

# Lesson 6: Tips for working with children

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The most natural way for others to learn about the Montessori approach is by showing them how we work in the class with the children.

The joy of being with children. The respect we show them. The way we speak to them. And the way we support them in their self-mastery, giving as little help as possible and as much as necessary. All the while, remaining open to continue learning ourselves.

This lesson has three parts:

The first is the very practical way of presenting lessons.

The second are practical tips in the classroom: the special ways we respond to a child (like instead of praise, helping them see what they achieved), and some very practical ways of showing children where things belong, and how to take turns.

The third is the big picture of working with children. And considering what are the Montessori principles we apply every day in the classroom with the children.

I hope you find them equally helpful in aiding you to be a calm, clear and joyful teacher/guide in the classroom regardless of your setting or experience.

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## Presentations

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A large part of our work with children is in connecting them to the environment. In our Montessori training, we learn to give presentations of all the materials in the classroom.

We break the process into small steps and practise these so well so that our movements are slow and precise for a child to follow, there are no extraneous movements, and we show the child the same way every time (easier for them to learn).

I have included examples of a presentation from each learning area here:

You'll see that the steps are very precise, exaggerated for the child to follow. You can apply these principles to write up your own presentations for every activity in your class.

In practice, you may rarely give a full presentation to a child following every step. Instead, in practice, I find I call on just a few steps from the presentation where I see the child needs some help – I step in to offer help – then step back again to see how they get on.

For me, rather than telling a child what they need to learn, “Here, I’m going to show you hand-washing”, I follow the child, allow them to take their time to find the activity they are drawn to, observe them, and sit on my hands. Until I see that small moment where

they have struggled and are at the point of giving up, and then I step in calmly to offer some help.

“What you like some help?”

“Would you like me to show you?”

“Would you like another child to help you?”

Or offering a verbal instruction, “Have you tried turning it around?”

So we use the presentations to improvise with each child, where they are at.

*“I give very few lessons on how to give lessons, lest my suggestions—becoming stereotypes & parodied—should turn into obstacle instead of help. The directress is dealing with different personalities and it therefore becomes a question of how she should orient herself in what is for her a new world, rather than any rigid and absolute rules.” – Dr Montessori*



Matching objects to cards

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## Practical tips working with children

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1. Follow the child  
Follow the child's pace and interests. Let them take the time to choose for themselves rather than suggesting or leading them. Have available activities they are working to master – something challenging but not so hard they give up. And let them work with it for as long as they like. This takes a lot of trust in the child that they know what they need to be working on right now.  
It's ok for them to observe and watch before choosing an activity.

If they want to play with two activities at the same time, we can help them to choose one at a time, "Let's play with one activity at a time. Would you like to play this one or this one?"

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2. Offer the child to repeat an activity  
When they have completed an activity, we can ask, "Would you like to do it again?" This helps build their concentration. They may stay as long as they like with any activity as they are practising to master the activity even if someone is waiting.

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3. Help the child bring their activity to a table or roll out a mat on the floor  
Young children will work at the shelf; as their concentration builds, we can invite them to bring their tray to a table or they can roll out a mat on the floor to mark their space.

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4. Putting an activity back  
This is a process the child learns over time. Trust they are absorbing the modelling around them of how to put things away.  
Rather than forcing a child to put the activity back, we will model for the younger children and the older children will also be examples of this.

We replace activities in their special place, with everything complete and at the ready for the next child. Over time they will start to help. Then we might only need to tap the shelf and say "it goes here" ..And then they will be able to bring it back all by themselves.

For an older child, if they get out a second activity before putting back the first, we can offer to hold the second one for them. "I'll hold this one while you put the other activity back for the next person." This is usually enough reassurance that it will be available for them once they have put the first back.

