

Assistant Training DVD Transcript

Introduction (Becoming a High Performance Montessori Assistant)

An assistant has to be good at many things. As assistant needs to be observant (Observant).

You really need to be able to put others first (Put Others First), but not in a way that you sacrifice your own values or who you are. You have to be happy as a person who likes to help others, because there's not a lot of room for your own needs in the classroom. But if you enjoy working with children in that way, you can see that the way that you help set up the environment, the way that you help manage any disputes in the classroom, really does foster their development. So it can be very rewarding in that way.

Classroom Environment

What I really noticed when I came into the Montessori environment was that the children are in charge (Child Centered Development). It's really their environment. They feel responsible for their learning.

Voice of assistant waiting patiently while a girl buckles her overalls (Encouraging Independence).

"You can get that."

Another student who is watching says, "I can do it."

Assistant says: "I think she can do it Watuk. Thank you though."

And the adults in the room are there to help them follow their own path and so you get the sense of children being responsible for themselves but also learning to be responsible for one another and the whole classroom (Multi-age Learning Community). So there's a tremendous synergy that develops, children (Self-paced Learning) watch each other and take care of each other too (Cooperative Learning).

It's really important to understand that the classroom environment needs to be beautiful (Beautiful Environment) because that's one thing that distinguishes Montessori education from other methods, which is not to say that other classrooms aren't beautiful, but it is so important for children to be in a beautiful environment, because in the environment that is like this which is spare but has beautiful things to work with (Hands-on

Materials), children are inspired to do the work. They want to do it. They want to put their hands on it. They can't wait to do it. So it develops a lot of eagerness and curiosity in them (Nurturing the Love of Learning), which is exactly the spirit we want to develop in them when they are young.

And they can't do beautiful work unless they see it modeled for them or unless that's a value that's in the classroom, so if you have a classroom that isn't beautiful, the children can't strive to achieve beauty in their own work. So I think that it's really important for them to hold that even as a young child, when they don't have the dexterity maybe to make things beautiful, because it will serve them later.

CLASSROOM ROLE

When I first came in the room I think I made a pretty big statement and the directress asked me to sit back a while and watch. I think that was really helpful because the room is really for the children, its not for the adults. We're just there to help them get their work done, so I like to think of myself as just a wallflower kind of fading into the background. I don't want them to notice me when I am walking around.

I like to walk quietly and I never talk to children when they are doing their work. I never want to interrupt them (Uninterrupted Work) because what they are developing at this age is a sense of concentration and focus, which they already have, but if you interrupt them it takes away the value they are getting from the work they are doing, so it's not fair to them. If I don't understand what they are doing or if I'm interested, I can always talk to the directress at the end of the day and she can explain to me how to use it.

When I talk with children, I often will squat down so that I am at their eye level (Calm, Respectful Approach) and I speak quietly so that we don't disturb the rest of the children so they feel that they are getting the one-on-one attention that they need at that time and then when the conversation is done, I will stand up and they can move on to whatever next work they are going to do.

Once you figure out the style of your directress it is also good to know how you might complement that style for the children. So if you have a directress who is very fun loving and buoyant and big, children might appreciate you not being big in that way and not having a big personality but being quieter. Or if you have a director or directress who is very serious and focused, children might like someone who is a little bit more

fun loving. Not that you will get a lot of room for that in the classroom but out on the playground there are times you can socialize more with the children. It's nice to have a balance for the children.

I like to go around the room and look at all the shelves and take a closer look to see if things are getting dirty because they have been handled. Sometimes kids come in from the playground and don't wash their hands as they should or things just tend to get dirty when there is a lot of use. So I like to cleaning, so that is a time that I can see are we running out of things, say for the Practical Life area. For polishing, is there enough polish? Are there enough cotton balls or things to polish with? Or the actual materials that they are polishing, are they in good shape? Did something get broken and we didn't know about it until just now. I want to make sure that the room is as beautiful as it can be. We like to keep it beautiful as if it is always that way but really it starts beautiful and then you always kind of lift it back up to its beauty at the end of the day.

