, and why I like it better than some other models, is that the container for that play is healthy and wholesome. You don't have video monitors, video games, or televisions, and other things like that.

**PP:** I read an essay of yours entitled "Imagine a 3-D World," in which you talk about going to the latest Hobbit film with your son and a friend, and you joke with them, saying: "Wouldn't it be cool if the world was in 3-D?" But they don't get the joke that of course the world *is* in 3-D. Instead, they raised your consciousness about something that seems to be becoming more evident every day in our culture: that reality is boring compared with what we can create on a screen in the fantasy world. Can education really compete with what is available in the media world today? Do you worry about what screen time is doing to youth?

**CE:** This is an important question. One reason why the online world is so much more exciting is that there is not much going on outside anymore. Everybody else is inside playing video games. To some extent, the skills, the ability to engage in imaginative play, have atrophied. If we just up and banned screens and said we're not going to let our kids be on these screens before a certain age, there would be transition. This often happens in the Sudbury school model [a type of democratic school], when a child is so used to having every moment prescribed that he doesn't know what to do. He tests it out [freedom] for a while and then, after a transitional period, begins to ask himself: What do I want to do really with my life? With my time? Ideally, the environment would be rich enough for the child to gravitate toward and grab on to and learn. I think that too much entertainment and video games can prevent children from developing skills for

**I would love to see people with wealth set up schools in places where there are no good alternatives to public education, such as in inner cities, or in Appalachia.**

imagination. Yet I don't want to write them off entirely. I think that screens can be especially damaging for children under a certain age. I limited my own children's access to video games until they were 9 or 10, and then I relaxed control, and in the teenage years I did not exercise control.

**PP:** Is there a proper role in the transformation of human consciousness for the types of technology at our disposal today?

**CE:** I'd probably have to say yes because everything that is happening is happening for an evolutionary purpose. But I think there is also a countermovement now. My 19-year-old is becoming less digital. For a time, he was composing electronic music, and now he's learning guitar and other less-digitized instruments.

**PP:** Montessori talked about navigating a path between freedom and discipline. She intended teachers to be "guides on the side," rather than "sages on the stage" (King, 1993) and spoke of an inherent tension between freedom and discipline. Can you talk about your thoughts about how much freedom is too much and when discipline becomes coercion?

**CE:** Students will become mischievous when they are seeking boundaries. If the boundaries are not apparent, they'll keep looking for them until they find out where they are. Their behavior may become more obnoxious until they find a boundary. Eventually they will find one! It may happen that the adults will get totally fed up. That's not ideal. It's not ideal to find a boundary lying in the unconscious psyche of the teacher (or the parent) who gets so triggered that they lash out or start shouting. It's better to consider proactively what the appropriate boundaries are. Montessori is about freedom within boundaries. I don't know if there's a recipe for where the boundaries should be. I think that is a matter of the surrounding culture or the intuition of the parent. Furthermore, different boundaries are appropriate for different children. Some children need much tighter boundaries, some looser. Something I've sometimes struggled with as a parent has been not providing enough of a boundary. Having a boundary seems to be the way discipline is maintained.

**PP:** Dr. Montessori might have argued that the best way to create freedom within limits was to look at the environment itself and set it up so that it was inherently self-correcting. That way the responsibility for boundaries becomes the work of the community of children,

the elders, or is present in the way the design of the environment is set up. Do you subscribe to this idea?

**CE:** I'm thinking about how, in a Montessori environment, when you're done with your work, you have to put it away and put away your mat. The design of the school is conducive to that. There's a place where your work goes, there's a place where your mat goes, and that's what the in-built order of the space demands, but that doesn't guarantee that a particular child will in fact put away his work and roll up his mat. If he just wanders off without doing those things, there has to be some kind of intervention, and other students might help in that intervention, but you're also sometimes going to need the intervention of the teacher to remind the child. But you've seen then that the design of the space is so important, because the teacher, instead of relying on personal authority—as in "put it away because I said so," which crosses into coercion and power—can say: The mat belongs here, the work belongs there, let's put it back where it belongs. It's fundamentally not authoritarian. It is not making a virtue out of obedience. It's making a virtue out of maintaining an orderly commons. I think that's a key distinction.

