

1. Introduction

As Montessorians what we share {Observation Skills} is the deep respect for observation and through observation. We know what the child needs in materials and we provide those and they almost have to be changed weekly because the development is changing so quickly. I think any Montessorian will say they wake up in the middle of the night thinking, “that’s what they need, that’s what I saw today, that’s what they are doing.”

It takes a lot of flexibility {Flexibility} because the developmental stages {Individual Developmental Growth} go so quickly and they have to be very aware of the developmental stages as they come on an individual basis and often that takes a lot of observation skills.



Narration:

Carolee Watt has been a Montessori directress since 1978 and has been a head of school for many years. More recently, she has spent many hours serving as an infant toddler assistant at Hope Montessori Infant Toddler Community in St. Louis, MO. In this program, there are nine individual segments that combine background on infant and toddler development with specific tasks that an assistant needs to carry out. Watch each section and then pause to answer to take notes on the “Assistant Notes” sheet provided. Also write down your own questions to discuss with your directress. The DVD has a series of review slides of these screens for more detailed information.

An assistant in a Montessori environment {Communicate with and Observe Your Directress} has a lot to learn from talking to and observing the directress. This DVD is an introduction to the knowledge necessary to become a high quality Montessori assistant.

The tasks in the infant room are somewhat different than in a toddler room.

They work as a team with the director or directress of the class, but in an infant class it is probably more “humble service” than perhaps in 3-6 where you are really more engaged with the children because in infancy it really is an “assistance to infancy.” That is what an assistant has to do as well as the director or directress is just assist the developing infant from being cared for to a caring child.

Narration:

The infant and toddler is absorbing everything that goes on in the environment from how we talk, to how we move, to how we respond to one another. That is why Montessorians

say the most important part of the Montessori environment is the adult. This program will help you become an assistant who understands what the directress and the children need.

2. The Prepared Environment

Narration:



Montessori emphasized that the classroom {Beautiful Environment} environment should be beautiful. The materials in the infant and toddler rooms are carefully chosen to draw the child's attention. As the child explores the prepared environment, he satisfies his natural curiosity and begins to build a sense of confidence in his ability to discover what the world is about. Montessori emphasizes that infants and toddlers should be in environments that are child-safe {Child- Safe Environment} to encourage free movement. In the infant room, a variety of surfaces from {Tactile Stimulation} carpet to tile to wood stimulate the infant's sense of touch and challenge him to act on developing motor skills. The environment is {Age Appropriate Environment} age appropriate and designed to serve the needs of the child. Pillows... mobiles... mirrors... infant-sized tables and chairs...tunnels to explore.

Beds or soft areas are usually on the floor and accessible for the infants to choose when to take a nap.

Toddler classrooms have tables and chairs that are toddler-sized. Sinks are at the child's level to allow water play. The materials stimulate visual and auditory senses and challenge toddlers to develop their {Small and Large Motor Skills} small motor and large motor skills.

{Practice with the Materials} As part of your preparation to work in the classroom, take time to work with the materials yourself to better understand how each material is intended to assist the child's development. Answer these questions:

What is this material?

What can I do with this?

What might a child learn?

What might you learn from your observation of how the child uses the material?

When the child is ready to take on new developmentally appropriate challenges, the environment can be {Rotating Materials} adjusted to meet that need.

At the core of every decision an adult in the classroom makes is a respect for the child's ability and {Desire for Independence} desire to achieve independence.

I think there is always a jump to help. There's a jump to get into the middle of it. There's a jump to feeling responsible for what's going on. If you sit and watch, the children will show you what to do. They run the classroom. We are only there to support what is going on. If we observe something, we think about it, process it and go back to the situation the next time and give suggestions.



Narration

When a child is able to walk, {Respect for Child's Capabilities} the adults in the classroom do not carry him. When a child can stand, he is diapered standing.

It is a good idea to sit low on a small chair or to sit on the floor nearer the child's level. When talking to a toddler, {Work at the Child's Level} talk to them at eye level as much as possible

The children are all growing at their own pace. As infants become toddlers they begin to watch and interact with each other and they get to learn from each other.

3. Classroom Role

Narration



The assistant must be attentive to the needs of the classroom: {Required Tasks} putting materials away, assisting the children to put on shoes, coats and hats for outside play, cleaning up spills, wiping shelves, taking care of the laundry, putting out cots for nap if necessary, assisting with feeding and snacks, changing diapers, whatever task needs to be done.

It is important to {Model Movement} model level of movement you want to see in the children. Move slowly and deliberately, allowing the children to observe the process.

If you are feeding an infant, {Feeding Infants} take the time to allow the child to initiate a bite when he is ready. If you hold the spoon within reach, the infant will learn that it is his choice to eat.

When a child is ready, they are encouraged to pour their own milk. The adult pours the milk in a child-sized pitcher to make the task more manageable for the toddler.