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5. In Montessori we don't put the child into a position that they can't get into themselves  
For example, we lay them down until they are ready to sit by themselves; let them pull up and cruise on a low shelf, rather than holding their hands to walk; supervise them on climbing equipment, but see how much they can do for themselves before stepping in to help

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6. Use rich language, use positive language, use a quiet voice

Just as a child can learn the names of different fruits (bananas, apples, grapes etc), so too can they learn the names of the birds and trees you see in the park, the different vehicle names from front-wheel loader to excavator to mobile crane. We will only be limited by our own knowledge.

And use positive language. Instead of saying, "Don't spill the water", say what we want them to do, eg, "Use two hands".

We can make time for conversation with a child of any age. A baby can poke out their tongue and we can copy them; a toddler can make the sounds of animals they have seen on a farm; and a preschooler may be able to tell a whole story, with a few well-placed comments and questions from us.

And we can make sure our voice is quiet when we speak, that we move across the room to speak with a parent asking a question, and especially when the noise in the classroom increases.

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7. Turn taking

Toddlers find it hard to share so in our Montessori playgroup, we share by taking turns.

If the child is keen to have a turn at something they see another child working on, first wait and see if it resolves by itself. Observe the body language of the child at work – do they mind or not? If they do, they may tell the other child, "it will be available soon."

Or we can help them translate, "It looks like they want to finish it by themselves. It will be available soon."

Or, "Would you like to watch with me until it's back on the shelf?"

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8. Talk first, then demonstrate with slow movements

When showing a young child a new skill, we separate our actions and words. If we talk and demonstrate at the same time, the child doesn't know if they should be listening or watching.

Instead, invite them to look, "Watch", and then show them, for example, how to turn the lid of the jar.

If we slow down our movements and break them into small parts, it is easier for the young child to learn the skill. For example, think of all the small parts of undoing a button and break the movement into little steps.

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9. Model, model, model

The child learns a lot from observing the adults in the environment. If we push in our chair with our foot, sit on the table or shelf, carry two trays at a time, we will see them trying to copy us.

So be conscious of the way we carry a tray (use two hands), push in a chair by lifting with two hands, pour water from a jug with two hands etc. Handle the objects in a way that the child can manage. And move slowly. As Ferne van Zyl says, "If you think you are going slow, go even slower."

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10. Step back as long as possible before stepping in to help

The activities in the environment are set up for the child to be as independent as possible.  
A good guideline is “If the child’s hands are on the work, then ours are off the work.” Then we can ask, “Do you need help?” if they get stuck.

Even if a ball is going to fall off the table, we wait to see what the child does. They may notice it themselves or we could invite them to pick it up. The child may be pouring water into a glass and does not stop at the top. They will learn that the glass becomes too full and we can show them how to use the sponge or mop to clean up.

Step back and keep observing the child, ready to step in if necessary. For example, if the child is using a glass inappropriately, we are ready to step in and gently show the child that the glasses are for drinking.

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11. Encourage or describe rather than evaluate and praise

Children need encouragement, but the actual evaluation should be left to the child, otherwise we run the risk of our children relying on outside approval more than trusting their own evaluation.  
Rather than saying, “good job”, “goedzo”, “good boy/girl”, instead try to get in the habit of giving encouragement by giving positive and factual descriptions of the child’s actions and accomplishment.

For example:

“I see red and blue paint on your picture.”//“Would you like to tell me about your painting?”

“You look pleased. You matched all the animals to the picture cards.”

“Thanks for your help making snack today – all of those crackers and cutting that fruit.”

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12. Observe the child

Take the opportunity to observe each child and see what they are capable of.

We can observe:

a. movement – how they hold the paintbrush, how they come to stand from sitting, how they sit on a chair

b. language – sounds, words, sentence structures

c. cognitive development – how they think and approach tasks

d. social development – interactions with other children, observing other children and adults, attachment to parent, waiting for their turn

e. the work cycle – choosing work independently, points of interest in an activity, putting away when finished

(see Lesson 5 for more details)

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13. Help the child concentrate

It may look like a young child is not concentrating. They stand at the shelf, place a couple of pegs in the board, stop to look around, place another peg in, a peg drops on the ground, they pause, then slowly lower themselves to pick it up, then they might come back to placing another peg. This is quite normal concentration for a toddler. There is a difference between purposeful activity and non-purposeful activity. We can observe a child's interest in water and guide them to the hand-washing activity or flower arranging.