**PP:** Montessori education has, for many decades extended into the elementary and adolescent years, including high school. There aren't yet any Montessori universities, though there are Montessori diplomas and master's degree programs for teachers. Montessori at the Elementary level introduces the idea of Cosmic Education, that each being or each expression of matter here on earth and in the universe has a purpose that is uniquely its own. That idea is transmitted to the child through story. I was struck by the similarity in your work, to your concept of "interbeing," and that everything is connected. How do you feel about the idea that everything has a cosmic task?

**CE:** I fundamentally believe that. That is one of the main threads of my book *Sacred Economics*. It asks: What does an economic and financial system that recognizes the inherent worth in all expressions of matter on the planet look like, rather than a system that manipulates people into doing work that is necessary to maintain the machine, or that is not an expression of their highest gifts or their highest care? What would a system look like that did encourage and reward the expression of one's highest potential? Really, that is what Montessori schooling is supposed to be about. It's not about how I am going to parlay my gifts into a lucrative profession or simply make a living. That seems to be the essential question of ordinary school. I believe Montessori's premise is true, not only for human beings, but for all beings: plants, the fox,

**What would a system look like that did encourage and reward the expression of one's highest potential? Really, that is what Montessori schooling is supposed to be about.**

water, the sun, they all have a different cosmic purpose that they long to fulfill, and if not fulfilled, we (all these beings) become rebellious and want to break free.

**PP:** In your essay “Back to Play” ([www.charleseisenstein.net/back-to-play](http://www.charleseisenstein.net/back-to-play)), you agreed with Daniel Greenberg’s assessment of Sudbury Valley School, in Framingham, MA, when he said, “Everyone knows that the subject matter itself isn’t that hard. What’s hard, virtually impossible, is beating it into the heads of youngsters who hate every step” (1995). You agree with him that one of the myths of the educational system is that learning is supposed to be hard. You challenge that. I wondered if you could explain what you mean, and if you see value in struggle and failure, and, if so, in what context?

**CE:** A lot of [traditional] schoolwork seems to involve making yourself do something you don’t really want to do. I’m not going to deny that there are things that are difficult to learn. Mathematics can be difficult. Learning a language can be difficult. There are times when you must exert enormous effort. There are times when I’ve learned a huge amount, and I did have to focus and pay attention. I still wouldn’t say it was “hard.” I learned how to read Chinese. It required dedication and attention. It did not happen by just sitting in front of flash cards. I had to do it again and again and concentrate. But where does concentration come from? Does it come from being forced to concentrate? You can force someone if you scare them enough, but I have a 2-year-old now who is so deeply engaged in what he’s doing that it’s like the whole outside world doesn’t exist. That’s the state I would get into and that feels akin to the state of play. Also, I’ve had those moments when I was trying and trying and it was only in the letting go that knowledge and understanding came. It doesn’t always have to involve one’s own choice either. It can be set up by someone else, but I believe that effective learning doesn’t happen when one is in a state of anxiety, and if I have the anxiety of “what is going to happen if I don’t learn this,” then I’m less likely to be able to focus my attention.

**PP:** At the end of *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible*, you included a parable that you wrote. Montessori and her son created a series of Great Lessons for the Elementary-aged child, and I believe that your parable could be included as a Great Lesson for the adolescent, as a message of hope for the world in which they live, as they are discovering how to take part in social life. Could we have permission to reprint that parable?

**CE:** Yes.

## A PARABLE FROM *THE MORE BEAUTIFUL WORLD OUR HEARTS KNOW IS POSSIBLE*

Once upon a time, a great tribe of people lived in a world far away from ours. Whether far away in space, or in time, or even outside of time, we do not know. They lived in a state of enchantment and joy that few of us today dare to believe could exist, except in those exceptional peak experiences when we glimpse the true potential of life and mind.

