

# **The High Performance Elementary Assistant Training Program**

## **01 Introduction**

### **The Montessori Elementary Assistant: A Model Program**

*The assistant in an elementary Montessori classroom is an important and complex responsibility. The teacher is primarily responsible for the curriculum while the assistant plays many roles in ensuring that the classroom functions smoothly and that the needs of the children are met. Genevieve Meyer has been an elementary assistant for many years and shared her wisdom about her role in the classroom. Genevieve Meyer was an elementary assistant prior to receiving her elementary training. During the time of these interviews, Genevieve was working at the Montessori Center of Jackson in Tennessee which served as her practicum site.*

*We interviewed her twice over the span of a school year and documented her tasks as an assistant. We also documented assistants in other public and private elementary programs. While your classroom may not function in all the same ways as Genevieve's, the essential information is common among all elementary classrooms. Some of the differences may provide insights into new ways to approach your current practices.*

#### **01 Seeing Elementary Montessori for the First Time 1:16**

I remember being so overwhelmed when I first set foot into a Montessori classroom. I didn't understand what all the materials were on the shelves and the children were all so independently busy. Everybody doing different things all the time, that I never thought I'd be able to keep my eye on every child at once. Children would ask me questions about a work and I wouldn't know what to tell them.

My lead teacher conferenced with me multiple times every day, giving me instruction, giving me direction. And eventually I got into the swing of knowing how to be everywhere all at once, how to help everybody with all these different works. It takes time to learn and I told her I want to do well at this, I want to learn more and so she taught me.

## **02 Respect in the Montessori Community**

#### **02 How an Elementary Assistant is Different from an Early Childhood Assistant 2:05**

I think a large part of the difference is the content knowledge that is needed to be an assistant in the elementary and upper elementary environment, in order to be able to assist the children with their works, one does have to know a little bit about the curriculum. Whereas in the early childhood, I think it is more easy to work with the hands-on sensory materials. Just walking in without having an education degree, an educational background of any sort.

Narration

An elementary assistant may be responsible for children from age 6 through age 12. The sophistication of the curriculum requires a grasp of the curriculum sufficient to be of service to the children with their work.

I think it's very important for the assistant to recognize how much training the teacher has gone through in order to earn her credentials in Montessori. And to understand that when the teacher requests something of the assistant or asks for things to be done a certain way, that it is because of her background in Montessori and the course work she's taken. She has very specific reasons for doing everything. I think assistants need to make sure that they do understand that the teacher is not trying to be difficult if they ask for things to be done in a certain way. And that everything in Montessori is always in its place and an assistant should know where all the materials should be, how they should be tidied on the shelves, it's very important for everything to be prepared for the children at all times.

### **03 Modeling Behavior after the Lead Teacher 3:30**

The lead teacher really is the ultimate model for the assistant. The assistant needs to pattern all of her actions and her interactions with the children after the lead teacher. Everything from the tone of the lead teacher's voice and the quietness in her movements through the classroom, all the way to what she does when she sits down with a child, the way that she speaks to the child. Or the kinds of questions that she asks the child to extend their learning. A large part of the assistant's job is teaching children in the moment and in order to learn how to do that, the assistant needs to watch what the lead teacher does in her lessons, listen to the kinds of questions she asks and do the same thing.

I remember very clearly one of the first times that I heard my lead teacher problem solve with a child and I remember thinking "I will never know how to do that." I was terrified, thinking she knows all the exact right words to say and "how am I going to learn this?" And I listened. I listened to her voice and I listened to what she said to the children and over time, I picked it up. And it really didn't take too long. I practiced with her. We had roleplaying situations every once in awhile so I would know what to do. And I listened mostly and the more I could hear from her, the more I picked it up and now it's second nature.

### **04 Modeling Respect 4:58**

If we want the children to be respectful, we must model that for them and that includes speaking to them in a respectful manner. Many people feel that children should be ordered what to do or commanded what to do, but if we want them to use respect with one another, and with us, we have to model that by showing them respect as well. And asking a child if they could help when they have a chance. Ask if they could assist another child if they are available, never assuming that you know better what the child should be doing than they do. Maybe they're very focused on their work and they need to say "no thank you." We need to be respectful of their choices. We need to speak to them and ask questions respectfully. If we problem solve with them, we always do so in a respectful manner rather than telling children what a consequence will be. We ask them, what do you think should happen?