We can look to simplify an activity to allow them to concentrate when an activity is too hard – for example, by limiting the number of pieces available. Or to make it more challenging if they have already mastered it – for example, doing the activity with a blindfold.

I also observe that, in addition to the movement built into many of the Montessori activities like fetching water and bringing materials across the room, there is still a great need for gross motor movement. I suggest incorporating some gross motor climbing and balancing in the classroom (in addition to the outdoor environment).

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14. Allow all feelings, stop any unacceptable behaviour

Part of respectful communication is being a safe space for a child to express themselves without being dismissed or shamed. If a child is sad or angry, we can offer them a hug or keep them safe if they don't want one. They learn that they are accepted even when they are having a hard time.

You can gently remove them from the space if it's upsetting to other children, to allow them time to fully feel and process their emotions.

But we don't allow children to hurt each other and we will step in to keep everyone safe. "It's my job to keep everyone safe."

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15. Avoid testing the child (especially under 3 years old)

We may not realise we are doing it, but we are constantly testing our children. "What colour is this?" "How many apples am I holding?" "Can you show grandma how you can walk?"

The only time I would test a child is if they know the answer 100% and would be excited to tell us, usually when they are 3+ years old. For example, if they have been identifying blue objects all by themselves, I could point to something blue and ask, "What colour is this?" They will be delighted to shriek, "Blue!"

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16. Do not allow hitting, biting, throwing, pushing

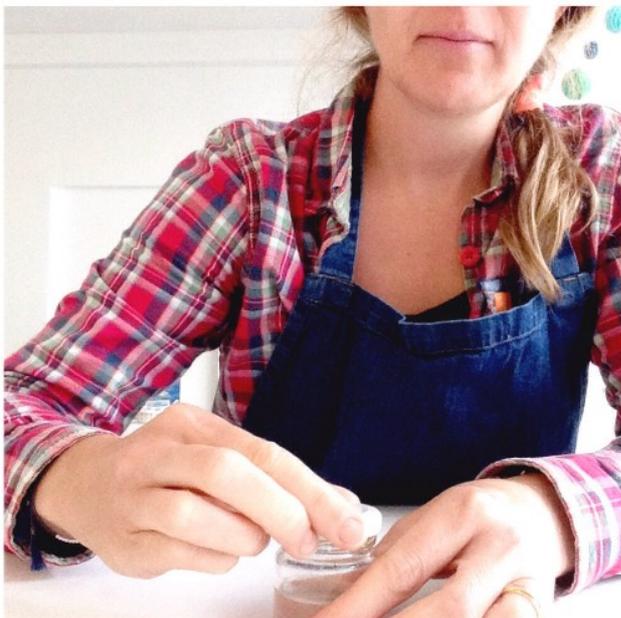
First observe to see what happens to trigger this behaviour (if there is a trigger). For example, for toddlers it can be a lack of verbal skills to tell another child not to touch; but it could also be a vision problem giving them a feeling of disorientation; or happening at certain times of day. So observe the full picture.

If there is time, we can translate for them “Are you trying to tell them, “it’s my turn”?”

We can place a gentle hand between two children and remind them you are going to keep everyone safe.

We can remove something that is dangerous to be thrown and help them find something that is ok to throw

And if they are biting/hitting/throwing/pushing often, we or their adult can sit nearby them and be a calm bodyguard, ready to step in with a gentle arm between the two children, or to physically sit between two children to provide a safe and calm barrier.



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## The bigger picture to working with children

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I know that I have been called a “soft” Montessori teacher. And do you know what? I’m ok with that.

Because I do think the child should be treated with respect.

That it’s ok to offer a hug to a child to help them calm down if they are sad. To accept a hug if the child wants to hug us.

That I want to offer the child as much help as is necessary (and as little as needed) for them to settle into my environment.