One day, the shaman of the tribe called a meeting. They gathered around him, and he spoke very solemnly. “My friends,” he said, “there is a world that needs our help. It is called Earth, and its fate hangs in the balance. Its humans have reached a critical point in their collective birthing, and they will be stillborn without our help. Who would like to volunteer for a mission to this time and place, and render service to humanity?”

“Tell us more about his mission,” they asked.

“I am glad you asked, because it is no small thing. I will put you into a deep, deep trance, so complete that you will forget who you are. You will live a human life, and in the beginning you will completely forget your origins. You will forget even our language and your own true name. You will be separated from the wonder and beauty of our world, and from the love that bathes us all. You will miss it deeply, yet you will not know what it is you are missing. You will only remember the love and beauty that we know to be normal as a longing in your heart. Your memory will take the form of an intuitive knowledge, as you plunge into the painfully marred earth, that a more beautiful world is possible.

“As you grow up in that world, your knowledge will be under constant assault. You will be told in a million ways that a world of destruction, violence, drudgery, anxiety, and degradation is normal. You may go through a time when you are completely alone, with no allies to affirm your knowledge of a more beautiful world. You may plunge into a depth of despair that we, in our world of light, cannot imagine. But no matter what, a spark of knowledge will never leave you. A memory of your true origin will be encoded in your DNA. That spark will lie within you, inextinguishable, until one day it is awakened.

“You see, even though you will feel, for a time, utterly alone, you will not be alone. I will send you assistance, help that you will experience as miraculous, experiences that you will describe as transcendent. For a few moments or hours or days, you will reawaken to the beauty

**It can be set up by someone else, but I believe that effective learning doesn’t happen when one is in a state of anxiety, and if I have the anxiety of “what is going to happen if I don’t learn this,” then I’m less likely to be able to focus my attention.**

and the joy that is meant to be. You will see it on earth, for even though the planet and its people are deeply wounded, there is beauty there still, projected from past and future onto the present as a promise of what is possible and a reminder of what is real.

“You will also receive help from each other. As you begin to awaken to your mission, you will meet others of our tribe. You will recognize them by your common purpose, values, and intuitions, and by the similarity of the paths you have walked. As the condition of the planet Earth reaches crisis proportions, your paths will cross more and more. The time of loneliness, the time of thinking you might be crazy, will be over.

“You will find the people of your tribe all over the Earth and become aware of them through the long-distance communication technologies used on that planet. But the real shift, the real quickening, will happen in face-to-face gatherings in special places on Earth. When many of you gather together, you will launch a new stage on your journey, a journey, which, I assure you, will end where it began. Then, the mission that lay unconscious within you will flower into consciousness. Your intuitive rebellion against the world presented you as normal will become an explicit quest to create a more beautiful one.

“In the time of loneliness, you will always be seeking to reassure yourself that you are not crazy. You will do that by telling people all about what is wrong with the world, and you will feel a sense of betrayal when they don’t listen to you. You will be hungry for stories of wrongness, atrocity, and ecological destruction, all of which confirm the validity of your intuition that a more beautiful world exists. But after you have fully received the help I will send you, and the quickening of your gatherings, you will no longer need to do that. Because, you will Know. Your energy will thereafter turn toward actively creating that more beautiful world.”

A tribeswoman asked the shaman, “How do you know this will work? Are you sure your shamanic powers are great enough to send us on such a journey?”

The shaman replied, “I know it will work because I have done it many times before. Many have already been sent to Earth, to live human lives, and to lay the groundwork for the mission you will undertake now. I’ve been practicing! The only difference now is that many of you will venture there at once. What is new in the time you will live in is that the Gatherings are beginning to happen.”

A tribesman asked, “Is there a danger we will become lost in that world and never wake up from the shamanic trance? Is there a danger that the despair, the cynicism, the pain of separation will be so great that it will extinguish the spark of hope, the spark of our true selves and origin, and that we will be separated from our beloved ones forever?”