And so for some of the writing shelves, for the metal inset work, there might be paper, making sure the pencils are sharpened for the children and just checking in other areas even for the paper towels for the children to dry their hand or the bathroom stocked with toilet paper. Is there Kleenex out? All of these little things, if they come during the day and children don't have what they need then it gets in the way of them being able to smoothly go about their work so I really like to make sure the room is as perfect as possible before I leave and that way when I come in the morning and the directress comes in and the children come in, we're ready to go and there's nothing left to do and then we can start the day in a relaxed and positive way.

The Daily Routine

I get here early enough, about a half an hour before the children come so that I can take care of any business in the office, respond to any memos that I've received and then come in here and prepare snack, look around at the shelves to make sure that what's there is needed (Maintaining the Environment), do any cleaning that needs to happen just in case it didn't happen the night before when we left the classroom and then get ready for the children to come. Hopefully, if a child comes early, try to take care of them and make sure they get in before school care. And, as the children come in, I'm either at the door greeting them and helping them get their shoes off (Assisting Children) and hang up their coats or I'm out greeting the parent and walking them in so we either choose one or we share those

roles, the directress and I. It's a good chance to get a read on the children and see (Observe Children's Needs), how is this child doing to day? Sometimes you can tell immediately that the child is having a great day, they come bouncing in and they look great and they're full of energy. That's a good chance in the morning to just see where they are so if they come to you later in the day and just say, "I don't feel well" or 'I'm really tired,' you'll already be sensitive to the fact that they came in that way. Where as, if you have a child that comes bouncing in, and then fifteen minutes later, maybe is feeling hungry, they want snack, that's a different situation.

And then once the children get in the room, then I'm trying to keep a back door pace, not trying to tell kids what to do but just watch and see what's happening and see where I can be useful. If a child needs help getting an activity together or doing some work, I might help them or I might just wait for a while and see what I need to do. And then around 10:30, we start cleaning up and getting ready for circle time and to go outside. Usually, we get to go outside and so that's helping children with their clothes, observing on the playground as we go outside. Making sure that they're being safe (Ensuring Safety) as well as having fun. Then, when we come back into the room, I help get lunch ready, clean the tables off. Help the children get school lunches if they need certain things opened like their milk or their juice containers.

Then, I usually try to catch up with the directress at that point, over lunch, and then talk about what's happened so far if we haven't had a chance to touch base because sometimes she gets busy doing her work and I get busy doing my work and we may need to confer about a certain child who's having a hard day or anything we want to be aware of in the afternoon. Then, we help clean up after lunch and I bring the children down to the nap room after they've gone to the bathroom and washed their hands (Supervise Lunch and Nap) and I supervise the nap room. I either stay with the children, if they're continuing to nap past that half an hour or I come back into the room with them and continue assisting. Then, I get them ready to go home in the same way. I get their shoes on; I get their coats and work with the directress to make sure that that happens smoothly. And if there's any administrative business (Administrative Duties) from the office, make sure that notes go home with children or those things get handled. Help maintain the environment for the children, that could be the physical environment, making sure that there are supplies on the shelves, making sure that things are available for the children, making sure snack is there.

Responsibility and Respect

It's also the learning environment that they're partially responsible for (Manage Conflicts) so if there's a disruption in the class room or if a child's having a problem, that's the assistant's role to step in and manage that so that the directress or director can actually be teaching lessons and not have to manage all the children at the same time. Usually I'm looking, just to make sure there are no problems with the children. Sometimes, they might have an accident or they might have a dispute with another child about who gets to do a particular work so I'm always on the lookout for that and the room is not perfectly quiet, there are children doing work and so you have to listen to the noise to see if it's a normal working noise or if there's chaos somewhere (Monitor Classroom Noise Level).

They think it's unfair. Even if I personally don't think it's unfair, I might say; (Acknowledge Children's Feelings) "Boy, it sounds like you don't think that that's right or that that's fair."

