

Accommodations in Primary



BY JULIA VOLKMAN

“Accommodations are alterations in the way tasks are presented that allow children with learning disabilities to complete the same assignments as other students. Accommodations do not alter the content of assignments,” National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2006

Dr. Montessori never used the term “learning disability” (The term was coined in the U.S. in 1963.) She worked with children – all kinds of children. So, to start, I suggest we Montessorians take a leading role in reframing the professional dialogue: we are talking about learning variability, not learning disability.

Within that paradigm, Montessorians specialize in learning variability. We create individualized educational plans for every single one of our students. We do this both in the long term as we plan lessons and in real time while

We rub a back if reassurance is needed. We adapt to accommodate the needs of the child before us. This is the serve-and-return of the Montessori method.

But beyond this, there are many resources within the pedagogy that we can bring to the aid of children who need it. If you’ve ever been present when a child receives “services,” you may have already recognized this. Why? Because the prepared primary environment meets the needs of all humans, both standard-issue and utterly unique. Let me give you a few examples of how we can apply the method just as we would apply an accommodation in an IEP.

For Social Difficulty: Explicit Grace And Courtesy

My mentor and friend Susan Stephenson was staying at our home when she saw my three-year-old son constantly bumping into things. He would walk/run and crash into the cupboard, the table, the piano, or other people. So, she gave him a lesson on “How to stop before you hit something.” And they practiced running right up to things and stopping just in time. What a blast! Before this, I thought “grace and courtesy” just meant things like “please”, “thank you”, and “welcome to our room.” I just didn’t realize it meant you could teach the child absolutely anything they

observe carefully to discover the specific behaviors they need to learn. If some of your children “lose it” when someone gets too close to them, create a lesson on “What to do when someone moves very close to you.” If they

them from concentrating, create visually protected work areas. If they are squinting, put a light on their work. The point is to use less brain capacity on distractions so they have more available to learn something new.

Above all, get them talking and singing. Tell your own true stories and invite them to share theirs

speak with tremendous volume, create a lesson on, “How to speak so softly that someone can just hear you.” If they scowl at others, bring them to the mirror and give a lesson on, “How to make a face that people like to see.” The key is to observe so you can discover the precise challenge they face and help them overcome it.

Soon, you may see your worst offenders turning into police officers, reporting on every transgression of every other child. This is a most excellent sign...even if they are still the worst offenders. It means they have seen the light! Once their inner discipline develops, they may just be able to walk the talk.

For Processing Difficulties: Isolate the Stimulus

Some children have trouble taking in and processing certain kinds of information. You’ll see them blinking, squinting, looking away, covering their ears, leaning back and balancing in their chairs, chewing some things for a very long time, and more. Sometimes the challenge is with the sense of touch, hearing, and/or vision. Sometimes it is language-based. For all of these, Dr. Montessori has given us a way to help: isolate the stimulus. After all, that inner “flashlight” that is supposed to shine on just what the child needs won’t work unless the room is dark and you have fresh batteries.

Keep in mind that the brain has a limited overall capacity. If a child is spending all of her brain resources on trying to hear, she’ll have little leftover to work on remembering a complex series of steps. So, if sounds overwhelm them, dampen the soundscape. If they can’t hear the sounds in language, artic-u-late sl-ow-ly and increase the volume. If visual stimulus prevents

For Sequencing Difficulties: Explicit Preliminary Exercises

Some children are not yet ready to follow a long sequence of steps. These children may become confused, frustrated, or lose their attention very early on in a work. They may also get a bit mischievous or ‘charming’ as they draw your attention away from what is tricky for them. If you suspect they may have difficulty with order, look to preliminary exercises.

Don’t limit yourself to the standards like pouring water, using the faucet, using a clothespin, or folding an apron. Think about the more complex activity you are hoping the child will be able to do, and break it down to its components. If you have a child who is flooding the classroom, teach them how to fill and empty a pitcher. Go to the sink. Fill the pitcher. Empty the pitcher. Go back to the table to dry it and then repeat. Once they can do this, add in a pail. Fill the pitcher at the sink and pour it into the pail at the table. Empty the pail at the sink. Dry and repeat.

Remember that preliminary exercises have no need for an aim in and of themselves, but the children don’t care about that. They want to do it because they are trying to master something. Use your observations to guide you and create the custom preliminary exercises the child needs.

So, if table scrubbing seems impossible, practice laying it out and putting it back...no water, no scrubbing, just setting it up on the floor cloth and putting it back in order on the tray. Lay it out, tidy it up. Lay it out, tidy it up. If they know their numbers but their decimal cards are a jumble, practice setting out the cards and putting them away. Set them out, put them back. If they can’t get to the 54 steps of flower arranging, offer them pre-measured and



Precision of movement

we present lessons. For example, while one four-year-old is ready to learn the sounds of the alphabet, another may already be ready for reading. While we are giving a one-on-one lesson, we may take a little longer here or go faster there. We exaggerate a point of interest or understate it. We make eye contact.

needed to know. Charging into both things and people was definitely getting in the way of my son’s relationships. But he didn’t need a lecture or a role model – he needed practice judging distances and then stopping himself.