The shaman replied, “That is impossible. The more deeply you get lost, the more powerful the help I will send you. You might experience it at the time as a collapse of your personal world, the loss of everything important to you. Later you will recognize the gift within it. We will never abandon you.”

Another man asked, “Is it possible that our mission will fail, and that this planet, Earth, will perish?”

The shaman replied, “I will answer your question with a paradox. It is impossible that your mission will fail. Yet, its success hangs on your own actions. The fate of the world is in your hands. The key to this paradox lies within you, in the feeling you carry that each of your actions, even your personal, secret struggles within, has cosmic significance. You will know then, as you do now, that everything you do matters. God sees everything.”

There were no more questions. The volunteers gathered in a circle, and the shaman went to each one. The last thing each was aware of was the shaman blowing smoke in his face. They entered a deep trance and dreamed themselves into the world where we find ourselves today.

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# WHY SIXTH-GRADERS SHOULD BE IN A MONTESSORI UPPER ELEMENTARY PROGRAM

*By Robyn Breiman, MEd, and Betsy Coe, PhD*

**Experiencing the mastery and leadership possibilities of the final year in the 3-year cycle of Upper Elementary is a significant opportunity for children to consolidate strengths they have developed.**

In 2014, the AMS School Accreditation Commission, with the support of the AMS Board of Directors, reaffirmed the importance of 3-year multiage classrooms, making that 3-year range the standard for accreditation for Montessori Early Childhood, Lower Elementary, and Upper Elementary programs (American Montessori Society, 2014). Still, there are many schools that struggle with where to best “place” their tweens, the sixth-grade students, who are usually 11 when they start sixth grade and turn 12 over the school year. The question is, Are they best served in Upper Elementary or Middle School classrooms?

It is our belief that a student’s sixth-grade year in a Montessori program should be in an Upper Elementary classroom. Experiencing the mastery and leadership possibilities of the final year in the 3-year cycle of Upper Elementary is a significant opportunity for children to consolidate strengths they have developed. Being “known” (by teachers and peer groups) and feeling safe and challenged helps these young people in the construction of their strongest selves. In their communities and within the framework of the broad and deep Montessori curriculum, students practice effective self-expression based on self-awareness and appreciation for their own individual gifts and quirks. This healthy experience of personal power is a great solidifier of the self and a bolster for facing the challenges of the next plane of development.

The wisdom of the 3-year cycle, that opportunity to move from first-year newbie to second-year experienced to third-year mentor in all areas—social, emotional, academic—while building on previous experiences, applying previous knowledge, and seamlessly moving into new levels, is one of the most effective and successful elements of a Montessori program. This is especially true for children in their tween years, since few children develop at the same rate in both social and academic realms.

Why do so many Montessori programs “lose” their sixth-graders, then? In discussions with Upper Elementary teachers and school administrators, we found common scenarios.

First, most parents and their children are faced with the inevitability of leaving Montessori education at some point in their school careers, since the majority of Montessori schools serve children only through age 6, while fewer schools offer Elementary programs, and fewer still have

Secondary offerings. Many conventional schools, both public and independent, begin Middle School with the sixth-grade year, so the attrition to Middle School often happens then. Some Montessori schools keep the sixth-grade level in their Upper Elementary program but report that many of these students don’t stay for that year. They leave because their peers are leaving, because their parents want to be sure to secure a place in the next program they’ll be attending, and because they (or their parents) don’t want them to miss the social orientation to that new program.

Some parents may hope or believe that a Middle School sixth-grade experience might be more “academic,” or more rigorous, than the familiar, familial Montessori multiage Elementary classroom. Parents may also be concerned about the size of a child’s peer group and may find the Montessori sixth-grade group (especially if there’s attrition) too small. Having friends is a primary focus for tween and teenage children, so it may seem more attractive to transition to a large school with lots of choices.