In toddler classrooms, the children are becoming more independent, learning to take more responsibility for their own care. Toddlers begin to put their own work away, to set up snacks and meals and to clean up after themselves. Toddlers appreciate doing the work that they observe adults and older students doing and will rise to these expectations.

That begins with putting their bibs in the basket. It is individual. They are ready for it at different times, but you tell the response of a child when they are ready to do that.

They see another child who does that and of course they want to do it so it comes right along it is just a natural progression.

Narration

Toddlers are beginning to learn to dress themselves. When it is necessary to assist a child in putting on his shoe or in doing any task, observe what he needs and provide just enough assistance {Minimal Assistance} so he can complete the task on his own.

We don't train children we unfold what is already there and that grace and courtesy and wanting to help and wanting to be helpful is already within them, we just have to develop it and we develop it as we do anything else – first of all by example and second by expectation. We just know they can do it so we step aside and let them do it.



Narration

It is important to {Speak Softly} speak softly and not to interrupt children while they are focused on an activity. For an infant, they may be discovering their hand or watching a fish swim about. A child learns to concentrate by not being interrupted. Also, it is best not to engage in unnecessary conversation with the directress. If you have questions, {Write Questions} write them down and discuss them at the end of the day whenever possible.

Part of the assistant's job is to ensure that the classroom is peaceful. {Problems and Conflicts} If an infant is crying, it may be time for a diaper change, feeding, or he or she may just want to be held.

For toddlers, it is important to be consistent. {Consistent Rules} Learn the classroom expectations and consult with the directress about how to how to set limits. You may resolve conflicts or tantrums by offering the child {Offering a Choice} a choice of two acceptable ways to resolve a problem.

Sometimes distracting a toddler {Use Distraction} with an alternative activity will resolve a conflict.

Each school has specific tasks that the assistant is expected to do in the classroom. Each teacher has his or her own expectations as well. {Classroom Expectations} Consult with the teacher in your classroom to be clear on what is expected of you.

I think there has to be a lot of intercommunication. It really is a team. {Teamwork} It cannot be worked any way but by being a team. The assistant is a very, very important part of what is going on.



4. Separation

Narration

In some classrooms, assistants may be responsible for greeting parents and children when they arrive at school. In most cases, only a few new children are added to the classroom at any one time to maintain a sense of consistency.

I think that it is for the communication (the important communication to parents every day), {Parent Communication} to come only from the person who is in charge of the room, because it has to be well thought out and well communicated and usually the person in charge of the room is trained better to do that.

It is very much encouraged here that if your child walks, they walk into school and that is a big help to separation. It is more working with the parent than the child. The child is probably a lot of times more ready than the parent. It is a big step to be separated from your young child. That is something we need to be very sensitive to, but it is just helping parents in becoming better observers of what really the child is capable of, because we do a lot of underestimating.

We work very hard here to have the child walk away. You don't walk away from your child, let your child walk away from you. It is always startling for a parent to realize how quickly a child can use a cup or a spoon or feed themselves. That usually is really a startling revelation, because that leap from being cared for is a big one and it comes very quickly and almost unexpectedly.

5. Movement

Narration



Infants and toddlers have what Montessori called “sensitive periods.” During a sensitive period, {Sensitive Periods} a child can learn rapidly if the opportunity is provided. After the sensitive period has passed, he may find it more difficult to absorb these skills and information. For infants and toddlers, the sensitive periods include: {Movement, Order and Language} Movement, Order and Language.

If you watch a child from the very birth experience there is a startle reflex and there is lots of movement. Some babes like to be swaddled {Observe Infant’s Need for Movement} so that is controlled for them. Some in calming themselves need their hands in that calming skill and they move their hands. A lot of times we get pictures of that pre-natally of them moving their hands, sucking their thumbs. There is movement from the very beginning. Movement is just something that is within all of us.

You have to be very aware of the individual needs for movement of the child. For example, as elementary as it seems, {Stomach Time} stomach time is very important because it helps them open their hands and an assistant who can be sensitive to the needs of that child who needs to be on their stomach, opening their hands.

And once the hand is open and they see their hand floating by, then they begin to start grasping at things and that is very exciting. It is tremendous stimulation to be able to pick up something and bring it up either to your mouth or in front of your eyes. Often it is placed just out of their reach, which is an interesting developmental thing to watch.



Narration

The opening of the hands is the beginning of the process of grasping. As you observe the child’s natural progression, it is important {Concentration} to interfere as little as possible with this activity, which is occurring at the optimal time for that child. Part of learning to coordinate the hand is practicing grasping and releasing.

I have been to restaurants where I have heard parents say, “If you drop that one more time” and they are sitting in a high chair but what they are doing is dropping {Dropping}

and in the infant rooms you will see materials provided for that stimulation. They love to drop things.