## **05 Using “I” Statements 6:09**

“I” statements are extremely important when discussing anything with a child and when working with them in a respectful manner. To say to the child: I am concerned about your learning plan. I’ve noticed that you haven’t gotten much work done today. What can we do about this? Or, “I notice that you’ve been visiting a lot today, can I help you get involved in something else?” Using a statement such as “I think”, “I feel”, doesn’t put the child on the defensive. It tells them simply what you are feeling and doesn’t assume that you know what is going on with the child.

## **06 Listening to Children 6:44**

Reflective listening is a very important skill to have when you’re an assistant teacher. A lot of the time you’re going to be problem solving with children, you’re going to be troubleshooting situations throughout the day, while the teacher is in the lesson. And children can get very emotional for so many reasons and you need to be able to sit down, respectfully listen, quietly listen to what they have to say. And then repeat to them, what they have said to you, to show them that you understand that they’re upset. For example, a child today in the classroom, got very upset because she didn’t have her learning plan finished by the end of the afternoon and she started to get tears in her eyes and she was so frustrated and I said to her, “you sound frustrated. I know that you’re concerned about your learning plan.” And that was all she needed to hear. She needed to know that I understood what she was feeling.

### **Pause Screen # 1: 7:41**

What are some ways you’ve observed respect being practiced in your classroom?

How do you demonstrate respectful behavior with your students?

What’s it like to listen without judgment?

What’s difficult about interacting with children in a Montessori environment?

How can you be respectful with a disrespectful child?

## **03 Discipline**

### **07 Modeling Careful Movement and Demeanor 7:51**

I try to always model careful movement through the environment. That is very important with many children on the floor, doing their works. And we don’t want to step on things, we don’t want to step on materials, we don’t want to run into children.

Traffic flow, for example. We have areas where we’re always just walking through instead of going through a long runway in the class. We have furniture arranged to enhance that so that children don’t have room to be running and walking quickly and running into people and bumping. And we say that it is very important to keep hands to your own work, to your own self, unless you’re assisting another child. I try to model a pleasant demeanor as well at all times.

## **08 Noise Level 8:46**

Around the classroom, I use as quiet a voice as possible and that helps the children to also keep their voices low. When they see my calm and low voice and my calm demeanor, they react to that. They also turn calm, they also lower their voices. Every once in a while, I'll speak in a whispered voice for a child to remind them to lower their voice. And we also use hand signals and we ask them to lower their voice sometimes.

Our lab experiment this week is a rather noisy one so the noise level does increase a little bit when the children are getting really involved in a fun experiment and that's good fun for everybody and as long as the noise level is kept to a place where it's not disturbing anyone else then that is fine.

## **09 Conflict Resolution 9:43**

When there are conflicts in the classroom, whether there's just an issue with one child that the teacher needs to resolve or an issue between any of the children, we always try to keep our corrections positive, our reinforcements positive with the children. Rather than giving them instructions about what they will not do or commanding them to do things, we respectfully discuss with the children what we would like to see happen in the future. When there's a conflict between multiple children, they all share their feelings, first of all, about what has happened. And they problem solve together about how can we prevent this from happening again in the future? The children come to agreements together rather than being told what to do.

It's important to have consistent discipline. What we do for one child in any situation needs to be the same for everybody. They need to feel safe. They need to know that if something happens that is not appropriate, that it will be taken care of. And that they will get assistance if they are having conflict with another child.

The children need to know that this is a place for learning and that any kind of conflicts, any kind of fooling around, things will be addressed by the teacher, they need to feel that safety.

## **10 Lunchtime and Outdoor Play 11:18**

During lunchtime, I supervise the children from the time that they wash their hands, setting places at the lunch tables, sitting down, opening their lunchboxes, eating, and all the way through clean up. We do have a lot of procedures for cleanup, they're followed every day. The children are responsible during the lunchtime for making sure that the room is ready again for learning later on. Making sure that children are sitting peacefully at their tables and focusing on eating, so that they're ready to learn for the rest of the afternoon. On the playground, it's also important to be aware at all times of what is going on. Watching all children, being ready to be able to move

in any direction to get to a child if necessary. Making sure that all interactions are peaceful between the students and we also have noncompetitive interactions. Playtime, rather than having competitive sports. And making sure that children are having a good time, are having fun during their movement time, as well as working on their large motor skills.