Even Montessorians sometimes argue that 21st-century children are different from those in Montessori’s time. Certainly they are more technologically savvy. Parents and teachers may consider sixth-grade students more sophisticated, and too mature, for their Elementary classroom. This argument is especially vehement when it comes to girls. However, we would argue that this sophistication and maturity is “surface,” and while exposure to media may give children the vocabulary and the content of an older person, their brains and their bodies haven’t evolved as quickly.

Finally, a 3-year multiage grouping is enormously challenging for teachers and schools, even more so for those schools, such as publicly funded programs, that are required to use high-stakes assessments. The breadth and depth of curriculum at every level can be overwhelming, and managing 3 years of curricula sequences takes planning, organization, stamina, and creative energy. Some teachers, particularly if they come to Montessori from a conventional teaching background, find managing the 3-year cycle too difficult. And sixth-grade studies are really daunting, even more so if one is trying to present them authentically, using hands-on materials, creating opportunities for autonomous learning, and assessing individual students’ progress effectively. Because of all these pressures, teachers often do not advocate a 3-year grouping of fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-graders.

**Many educators and parents cite the physical maturity of students as a reason that sixth-graders should be moved from Upper Elementary to Middle School.**

The other typical rationale for moving sixth-grade students from an Upper Elementary program arises when a school wants to expand its program and open a Middle School. Having a successful Elementary program is a key ingredient for this type of expansion. But, since the first year of a new Middle School program would be a single seventh grade, enrollment could be relatively small. In response to this problem, many schools choose to move their sixth-graders into the new Middle School program, justifying the shift because it provides a new multiage grouping, more students for the Middle School classroom, and an incentive for families to keep their children in the school.

So what truly is the best fit for sixth-graders? In Montessori, the first three of the four planes of development (occurring from birth to age 18) are the touchstones for creating the prepared environment. The significant qualities and range of developmental needs characteristic of each plane are what the prepared environment honors. But sometimes both students and adults want to rush into the next plane. This is especially true at the kindergarten, sixth-grade, and high-school-senior levels. Our society fosters pushing and hurrying students, in hopes of better preparing them for what is next. However, the planes are not isolated but a continuum; the third plane builds upon the previous two. Ideally, students will have the richness of the first two planes as a starting point for the prepared environment of the third plane, or Adolescent level.

In Montessori schools, we acknowledge each plane as equally important. In our classrooms, we can provide students with experiences appropriate to their developmental levels and meet each individual where he or she is right now. This is the most effective way to support students to do their best in the future.

The third year of each 3-year cycle serves a distinct purpose for the student in a Montessori classroom. It allows the student to synthesize knowledge, to step up to a position of leadership in the community, to be a role model for younger students, and to be a valued peer teacher. According to Stephen Covey (2006), you really do not know something until you can teach it. Why take these gifts away from students?

Parents and teachers confirm that, toward the end of the school year, students who are ready to move on are a challenge. Kindergartners drive the Early Childhood teachers crazy, sixth-graders exhibit adolescent angst, and twelfth-graders get senioritis. This is normal and indicative of students gearing up for a transition. But at the beginning of the school year, appropriate challenges for that year can and should thoroughly engage those older students. Ideally, these appropriate challenges maintain students' momentum throughout the entire school year.

David Elkind, in *All Grown Up and No Place to Go* (1998), talks about providing “markers” for students. Markers, or capstone projects, are special opportunities for those third-year children that engage them and help solidify their strengths, thus supporting their transition to the next level. The notion of markers is consistent with Montessori's ideas about rights and responsibilities; that is, when you take on more responsibility, you can handle more rights, which leads to more independence and thus builds a scaffolding of self-regulation skills.

Many educators and parents cite the physical maturity of students as a reason that sixth-graders should be moved from Upper Elementary to Middle School. But these children's bodies can be misleading. In *Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence*, developmental psychologist Laurence Steinberg (2014) discusses the recent trend toward the earlier physical maturity of both girls and boys. He points to research that indicates an overall rise in several factors over the past several decades that may cause early puberty: childhood obesity, premature births, excessive light exposure (mostly from electronic devices), endocrine disruptors (chemicals found, among other places, in plastics, pesticides, hair-care products that throw off hormonal functioning), and family stress.

