

Lesson 5: Work we need to do on ourselves to help the children and parents

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As an educator, we are providing a lot of care to the families who come to our classes.

When working as a Montessori educator, we have an enormous responsibility to the child. To see them, to work to understand them, and to accept them for who they are. Then we support them to be the best version of themselves.

Running a Montessori playgroup, we also are working with the adults who attend the classes in the same way. Everyone is going to enter the classroom with their own history, their own background and upbringing, their own judgements and feelings. It is our job to support these adults in the same way.

To enable this we need to prepare ourselves as the adult. I love that Dr Montessori recognised this *preparation of the adult*.

“It is not enough for the teacher to love the child. She must first love and understand the universe. She must prepare herself, and truly work at it.” – Maria Montessori

“The real preparation for education is a study of one’s self. The training of the teacher who is to help life is something far more than the learning of ideas. It includes the training of character, it is a preparation of the spirit.” -Maria Montessori, The Absorbent Mind

“He must rid his heart of pride and anger. He must learn how to humble himself and be clothed with charity. These are the virtues he must acquire and this inner preparation will give him the balance and poise which he will need...We insist on the fact that a teacher must prepare himself interiorly by systematically studying himself so that he can tear out his most deeply rooted defects, those in fact which impede his relations with children.” – Maria Montessori The Secret of Childhood

1. Practise observation

If there was only one thing that I could suggest we do to improve ourselves to work with families, it would be to practice observation. It is no surprise that we do 250 hours of observation in our training. I’ll be honest with you – this was my least favourite part of our training. It took me all 250 hours to make the shift to being an objective observer. And it is this shift that allows me to do the work in the classroom with the children and the adults.

Learning to see as a scientist, with objectivity, helps reveal our judgements, analysis and thoughts in the classroom. And moves us to a more objective place where we can have

space to see each child and adult, and accept them as they are.

If you have not done your Montessori training, then start practising observation now. And if you have done your Montessori training, keep practising!

In a notebook, note down the date, the time, the weather, location, and child's name and age. Record as if you were a video camera exactly what you see with as much detail as possible and using only objective language.

For example, instead of using a subjective statement like "the child is being shy", we could record objectively, "the child is standing on the side looking towards XXX; their arms are crossed over their chest; their head is lowered."

Record how the child moves, which activities are being worked on, for how long, interactions with other children and adults, independence, and language (verbal and non-verbal). Below you'll find a list from *The Montessori Toddler* with the things you can observe.

Observe. Then observe some more.

From the information obtained during observation, we can then ask ourselves how we can support this child/adult in the best way.

SOME THINGS WE CAN OBSERVE

FINE MOTOR

- how they grasp and hold objects
- which fingers and which hand they use
- what grip they use on a paintbrush or pencil
- which fine motor skill activities they choose and what fine motor skills they are practising, eg, posting, threading etc

GROSS MOTOR

- how they come to stand or sit
- how they walk – distance of legs or arm movements
- balance
- what gross motor skills they are practising
- do they choose activities which use gross motor skills?
- does the environment help or hinder movement?

COMMUNICATION

- sounds/words they make to communicate
- smiling
- crying – intensity, duration
- other body language
- how they express themselves
- eye contact during conversations
- language/s used
- how they are responded to when they communicate

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

- what they are interested in
- what they are practising/learning to master + which activities can they complete
- how long they play with the activity

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

- interactions with others – peers and adults
- do they observe others?
- how they ask for help
- how they provide assistance to others

EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- when does the child cry/smile/laugh?
- how they get comforted or comfort themselves
- how they respond to strangers
- how they deal with moments of separation
- how they manage when things do not go their way

EATING

- what? how much?
- passive or active eater
- are they self-feeding?

SLEEPING

- any sleep patterns
- how they fall asleep
- quality of sleep
- position during sleep
- how they transition to waking

INDEPENDENCE

- signs of independence
- relationship to adult

CLOTHING

- does the clothing help or hinder movement/independence?
- do they try to put their own clothing on/off?
- do they express preferences for their clothing?