And then they know they've been heard and then I can respond and say:

"Here's what the rule is. (Be consistent in Classroom Discipline) The rule is that one person gets to go outside at a time," for example. "And as soon as your classmate comes back then you can go outside. That's what the rule is in the classroom and that's what the directress and I say is fair."

So it's acknowledging them, it's explaining why the rules are not as a big defense of, here's why the things are the way they are but so that they understand that there's a reason for the rules that we have in the room. And they're pretty receptive to that and they internalize it and you can often hear them say, "Well, this is the rule for snack or this is the rule for that," so they like that structure.

The role of the teacher or the directress, that you're not the one leading all the time, it's that the children are really leading and that they're all going at their own pace and so somehow you lead this group of children (Self Paced Learning) through the year and they're all going at their own pace yet there's also this synergy together because all of them are doing the work in the room and they get to watch each other and they get to learn from each other. So, it's really more focused on children than other methods, I think.

One thing that you sometimes end up doing is, children will come to you and say, "I don't feel good, my stomach hurts, I think I have a fever." And there are some children who like that (Respond Thoughtfully to Children's Physical Needs) as a way to get attention and there are some children who

are truly not feeling well so you have to make decisions about how to handle that and you always take the step of seeing if their forehead is hot, perhaps taking their temperature or you might encourage them to go to the bathroom or ask them if they've eaten anything that day if they say their stomach is hurting, to try to troubleshoot it early. You always have to be aware and responsible for their health. On the playground, if they've run and they've fallen, to do a First Aid check, just to make sure (First Aid Checks). Depending on what you see, that they aren't more badly hurt than they look. That's a really important safety issue for me and children aren't always as sensitive to that as they need to be. They're pretty good about walking around each other's work but sometimes they try to climb on the stool at the same time to get a drink of water at the drinking fountain or might try to cut in front of the line with each other, no matter how much we try to structure it differently and as a result of that, children may trip each other or fall or something happens so that's a good time for an assistant to be very observant and be watching to be preventative, if there are two children climbing on the stool, make sure that one of them gets off.

If there's a problem that comes up in the classroom and I know that I should talk to the director or the directress, I first think, (Make judgment Calls) how important is the issue? If it's a little thing then I might be tempted to wait until we have a minute during the day when she's not presenting and I can have her attention. If it's important or serious or I really don't know what to do and something needs to happen then I'll see where she is in the room. If she's giving a lesson, I'll really ask myself again, do I need to interrupt right now? And I usually won't interrupt her in the lesson because things can usually wait and the lesson is short but after that I might seek her out and speak to her quietly about what's happening. And other times, if things are not so important or if there's just something that I want to talk to her about that's not immediate, I'll wait until we're on the playground or during lunch. But even on the playground, you'd be surprised, there are always children to watch and things happening so it's never that down time that you'd expect it to be. Even at lunch, if the children are not using their manners or something, you have to be aware of that, you can't get all your needs taken care of. We have a lot of times at the beginning of the day, during breaks, at lunch and at the end of the day we can catch up if we didn't have a chance during the day.

Sometimes, because things get kind of busy in the classroom, I might forget some things that I needed to talk about until it comes up again so when things come up during the day (Take Notes When Necessary), I have a list and I just make a note for myself so that when I do get some time with the directress, I can cover the points quickly. And I can be more

efficient that way. I've only learned to do that because I usually forget what they are so this way I remember and can cover things well.

Maintaining Personal Balance

It's difficult to get time during the day to get my own needs met in terms of making the phone calls (Prioritize School's Needs) that I need to, just the routine, personal business that you have, getting an appointment with a dentist or something, you really need to work around the schedule of the school so that was hard for me to get used to at first because I had an office job where I could slip out for a little while and here, you really have to be here every day. Even being sick, you feel like you don't want to be sick because you don't want to change the environment of the classroom if someone needs to come in and be a substitute for you. I have substituted before for other assistants and I notice that the children are different when they don't have their usual adult surrounding. It's a big distraction to them. To have someone else in the room, who has a different way of behaving and a different way of handling situations and they also like to test you and see how you're going to respond to things, just to see if there's a little more wiggle room about some things. It's hard on the children to have different adults coming in and that's why it's nice to be here every day and be very consistent not only on the times that you're here but in the ways that you're here. Be upbeat for them and be emotionally consistent and be consistent with your boundaries in terms of how you treat them and the support that you give them (Be Consistent and Reliable).