Though physical maturation is happening earlier (related to factors listed above), it isn't matched by earlier maturation in other areas of development. The prefrontal lobes of the brain evolve much more slowly. As Steinberg explains, “Adolescents' abilities to plan, think ahead, and control their impulses probably don't develop at a more accelerated pace today than a hundred years ago” (2014, p. 85). The gap between physical maturity and cognitive maturity contributes to emotional difficulties, since people treat these youngsters according to how they look, which, in turn, affects the way they act and feel about themselves. This can pose a problem when what appears to be an adult body reflects maturity and self-regulation levels more appropriate for their actual chronological ages. Early-maturing girls, said Steinberg, may be particularly at risk: “[They] are vulnerable to emotional stress in general, but especially so when they have a lot of male friends and when they are in school with older peers” (2014, p. 37).

In our experience over the last 30 years in visiting many Montessori Middle Schools, I (Betsy) have never seen sixth-graders fully integrated into classrooms with seventh- and eighth-graders. Typically, what happens is that the sixth-graders quickly separate themselves from the older students and end up working together as a single age group. This happens even when the teacher is credentialed and experienced in both Elementary I–II and Secondary.

These sixth-graders need the Upper Elementary program, with access to more advanced concrete materials and a developmentally appropriate planning and time-management structure. It is not fair to ask them to operate at the next plane or to ask their older classmates to function according to their younger classmates' needs.

So, if Upper Elementary is the right place for sixth-graders, what can a strong Montessori program do to counter the trend of attrition? Make the sixth-grade year a "not-to-be-missed" experience, with demanding, stimulating curricula. At The New School, in Cincinnati, OH, the sixth-grade year includes several exciting opportunities available only to "seniors." Many of these opportunities are just the 3rd year in a 3-year curriculum sequence, but because the match of learning activity opportunities with the interests of the children is so effective, students are eager to be involved. For example, sixth-grade math is wonderfully challenging but still hands-on, with materials for squaring, cubing, square and cube roots, and working in different base systems.

The New School also organizes "going out" activities that are specifically and exclusively for sixth-graders. For example, fourth- and fifth-year students study Early Humans and Great Civilizations, respectively, which then leads into American History study in the sixth year and a class trip to Washington, DC. Sixth-graders also study Human Biology, after having investigated Animals, Plants, and other Kingdoms in fourth and fifth grade. Human Biology study—such as Vital Functions of Humans and sexuality education—allows students to look at their own bodies and development, which they were doing anyway, and includes many guest speakers, field trips, and discussions about personal responsibility for one's own health. These third-year sequences build on the previous 2 years' studies; having that foundation and background makes the new studies more engaging.

Perhaps the most compelling part of The New School's sixth-grade curriculum is each student's opportunity to develop a senior project—a yearlong study culminating in a year-end paper and an oral presentation to the entire school community. Senior project topics are the student's choice, allowing each learner to immerse him/herself in something of intense interest and to become an expert. Senior projects are so engaging and make such an impression that even Lower Elementary students (and certainly fourth- and fifth-grade students) begin to think what their own projects will be. Sixth grade feels too exciting to miss!

As experienced Montessori Elementary and Secondary educators, we strongly believe that the best placement for Montessori students in the 6th year of Elementary education is in a Montessori Upper Elementary program.

This unwavering belief is based on our own experiences, years of observation in classrooms, discussions with Montessori teachers, our understanding of the breadth and depth of Montessori Elementary curriculum, and our commitment to an education that matches the range of developmental needs of students.

As Montessorians, we have experienced the synergistic effect of the 3-year age span, relatively unquestioned in Early Childhood and even Lower Elementary classrooms. The opportunity to grow up in a classroom, move into a leadership role, and become well known by teachers and peers, academically, socially, and emotionally, is a powerful support to becoming a competent, responsible, adaptive citizen and a lifelong learner.