SELF-OBSERVATION

(OBSERVING OURSELVES)

- what we say when our child does something we like
- record our communication
- how we respond if our child does not eat/sleep
- if anything comes up for us as we observe our child

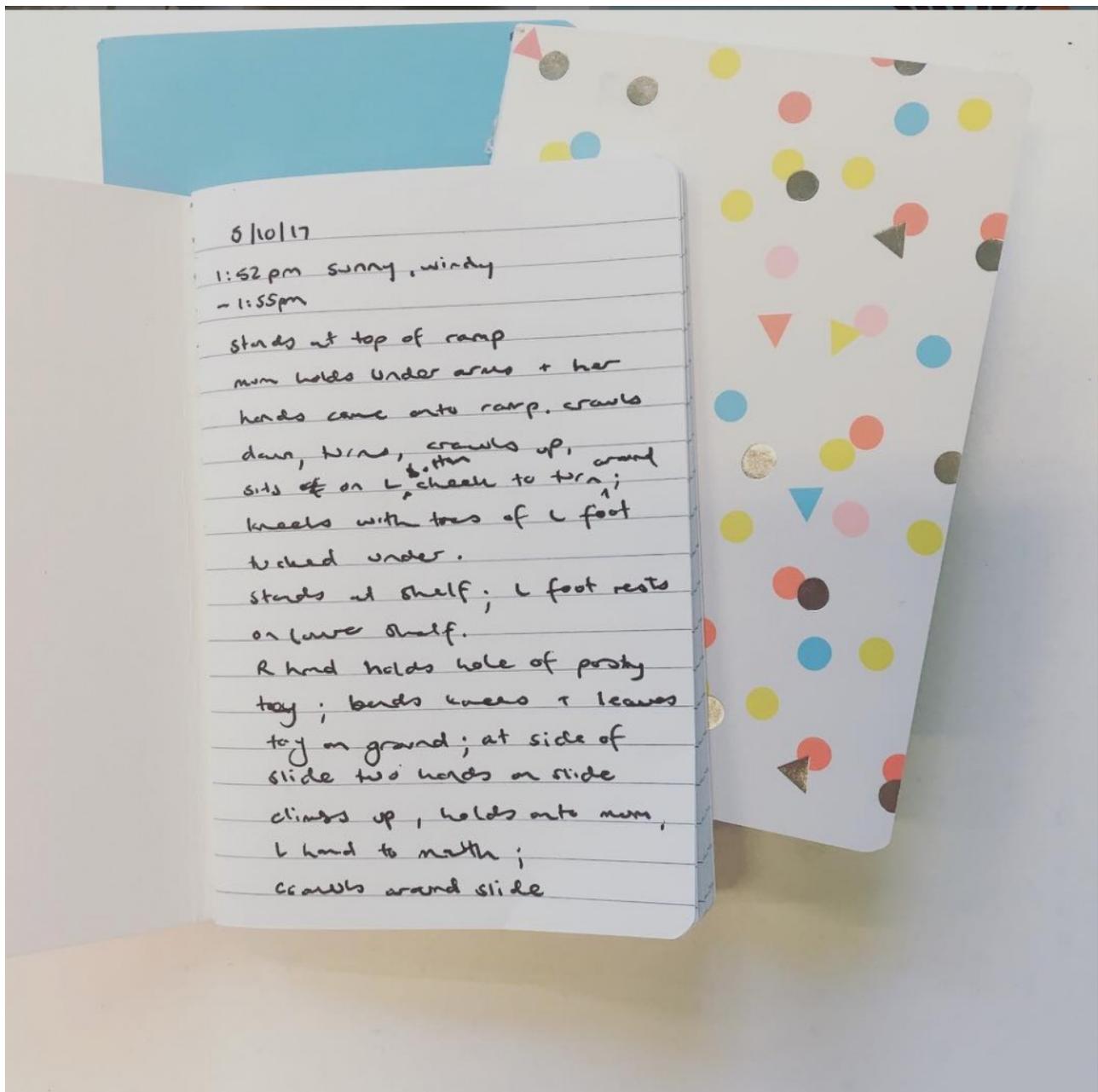
Self-observation

When doing observation, we can draw a line down the page to make a column on the side to make notes of things that come up for us during the observation. This is a powerful exercise in self-observation to see what we still need to work through.

I don't limit self-observation to the classroom. I try to practice it all the time. When I'm on my bike and notice that my shoulders are pulled up by my ears, if I have tiredness anywhere in my body, if something doesn't feel quite right, when I doubt myself.

To me, this is like gold. "Great, what can I uncover about myself here?" It can be confronting and make us question things that we take as given. For example, carrying the weight of the world on our shoulders and how we can release some of it. Do we need someone to care for us if we are busy caring for others? Are we taking on too much responsibility? Are we not being clear about our boundaries?