I've done several things to make sure that I can come in and be upbeat for the children and be able to focus on them because it's easy to get run down when you're focusing on others all day and you don't even have time to catch your breath sometimes or you have to make time in your day to make sure that you get a chance to go to the bathroom. So I do exercise in the morning before I go to school and I find that gives me a bit of a natural high and helps me be upbeat for the children and not sleepy. I also have my cup of coffee so those two things are a good combination. I like to read a lot, that's very relaxing for me in the evenings (Take Care of Yourself) so between that and spending time with my husband, I make sure that I make time for that and that any school commitments and that my other commitments don't get in the way of the things that make me feel like I'm a good person to be with and that I can be my best for the children.

Working Relationships

I've been fortunate to have a good working relationship with the directress that I work with and I have had friends who have not been so fortunate and what they've told me is that, the room feels very chaotic to them and I'm sure to the children so it's very difficult when you haven't taken the time that you need to address the issues with your directress or if for some reason, you're not getting along and are stressed (Resolve Issues When They Arise), it's not just between the two adults, it's like in a family. If you have children where the parents aren't getting along, children experience that similarly when adults are in the room in a Montessori environment are having some friction, the children are very sensitive to that and it will be harder for them to get their work done. Fortunately, the other is true too that (Children Respond to Adult's Behavior), if the adults have a really positive working relationship then the children really benefit from that because there's a lot of synergy that develops out of the relationships between the adults, and children are sensitive to whether adults are getting along or not and they're going to be comfortable and more happy if the adults are getting along well in the environment so it's really important to work on the relationship with the director or the directress and sometimes that means having difficult conversations or bringing up things that are uncomfortable for you or you don't know what to do because if you don't, the relationship will fester.

So it's really important to address problems while they're small. If the way that the two of you interacted about a particular situation with a child, you thought about it afterward and you thought, "Gee, I don't like that, does she think I'm this way or did he not like the way that I did this?"

It's important to clear that up because if you don't then you'll think that for several months and then you'll be gathering data and then you'll say, "Well, there's another instance where she doesn't like the way I did this." And you start to build this wall that the other person may have never intended to build, it might have just been a misunderstanding. Or, you might talk to the person and find out, "Wow, okay. That's what she expected me to do in this situation. I'm going to do that next time." Or say, "I have a different opinion, let's talk about it."

So if you let things wait, it gets pretty bad but if you're able to address them early, you can really make the relationship better and I think it's hard for assistants to know, I can say this. Even though this person is superior to me or is in charge of the room, it's okay for me to say what I think. Some people lack the courage to say and other people maybe don't have enough humility to be aware of what they do or don't know and being responsive to someone else's ideas but I think that's the cause of a lot of unhappiness

I've seen in other relationships between assistants and the director/directresses. Something started, a bad seed was planted and then the plant just grew and they never quite were able to get around it.

It's important to be optimistic and resilient, I think, because you might have a hard day one day. I had one day when a child decided that she wanted to fall on the floor pouting at least five times and it really started to get to me and that's going to happen to you and you need to be able to just let it wash over you at some point and handle it the best you can and know that you're not going to be perfect every time and you'll come in the next day and be excited to be with the children and be excited about your own skills and that you can figure it out so there's a sense in which you have to be willing to make mistakes and if what you're trying isn't working, be creative about thinking to try something different.

I really love the children. It's so fun to be with them and it's so neat to see them doing their work. You can see that they really love what they're doing and you can see that they change and become their best selves. I feel really powerful in helping these children become the best that they can be in this environment.