We also recognize that adolescence launches a new plane of development, with a new set of characteristics and sensitivities. Older students are powerful role models. Being an older student is a key leadership experience in multiage classrooms, fostering valor and empathy, individuality and collaboration.

We believe in a robust Upper Elementary curriculum, including unique opportunities that challenge these students and motivate them to happily engage in sixth-grade learning. We advocate for strong and effective parent education programs to help parents feel comfortable with their commitment to Montessori education, even when it doesn't match conventional school organizations. We champion thoughtful Montessori school leadership, which supports developing a Montessori Middle School program with a deliberate, proactive approach.

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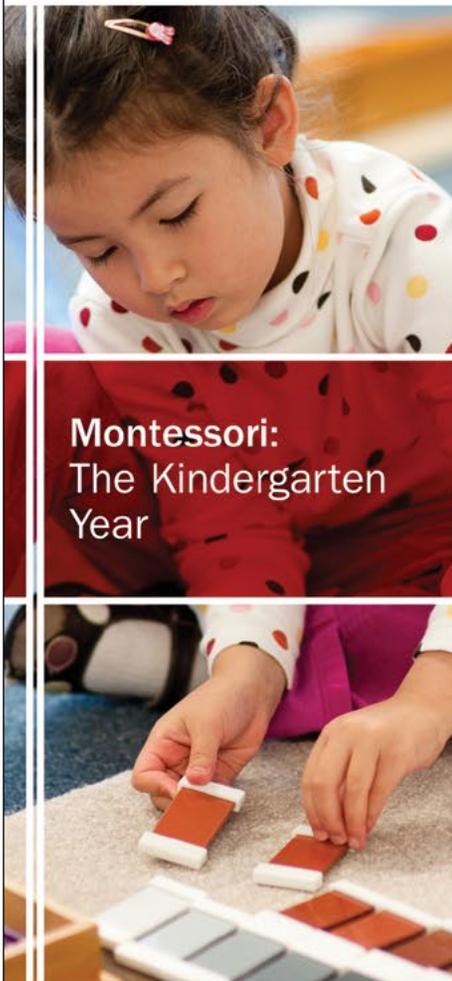
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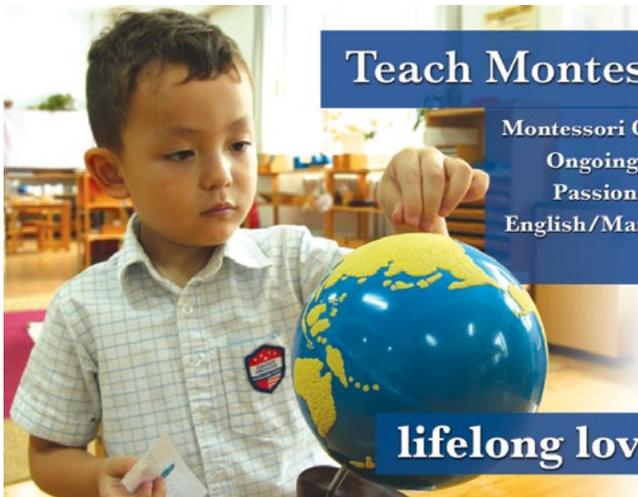
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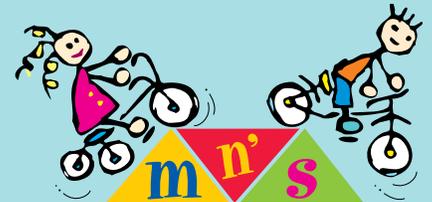
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One day, I noticed a child's jeans were ripped and pointed it out by saying, "You have a hole in your jeans." A 6-year-old boy standing close by heard me and said, "I have a hole in my underwear." A 3-year-old girl turned around and asked the boy, "Can I see? Can I see?"

**Yan Wang** Harborlight-Stoneridge Montessori School  
Beverly, MA

Years ago, a 3-year-old boy in my class came up to me and politely requested a lesson. He had seen a kindergarten doing a particular work the day before, and he wanted a chance, he said, to use "the circus work."