### **Pause Screen # 2: 12:39**

What might you do to “model” careful movement in the classroom?

How does tone of voice impact noise level in the classroom?

Do you think it makes a difference?

What did you notice about this approach to conflict resolution?

What strikes you as particularly important?

## **04 Role in the Classroom**

### **11 Maintaining the Classroom Environment 12:49**

Narration

The responsibility of keeping the classroom tidy, of insuring that all supplies are stocked and ready for use, and of keeping the classroom beautiful is the assistant’s role in the classroom.

It’s important for the classroom to be beautiful so that it’s attractive to the children. You want the children to be attracted to the materials that they see. You want them to be eager to work with them, eager to ask for a new lesson on a material. We all love to look at beautiful things and if they love to look at the materials and they want to touch them, they are going to be engaged in their learning.

The first thing of the day is getting the classroom ready, preparing the environment for the children. It’s a time to walk around the classroom and make sure that everything is in its place so that the children know where to find their things. And just to make sure everything is tidy, that it’s ready for the children.

### **12 Monitoring and Assisting in the Classroom 13:42**

If the teacher has any needs and any notes that she needs to give me before the day starts, to have a conversation about what the day is going to look like, if there are any special events coming up. It’s a time for us to talk.

My job during the independent work time is to float around the classroom, assisting children, making sure everybody is productively on task. We have a system whereby children put their name, they have a card with their name on it, and they put it on a magnet board and I come to each child in the order in which it was placed on the board, to assist them with whatever they need. They might have a question about how to record a work. I will assist them with that to the best of my ability and I use my best judgment sometimes. If I’m not exactly sure what the lead

teacher has asked them to do, I think about what will benefit this child the most in terms of recording and ask them to do that. Sometimes they have a question about a work or they're having difficulty manipulating a material and also to the best of my ability, I assist them with that. It's been important for me to learn the works, to spend extra time with the teacher learning so that I am able to help the children with that. I have eyes everywhere, making sure that people are doing what they're supposed to be doing during the course of the day and assisting the teacher any way that she asks me to do.

Additionally, the children need help throughout the day with their works. Sometimes it's something very small – their pencil is broken and they need help getting a new one. The little first levels need help with lots of little things. Sometimes the children need assistance with the actual work. They have questions that a friend hasn't been able to answer. If there's a pause in the day, if there's more than the usual number of children in a lesson for example, I might get to sit down with a child and talk to them in a little bit more focused way, but usually I need to be observing all of the children, all the time. I need to be monitoring them, counting heads, making sure that everyone is accounted for, people have what they need.

### **13 Observing and Taking Notes 16:05**

We use an online record keeping system at our school and the lead teacher has most of the responsibility for entering in lessons, making notes to parents, sending out emails, things like that. But as the assistant, it's also my responsibility to make notes weekly on the children. Just small things that I observe.

Anything at all from what I see a child doing with the work that doesn't seem correct and that child may need a new lesson on the material, all the way to if someone is unfocused, or a child complained of a stomachache or a child was in the bathroom a lot of times during the day. Anything that needs to be discussed between the teachers. If there are any difficulties or any problems, I usually discuss that with the lead teacher.

### **Pause Screen #3: 16:55**

How do this assistant's responsibilities compare with your own?

Are you responsible for maintaining the environment? What's your approach to that task? Do you take notes? When do you meet with the teacher to share notes or observations?

## **05 Safety Procedures and Dismissal**

### **14 Safety Procedures and Policies 17:05**

We do have basic safety procedures in place which we practice frequently. Things such as fire drills, tornado drills, we have specific paths out of the environment. All the children know that if they hear a whistle, that it is an emergency and they need to refer to an adult to find out what is happening. They need to go to the bathroom for the tornado drill. When they hear the fire alarm, they know exactly to stop everything they're doing and they know which door to exit from the

building. And it's important for me to make sure that I monitor the children during those situations- count heads, get everybody out of the building.

#### Narration

After a tornado drill or fire drill, Genevieve discusses with the students how the drill went and what parts of the procedure could be improved. This is an example of the shared responsibility that exists in the Montessori classroom community.