Uncomfortable work, but it's often where the growth is.



2. Accept every child; accept every family

In a perfect world, our Montessori playgroups can be a place of great safety. Where people can come without judgement, where they can receive our support, and where they can leave happier than they came.

See the parents develop alongside the child. Accept where they are on their journey – some will pick things up quickly. And others may never. We cannot make parents love Montessori.

What we can do is keeping offering information and an example and “love them into Montessori” as one of my Montessori mentors. Ferne van Zyl, would say.

Process any judgements that come up

We will have judgements come up for us – we are human. It is our responsibility to process these so we can provide a safe place for families to grow.

We may need a place to park these frustrations – a friend we can talk to; another teacher who can help us process things; another carer such as an osteopath, therapist, coach. It is not until we give ourselves empathy, particularly if we are triggered, that we can show up and support another.

Often things that trigger us are actually areas in which we need to grow ourselves. I often see this like a mirror. For example, if a child doesn't listen to us, we may need to think about if we are really listening to the child. It's very humbling to see it as not a problem with someone else, but looking at ourselves as the starting point.

An exercise

Look into another's eyes without judgement. Practice this with someone you know well first. Take two minutes and look into their eyes without making any analysis. Simply see them for who they are. What comes up for you? Is it confronting? What happens when you drop the judgement and see them totally for who they are?

Now apply the same principles when working with the adults in your class.

3. Leave our stuff at home

We do have lives outside of the classroom – our families, friends, world events etc. It is important for us not to bring this into class with us.

We want to be present in the classroom so we can do our best work.

One thing I have found enormously helpful is to consciously put on my apron at the beginning of class. When I put on my apron, I am transitioning from my role as mother to my role as teacher. And at the end of class when I take it off, I also transition from my

classroom role back to my role as a mother. This helps me also show up for my family in the way I'm needed there. Not simply using up all my "good stuff" in my class.

I also cycle home every day from class and let go of anything that I don't need in my home. The same can be done whether you commute by walking, driving, catching public transport, or cycling like me.

4. Take care of ourselves

It is important to take care of ourselves otherwise there is no-one to take our classes.

Keep healthy by feeding our minds, bodies and souls. Read books that are not just about work; eat food that nurtures you; move your body to keep active; feed your soul in ways that resonate for you.

What fills you up? For me it is trips into nature, being with my family and friends, yoga, drinking tea, putting the sun on my face (when it comes out in Amsterdam), baking and slowing down.

I also find it helpful to meditate every morning – nothing fancy, simply lying in my bed and clearing my mind. I also often do a "loving kindness" meditation.

It's important to feel replenished – take enough holidays, get help if needed – so that we can show up as the best guides in our classes.

Also, keep choosing every day to be in the classroom. I always say that the day I become a grumpy Montessori teacher is my last day in the classroom.



in my happy place – in the mountains with forests and lakes

5. Don't look for love from the children/parents

In class, it is our role to give love and care, not to need love from them. If we are looking to be loved, we cannot be in service to the family.

I make sure to receive love in other ways outside of the classroom – from my family, friends, the city etc.

I'll admit that I do receive a lot of love from the children and the families coming to my classes – an impromptu hug from a child, a grateful parent etc. However, I never ask a child/parent for a hug. That is not their role.

6. Being a model of respect – to both child and the adult

In our Montessori training, we learn to communicate in a respectful way to the child. We see them as capable, we listen to their words, we give them rich language, we have enriching conversations with them, and we help as little as necessary and as much as possible.

When setting limits with children, we are kind and clear. “I can’t let you bang the window with the glass. Let’s use the glass for drinking or we can bang the drum.”

Similarly, we can communicate with parents in the same way. We can listen to them, support them, give them support if needed. And above all we can **make them feel seen, understood and accepted for who they are.**

If we find ourselves responding with anger, then we are best to excuse ourselves to calm ourselves down. Are we triggered by something? How can we have our message heard in a calm and clear way? Do we need a break from our work? Or some help?

TIP:

How to Talk so Kids will Listen – I find this book so helpful in working with children in a Montessori way. And use the same communication with the adults.

As an extra layer, “non-violent communication” can be especially useful when working with families in a respectful way. I’ve followed several courses and still feel like a beginner, but it really helps see ourselves, others and look for connection.

7. Time management

Sometimes it feels like there is not enough time. It can be very busy managing our classroom, the maintenance, the families, the admin, and our own lives.