I bent my brain for a moment trying to think what materials he could possibly be referring to. Nothing in the room even came close to resembling something circus-like. I was about to ask him to show me where this material was when his face lit up with a triumphant smile.

"I remember the name now! I want a lesson on the Large Movable Acrobat!"

**Shannon Gorr** Nashoba Montessori School  
Lancaster, MA

I recently had the following exchange with Gobi, my 6-year-old son:

Gobi: I know how many inches there are in a foot.

Me: How many?

Gobi: 12 inches.

Me: Very good. How many feet are in a yard?

Gobi: It depends.

Me: On what?

Gobi: On how big the yard is.

**Jennifer Bomhoff Nitz**

New York, NY

During outdoor play, I saw a 3-year-old student fall inside of the play structure we refer to as "the treehouse." I climbed up the ladder, wiggled into the tiny house, and asked, "Are you okay?"

"No!" she cried. "I felled down and got hurt!"

"Where are you hurt?" I said.

With obvious irritation, she shouted, "I'm hurt IN THE TREEHOUSE!"

**Sharon K. Trumpy** Novi-Northville Montessori Center  
Novi, MI

*Send your funny and poignant stories to Carey Jones, at [careyjones@amshq.org](mailto:careyjones@amshq.org). Please include your name, your location, and if you're a teacher or an administrator, your school's name.*

# The Importance of Family Meals

By Jana Morgan Herman, MEd

Did you know there is a way to increase your children's vocabulary by tens of thousands of words, help them to become better listeners, allow them to express themselves more civilly, convey feelings of parental understanding, ensure they have higher nutrition levels, reduce their stress, and make them less likely to smoke or use drugs?

It's simple: Have a family meal together once a day.

By sharing meals together as a family, children learn firsthand what values are important to their family. Without thinking or planning, parents are showing their children how to converse with others in meaningful ways. Children watch as parents ask after each other and help console each other on a rough day, or celebrate milestones or achievements. They see how people who care about each other offer support and courtesy, learn to gauge others to see how they respond, and acquire a host of other important communication skills.

Children who eat dinner with their families learn more about their cultural (what, how, and when they eat), ethnic, and religious beliefs. A study from Emory University (Bohanek et al., 2006) shows that children who know a lot about their family history have a closer relationship to family members, higher self-esteem, and a greater sense of control over their lives. These benefits extend even into the teenage years! 71% of teens in a Columbia University study reported that catching up and spending time with family was the best part of family dinners. Research shows that children who eat family meals get better grades, are more motivated, and get along better with others (CASA, 2012). On the other hand, a 2011 study shows that children who do not have family meals are more likely to smoke, drink alcohol, try drugs, feel depressed, or have trouble at school (CASA, 2011). A team of researchers at the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health found that, even if the family members are not very close, having a meal together reduces the risk for many of these troubling behaviors among youth (Gengler, 2011).

It may take a bit of thinking and rearranging schedules, but family meals provide better outcomes than other after-school activities. So unless your child loves those activities, consider letting one or some go to make time for family meals. Additionally, meals eaten at home are usually healthier than meals eaten on the go, and children are likelier to eat a variety of foods that they prepare with you and benefit from learning how to plan a menu and shop for ingredients.

This practice may take a little getting used to, and, depending on your schedules, maybe a different meal would work better for you—think family

breakfast. In the end, having a meal together (without the TV on or phones at the table) provides an ideal context to grow together as a family. It's not surprising that, for as long as there have been people, celebrating—even brokering peace—has been done by breaking bread together.

JANA MORGAN HERMAN, MEd, is director of Kenwood Montessori School, Louisville, KY. She has been a parent and teacher educator, Early Childhood coordinator, and curriculum coordinator and has presented at many AMS conferences. She is AMS-credentialed (Early Childhood, Administrator). Contact her at janamorganherman@gmail.com.



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