### **15 Dismissal and Pick-up Procedures 18:08**

At the end of the day, the children gather and they have a quiet reading time where they read to themselves while we are dismissing and we have walkie talkies and one teacher will call, whoever the teacher is that is taking the children out to the cars will call for the next child and I will dismiss the child out and sometimes we reverse roles and I'll be the one taking the child out to the car and getting them in. I get a chance to talk to the parents this way and show my face a little bit, that's nice.

Parents are very good usually about letting us know who's going to pick up their child if it's anyone other than themselves and it does have to be somebody on a list that they have signed and turned in to us. We have it on file in the office. And when that happens, we do check the identification of that person, to make sure they're who they say they are.

#### **Pause Screen #4: 19:00**

Review your school's safety procedures, school parent and staff handbooks. Memorize emergency safety procedures.

## **06 Montessori Curriculum and Community**

### **16 Multi age Community 19:10**

I love the multi-age grouping because I think it encourages independence in the children. When the first levels come in, they are very, very young and they are not knowledgeable at all about our environment yet. But on the other hand, we have third levels who have already been here for two years and they know the ropes and they know their way around and they're very independent. They are able to sometimes help the first levels. They give little lessons or little reminders about what needs to be done. They help to teach them procedures and it helps those younger children have someone to look up to know what to expect in the coming years, have something to strive for.

At the beginning of the year, before school starts, we already know our upcoming second and third level children. We've had them already in the classroom and we know their personalities. And then from what we know of the first levels who are coming in, we pair them together in

groups that we just think would work well together. Usually, each first level child will have one second level mentor and one third level so that they can go to two different people. If one is busy, they can go to the other.

## **17 Curriculum 20:21**

Oftentimes, if I see a child making a mistake in their work, I simply take it in as information rather than jumping in and correcting the child's work. If I notice that the child has completely missed the point of the work, I may ask them questions about what they're doing, ask them to explain. Most of the time I do not interrupt, unless a child asks me to do so and asks for assistance.

If I see a child is making a consistent mistake over and over, reversing b/d for example, and I have mentioned it to the child and it's still happening again and again, that's something the teacher would need to address in an individual lesson with the child or simply the teacher would need to observe and make notes about it for the future information.

We have actually a little saying, we say, "ask three before me" and that means please ask three children first about what you need with your work rather than coming to the adult all the time. And that's part of promoting independence, is finding solutions to problems without asking for the adults intervention.

This curriculum is so individualized to what each child is ready to do in that moment, Children are able to flourish here that may not in other environments because they can get their hands on the materials, they can ask questions of other students, they can walk around the classroom, they can be moving all the time or they can be still in one place. They can tailor their own day to their needs. And when children are able to have their needs met, they're able to focus on their work.

The children do have learning plans. Every time after we come to a lesson, the children will write their follow-up works from that lesson into their learning plan. And at the end of every week, they go through their plan and they add in the small extra things like piano practice, music lessons, gardening, those sorts of things to fill up their work plan so it's ready for the coming week.

As an assistant, my role was just to monitor the work plans, to notice if it looks like their plans are overly full or if it looks as if they've been struggling with anything. I always sign when I enjoy a work that it has been done in the work plan, making any notes or observations for the teacher about a specific work or comments that she might need to see.

### **Pause Screen # 5: 22:56**

What is the assistant's role with regard to correcting mistakes?

How do you and your lead teacher discuss concerns about a child's work and who intervenes when it is appropriate?

How can you support independence in the classroom?

What kinds of work plans or learning plans are used in your classroom? How do children know what is expected of them?

What is the assistant's role with regard to correcting mistakes?

How do you and your lead teacher discuss concerns about a child's work and who intervenes when it is appropriate? How can you support independence in the classroom?

What kinds of work plans or learning plans are used in your classroom? How do children know what is expected of them?

## **07 Communication and Adult Consistency**

### **18 Professionalism 23:06**

If I ever have any feelings of tension between myself and the other adults in the classroom, I need to speak to those other adults immediately. We need to resolve the source of these feelings. We need to find out what it is that is creating these feelings and what has contributed to this. We need to sit down and talk about how we can solve the problem, and then avoid it in the future so that our interactions and the tension doesn't come into the classroom, and spill over to effect the children.