That I would model caring for our friends if someone has been bitten or hurt and help a child making amends. And if they cannot help yet, knowing that modelling will be absorbed by them and what I do is more important than what I say.

That I have fun with the children – I just adore their company and that they are learning so much is a fun side effect.

That I would try to remember (although I also at times forget) to ask permission before I handled a child, for example, to help them into a chair or with their clothing.

That I try to accept everyone for who they are, on their unique journey.

And all that said...

... I also have clear boundaries that I will assert when needed, in a kind and clear way.

Because I also do not believe that Montessori is about children being able to do whatever they like.

Through clear boundaries they learn to respect themselves, others and the environment.

I’m not claiming to be perfect. Who is?

But I do lead with love.

So, to this end, let’s review some important Montessori principles about working with children in a loving, kind, respectful way.

### 1. The absorbent mind

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*“There exists in the small child an unconscious mental state which is of a creative nature. We have called it the Absorbent Mind. The Absorbent Mind does not construct with a voluntary effort but according to the lead of inner sensitivities which we call “Sensitive Periods.”*

*– The Absorbent Mind, Dr M Montessori*

Dr Montessori recognised that children under 6 years old have an absorbent mind, taking things in effortlessly and also indiscriminately (the good and the bad).

This can be an enormous opportunity – we can model how we speak with respect, how we handle things in the environment, and care of others and our environment.

The child will unconsciously learn where things go back in the classroom, they will see how we carry furniture and trays (with two hands, because someone is watching us), and – if we move slowly (something I'm still practising) – they will watch how our fingers work and how we move our bodies with grace and control.

It's also a reminder to carefully prepare the classroom as this is what they will absorb – the beauty, the order, and everything at their level (more details back in Lesson 3).

***In short: model, model, model for the children (and their adults).***

## **2. Sensitive periods**

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Sensitive periods are when a child shows an intense interest in a particular area of learning. So as a Montessori educator, we are constantly observing to see what the children in our class are working to master and observing if the environment is meeting these needs or needs to be adjusted.

It reminds us to keep looking at each child individually on their own unique developmental timeline, with their own interests, and learning in their own way.

***In short: observe, observe, observe each child to see if their needs are being met (and how we can help meet these needs if needed).***

## **3. Human tendency to communicate**

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Human tendencies are the activities, behaviour and characteristics that human beings are born with which enable them to fit into their environment.

One of the human tendencies is communication. You can see from birth the child's need to communicate and to connect with other humans.

With such a strong tendency in the child to communicate, as the educator, we are responsible then for:

\* using correct language with the child

- providing rich vocabulary
- listening to the child
- being interested in what they are telling or showing us
- and, when the child is in deep concentration, we can give space to the child in their work by remaining silent

***In short, provide a rich language environment and moments of silence.***

#### 4. Human tendency to explore

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Their need to explore their environment and receive sensorial information about it means that, as the educator, we can:

- have an attitude and acceptance of freedom of movement
- set up a safe, rich environment which allows optimisation of movement abilities
- choose materials to stimulate movement and provide rich hand-on learning materials
- do practical life in collaboration with them
- provide opportunities for **maximum effort** – when they need to move heavy objects, for example, rearranging furniture in the classroom
- and, to resist doing something for the child that they are not yet ready for – for example, putting them in a position they are not yet ready for like sitting or walking holding our hands

***In short, remove obstacles to exploration and allow them mastery of their own bodies.***

#### 5. Human tendency to order and orientation

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To allow the child to feel accustomed to their environment and feel secure, we can:

- provide consistency of care (having an apron can help children identify the educator in the class)
- set up and use designated spaces for designated activities
- maintain a known routine/rhythm
- set up order in the environment
- offer acceptance and patience if things change and are not what the child is expecting
- and we can offer consistency of limits

***In short, provide consistency of both the physical and emotional environment***

#### 6. Human tendency to work, repeat, self-correct, self-perfect and be exact

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The young child thrives on the physical or mental effort directed at doing (or making) something and they will repeat to master, correct, and perfect it.