Here are some of my tips:

- Our minds feel full and we are constantly making lists in our heads of things we need to do. Create a simple system to record things. For me, I write them in a notebook. Then I later “process” these notes and use Trello to dump ideas, materials I’d like to make or purchase for the class. This way I know that everything is recorded somewhere so it doesn’t fill up my mind. It helps me to stay present.
- Do one thing at a time – if you are in the class, be present; if you are at home, switch off from class
- Work out what is the one thing you could do now to make everything else easier or unnecessary – for example, running a parent evening may help with something that is coming up a lot in class; or meeting a certain need in the class, may save energy from cleaning later. (Read the book, “The One Thing”)

8. Communicate our expectations

We are teachers and we want to help the families that come to our classes. Yet, we may not want to be accessible 24/7. Your downtime is important too.

When I first began, I had no limits. People could reach me any time of day, sometimes answering my phone during my children's school pick up.

I want parents to ask me questions, but for me I like to communicate how and when. During class they can ask me questions any time. And after hours, preferably by email.

So I state clearly on my website very limited hours when I can be reached by phone. Similarly, I make a lot of information available on the website like cost, class times, ages etc. This also helps reduce the number of phone calls.

Work out what works best for you, and clearly communicate this.

9. Continue learning

It's so important for us to keep learning and educating ourselves. Make professional development a priority and challenge yourself in new ways.

I also learn so much from things that are unrelated to my "work". Recently I tried some Suzuki piano lessons. And learning about learning as a student made me reflect on my own practices.

What are your favourite ways of learning? Podcasts? Online summits? E-courses like this? Reading books? Attending conferences? Or regular meet ups with colleagues or online groups? Facebook groups? etc

My favourite right now is the the poetry of Carl Diego (known on Instagram as Yung Pueblo). The most beautiful messages that challenge in just the right sort of way.

you can be a kind and loving
person while also making sure that
no one takes advantage of you

yung pueblo

10. Live in a Montessori way

I recently wrote on my blog [here](#) about living in a Montessori way even with the adults in our lives. I think this is our responsibility. There can be such division even within the Montessori community from different trainings, people's approaches etc.

When we look at it with fresh eyes, we all have a common purpose to serve the child. Can we find a way to be at peace with others? To challenge others ideas in a way that starts a conversation to understand each other better, not attack each other?

So my closing challenge to you for this lesson would be can you live in a Montessori way, both with the children, their parents, and anyone in your life?

Especially those that think differently from you?

That would be the example to others how to show up in the world. Will you accept?

One last thing...

This week I have a handout for parents in class to read with the Decalogue of Montessori. Do you know it?

The earliest record of it is from a 1992 AMI Journal – not necessarily written by Dr Montessori but a distillation of her ideas. I've heard people even have it hanging as a reminder in their classroom. Maybe one to be framed!

It seems very apt to include in today's lesson as well.

The decalogue of Montessori

1. Never touch the child unless invited by him (in some form or the other).
2. Never speak ill of him in his presence or in his absence.
3. Concentrate on developing and strengthening what is good in him. Take meticulous and constant care of the environment. Teach proper use of things and show the place where they are kept.
4. The adult is to be active when helping the child to establish relation with the environment, and remain outwardly passive but inwardly active when this relation has been established.
5. The adult must always be ready to answer the call of the child who stands in need of him and always listen and respond to the child who appeals to him.
6. The adult must respect the child who makes a mistake without correcting directly. But he must stop any misuses of the environment and any action which endangers the child or the other members of the community.
7. The adult must respect the child who takes rest and watches others working and not disturb him, neither call or force him to other forms of activity.
8. The adult must help those who are in search of activity without finding it.
9. The adult must, therefore, be untiring in repeating presentations to the child who refused them earlier, in teaching the child who has not yet learned, in helping the child who needs it to overcome the imperfections in animating the environment, with her care, with her purposeful silence, with her mild words, and her loving presence. She must make her presence felt to the child who searches and hide from the child who has found.
10. The adult must always treat the child with the best of good manners and, in general, offer him the best she has in herself and at her disposal.

TIME FOR ACTION

To me, this is the most important work we need to do – the work on ourselves. Be honest.

1. What work do you need to practise right now? What are your triggers showing you?
 2. Are you looking after yourself? What fills you up so you can care for others?
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Next lesson: Tips for working with children