### **19 Responsible Attendance 23:44**

Consistency with the adults and the routine in the classroom is key for the children to feel comfortable and feel able to work. When we have anything different going on, if there is a substitute in the classroom, if the day is different, if the routine is different for any reason, the children aren't as focused. They have difficulty staying on task, completing works, and getting involved with their learning. It's important for me to be here as often as I am able, very consistently, in order to help the classroom run smoothly and help the feel of the classroom and the flow to always be the same for the children.

When the lead teacher is gone, the assistant needs to serve two main functions really. First of all, she is the consistent person in the classroom who knows what the procedures are, knows what needs to be happening during the day and she needs to make sure that things run smoothly as they always do. Consistency is key to things running smoothly in our environment. And number two, she needs to make sure that everyone is working productively. The substitute may need to do the lessons if that's what the teacher prefers and that way the assistant can be throughout the classroom, making sure things are running smoothly, with consistency.

**Pause Screen #6: 25:08**

Why is consistency and communication so important in a Montessori classroom?

How does communication between adults impact the Montessori classroom?

What is your role in the classroom when the lead teacher is absent or away?

**20 Confidentiality 25:18**

I like to think of this in terms of the professions of maybe a doctor or a lawyer. It's an expectation that they keep absolute confidentiality with all situations with their patients or their clients. And in that same way, we must keep absolute confidentiality with anything that goes on in our school and with our families from the outside world. It is appropriate to discuss with a teacher, things that are happening or things that maybe a parent comes to you and discusses something. It's very appropriate to go to your Director or to your lead teacher, other staff members who need to know. But any information that you gain as a part of your employment with your school should never leave the school setting, it should never leave a discussion between anyone other than staff members. It's extremely important that we respect the privacy of our children and of our families.

I've often run into families in the grocery store for example and it's always wonderful to say "hi, how are you? It's nice to see you." But there's never a comment about the school day, there's never a comment about anything that shouldn't be said outside of the school setting about, it's not a place to discuss the progress of the child or something that happened earlier that day. And now with social media, we have to also be really careful about respecting our families' privacies

**Pause screen # 7: 26:51**

What legal issues may be posed by a failure to respect confidentiality?

How is confidentiality important to maintaining a strong relationship with families?

When is it appropriate to discuss a student's academic needs or performance?

**08 Personal Care****21 Taking Care of Personal issues 27:01**

I rarely have time during the day to take care of personal issues in my 7:30-3:30 schedule. I do have a lunch break and if anything needs to be done that day that is urgent, I can take care of it then but rarely do I have time to leave campus during that time. When I am here, I am focused on what is happening at school, and the children, and having the classroom ready for them. And then I try to take care of everything possible, after I'm done at the end of the day.

I try to get all of my work completed that needs to be done here at school so that when I do leave, I can focus on my family, that I can do fun things together with them.

I love to meditate and I love to read. I like to just sit and have quiet time to think. And I do that for about fifteen minutes every evening, I try. I get it in most of the time and just mindful breathing and peaceful thoughts helps me to center myself and get ready to actually rest throughout the night instead of laying in bed and thinking about things. It really helps me to get ready for rest.

Pause screen: 28:06 How do you take care of personal needs during the school day?  
What is the importance of self-care for success as an assistant in the Montessori classroom?

## **09 Conclusion 28:16**

I'm usually pretty tired (laughs). I'm usually pretty tired but I have such wonderful children and I have such a great teaching staff to work with that it's a good kind of a tired, like I know that I've had a wonderful experience with children, that I've been contributing to their education all day.

This is one of the most calm and peaceful places to work that I have ever been in, in a school. Because we have such calm demeanors, low voices, careful movement through the classroom. It is actually very relaxing to be with the children during the day, to be speaking in a low voice and having one-on-one attention rather than having to be yelling out to a class full of children, a class full of 27 children all at once and trying to create order. There's order in our classroom because it's built in and the environment is prepared and it's a happy place to be.

### **Narration**

*A Montessori elementary assistant has a challenging responsibility to ensure that the students in her classroom are happy, safe, and successful in their work each day, and that the classroom teacher is supported in completing all her instructional goals.*

**29:46**