As the educator, we can then:

- allow them to become independent (without abandonment)
- create purposeful work in which they will take great joy and satisfaction as well as a feeling of contribution
- invite repetition of an activity, “Let’s do it again!”
- look for points of interest, ie, that part of the activity they are working to master
- allow them to work without interruption

- look for self-correcting materials where the child feels the satisfaction from mastery when completed

***In short, allow the young child to feel capable, independent and responsible.***

## **7. Human tendency to abstraction, imagination and the mathematical mind**

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In the youngest years, we are laying the foundation for later abstraction, imagination, and the mathematical mind. Dr Montessori found it was best then in the first plane (0-6) to:

- offer reality-based materials and work that they easily understand from the world around them, for example, books and stories and language. This gives a solid foundation for later abstraction and imagination
- allow trial and error as they explore – developing concepts of distance, making decisions, and making mental calculations
- provide natural ways for them to absorb mathematical relationships around them – for example, 1:1 correspondence when setting the table (one placemat, bowl, glass for each person) or when unpacking the shopping into the cupboard counting the oranges one by one

***In short, keep providing reality-based materials and the world around them to explore.***

## **8. Offer freedom and limits**

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The Montessori approach is often misunderstood as being too free (where the children can do whatever they like) or too strict (where the children are only allowed to do things in particular way).

In reality, Montessori is somewhere in the middle. What we call in Montessori “freedom within limits.”

We offer the child freedom: the freedom to choose what activity they would like to do; to continue to repeat an activity for as long as they like, working to master it; to follow their unique rhythm; to be themselves; to allow them to take part in our daily lives; and to be supported as they explore the world.

And we offer the child a few clear limits: if a child is at risk of hurting themselves, another person, or the environment. The adult will be kind and clear to set a limit.

“This is not good for throwing. Let’s find something you can throw.”

“I don’t want to be hit. I’m going to calm down and I’ll be right back.”

“It looks like they are playing with it right now. It will be available soon. I’m going to put my hand here gently between you.”

And will help a child to make amends if needed.

“Would you like to offer them a wet cloth? Or would you like to ask if they are ok?”

***In short, allow freedom as much as possible, and set a limit with love when needed. And it's ok to set a limit if your own boundary is being crossed. It's not only about the child.***

## **9. Observation**

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The best way to see how we can support a child is to keep observing them. How they are today, in this moment, and this moment, and this moment. In observing, we are also seeing the child without judgement and allowing us to accept them for who they are.

If needed, go back to Lesson 5 to review observation.

And from your observations, we'll be able to see:

- what activities they are working to master
- how we can support their developing communication
- if they need any support or skill building in their social development
- in what way they may need help to manage their emotions
- etc

***In short, instead of judgements or assumptions, see the child in front of you now and respond only if needed.***

## **10. Importance of the environment**

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The prepared environment is like the second teacher. When we provide a rich hands-on learning environment for the child to explore, we see natural learning, discovery and delight. The child is able to choose for themselves and they are so capable when things are set up for them to be successful.

If needed, review Lesson 3 on setting up the classroom.

***In short, make the environment as inviting and engaging as possible for the child to explore.***

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That's a lot of information to take in. And to fully integrate this into daily practice with children takes years.

But we know what we know. We know more than many parents coming to our classes,. And we are willing to keep learning every day from what comes up in our classroom, reflecting, and constantly iterating. I know I am.

If you remember nothing else from this lesson, the one idea I'd love everyone to take away is to come from a place of joy and acceptance with the children. And that will be absorbed by them.

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## **TIME FOR ACTION**

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Take time to reflect on the 3 parts of the lesson:

1. Do you need to practise presentations of materials in your classroom? Is it a good idea to revisit your albums to refresh yourself?
  2. What do you need to practice of these practical tips? For me I am a naturally fast person, so remembering to slow down and use a quieter voice is something I need to keep reminding myself. And always practising setting kind and clear limits.
  3. Are you being an example of a Montessori teacher/guide who constantly removes obstacles for the child, observes the child in front of them, and is the best model we can be?
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