Narration

Toddlers are much more mobile and have become much more independent. The classroom offers them many opportunities to work on their large motor skills by moving tables and chairs and setting up lunch. {Big Work} They love to do big work that challenges them and teaches them new skills. They also have materials for fine motor skills such as threading blocks or grasping a knobbed cylinder.

6. The Need for Order

Infants respond to order. You will see in the Montessori infant rooms there is a great sense of order. When there is disorder or when there is any kind of chaos, we will have babies crying.



Narration

{Disorder }Part of the assistant's responsibility is to respond to disruptions and maintain the consistency and order. Therefore it is important to know the procedures used for changing diapers, feeding and caring for the environment.

When the staff follows a consistent procedure, the child can internalize the sequential steps which supports the child's sense of order.

A calm, orderly classroom is the most natural and healthy environment for the child.

Changing a diaper is a great opportunity for social interaction. {Changing Diapers} Out of respect for the child, remember not to respond negatively to the experience of changing a diaper. The infant may not understand that an expression of displeasure is not directed at her.

They come from a very orderly environment when they are born, a very quiet orderly environment and the more orderly an environment we can provide for them, the more they can respond.

Some children are very sensitive and don't want a lot of stimulation. A lot of the babies respond with a cry, it is not necessarily hunger or diaper, it is over stimulation. I was reading the other day about hiccupping babies. Hiccupping is a sign of over stimulation

so we must know that each babe is as individual as we are so as an assistant we have to do the careful observation that the director or directress of the class is also doing.

Narration

{Attendance and Punctuality} *Part of an orderly classroom is the need for consistency in the adult staff. It is important for an assistant to come to work on time, according to schedule. Children notice when there are changes in the adults in the classroom. Personal business should be handled outside of the classroom.*

{Adult Issues} *Children are also sensitive to the adults in the classroom just as they are in their family. If the adults are not getting along, the children will pick up on that in subtle ways. If you have an issue with the directress or another adult in the classroom, take the necessary steps to resolve it.*

7. Language

We have to understand that the child's language develops before the birth experience. I have a friend who played in a symphony before her child was born and the child recognized the music that had been played. There is a language communication going on. They know their mother's and father's voice, They know familiar caretaker's voices. They know the bark of the dog. They don't startle at that after they are born because that language, although it is all receptive, has been going on. {Reading, Singing, Rhymes and Talking} The more we sing and laugh and play and read and talk and just communicate in the most humane of ways it comes back.



All of a sudden they begin to babble and this is why, without obstructing their mouth with anything we get "lalas" and "dadas" and "babas." It really is a wonderful thing and to respond with music, only enhances it.

Narration

Music is also used in toddler rooms to help children learn. Here the teacher is singing a song that identifies individual children by the color they are wearing.

Reading and singing are important ways to nurture language development.

So that is what we learn, we learn songs and rhymes and things that are culturally appropriate to what we are doing with the children.

Language is something that is shared, more through an environment, than through a language itself. It is what you remember about the closeness of that sharing when a babe is held and read to, when a babe is rocked and sung to, {Speaking Voice} when a babe is sung to in a kindly respectful voice. That is what they thrive on.

In an infant room or in a toddler room it is a busy place, it is a busy humming place, so when you have that child alone on a changing table it is a wonderful time to make eye contact and to sing and talk and explain what you are doing. Babies very quickly get the idea of “I’m going to change your diaper.” They know what that means.

8. Final Tips

Narration

{Age Appropriate Music} *Calm music is sometimes played in infant and toddler classrooms particularly during nap. The music is chosen with the needs of the children in mind. During nap time assistants {Rub a Child’s Back During Nap} may need to rub a child’s back to help them fall asleep.*



The calm of the Montessori classroom is often just what an infant or toddler needs.

It is also extremely important for an assistant to be able to take the {Outdoor Learning} children outside. Light is a great gift. They can be carried in a front pack or a backpack. But to get them out and develop their observation skills from the very beginning.

We are tempted often {Adult Conversation} to talk over the children as if they don’t exist. I think if we are respectful between the people working in the room, we don’t correct each other, we do it in private {Giving Feedback} and we talk about it respectfully. That assistant is a right and a left hand to the harmony of that room and it runs according to how that assistant responds.

9. Conclusion

Narration

This training program is just the beginning of your learning process as a new assistant.

Understanding infants and toddlers is an intellectually challenging endeavor. Why a child is behaving in a particular way at a particular time raises many questions. People who work with children, who are curious about human behavior, enjoy considering these questions and seeking answers.

Taking care of an infant is as scholarly a challenge as taking a graduate class because there are probably not developmental leaps like that again. That is such an astounding developmental stage that I think you have to be well schooled. You have to read and study and observe and ask. It is not something that should be taken lightly by an unskilled person. It takes a lifetime to figure it out. I think people who have worked with infants find that it is a very fulfilling, challenging intellectual pursuit.