When you notice children having trouble working well with others,



Isolating the stimulus

cut flowers for a simpler activity until they're ready for the more complex one.

For Internal Disorder: Extreme Precision, Predictability, and Repeatability

Dr. Montessori taught us about the child's intense sensitivity to order. Today's researchers would say the young child's cognitive flexibility (a foundational skill for executive functions) is just developing. Cognitive flexibility means the ability to adjust when things don't go the way you think they're going to go.

When you see a child cry, act out, or have a tantrum and you can't tell why, it may be that something is out of order. This could be a cognitive capacity issue. There is only so much that the child's brain can do at once. If they are spinning their wheels trying to figure out

why things are different from how they 'ought' to be, they can't be focusing on the modes of activity.

We can accommodate this developing skill by making things as consistent and predictable as possible. Think of this as an extreme sport. It means that the way we show the children to use two hands to simultaneously tear off a paper towel in a preliminary exercise is the same way we get a paper towel...every time. The way we show them to use two hands to squeeze a sponge is the way we always squeeze a sponge. The way we teach them to get someone's attention is the way we get anyone's attention. The way we turn on some quiet music to indicate the end of the work cycle is the way we are always going to signal the end of the work cycle. Reliable routines and predictable human movements are a tremendous support

to the developing child.

For Reading Difficulties: Explicit Spoken Language

If you are working with children in poverty, chances are high that they are exposed to dramatically fewer words per day than their more affluent peers. These children need more than natural conversations to help them catch up. They need a rigorous daily dose of explicit spoken language lessons and activities. You must take this invisible part of the Montessori method and make it a physical presence in your room.

For example, each week, choose a song, a poem, and a tongue twister. Print them out on cardstock and display them on your spoken language shelf. Present each one every day for the

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The key is observation

BY **CARLY RILEY**

Dr. Montessori's application of the scientific method relies on careful and ongoing observation of the children in your classroom. When children are facing academic challenges or demonstrating unskillful behavior, our brains are hardwired to focus on the areas in which they are not yet successful. (Google the term 'negativity bias' if you'd like to learn more about this.) Pausing to clarify what we're doing before we start our observations can help us to see both what is working and what is not.

First, define the issue. Is the child cognitively on track yet struggling to engage in prosocial behaviors? Are there sensory triggers in the classroom that set them off? Do they lay out materials in a disorganized or non-sequential manner or struggle to orient properly to work on a rug?

Next, set an intention around your observations so that they are objective, unbiased, and focused. What is the behavior that most interferes with their social interactions? Does a pattern emerge of when the unskillful behavior occurs? What is the specific work that they avoid or are drawn to and why?

These observations are the first step towards differentiating your interactions with each child and meeting the specific needs of the children in your classroom.

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week. I recommend doing the tongue twisters when you greet the children in the morning. “Good morning! I have a new tongue twister for you: red leather yellow leather, red leather yellow leather, red leather yellow leather...”

Carry a handful of sound game objects in your pocket and pull these out to play sound games while you are waiting in line. And for goodness sakes, play all four levels of the sound game!

Play small group spoken classification games. Begin with simple ones like, “I’m thinking of my favorite foods. Raspberries. Oatmeal cookies.” Invite the children to join in. Next time you can get more specific by thinking of types of fruits or vegetables or cars or pets. Find the topics that they are interested in so that you can get them talking! You can also do this to help them develop a true love for language as you prepare them for later word study. This means things like, “I’m thinking of two words that mean something new when you put them together like star...fish. Starfish.”

Above all, get them talking and singing. Tell your own true stories and invite them to share theirs. Invite them to bring in a picture or book to share. Especially get them talking about art, such as the fine art you hang on the walls, and the classical music you play at lunch. Art is the best because no

matter what their opinion is, they can’t be wrong. It’s art! We are guiding them to discover that they have a voice and that they have something worth saying.

In the Face of Negativity: Positivity

I had a student once who would pick up a pair of scissors, hold them behind another child, and pretend he was going to stab her. I had another student who would kick a child for no reason and then appear very pleased with himself once the child cried. I didn’t know what to do so I asked my trainer for advice. She said, “Keep them close to you. Don’t let the other children know they are a problem.” I took her advice and it worked. I held their hands whenever we needed to line up, I warned them in advance when a transition was about to occur and cleaned up with them, I sat them next to me when I gave a lesson to someone else. Most of all, I trained myself to notice anything positive or skillful about their behavior and to notice it aloud.

This last point is especially important if you are working with children in poverty. These children, even from good and loving homes, hear twice as many discouraging comments each day (e.g., “Don’t!”, “Stop!”, “Quit it!”) than encouraging ones (Hart & Risley, 2003).

Positivity is also critical for children who are being evaluated or have already

been diagnosed with a ‘learning disability.’ Specialists may ask us and parents to fill out checklists of symptoms, syndromes, and problems. All of a sudden, we are overwhelmed by everything that is “wrong” with the child. It can seem quite hopeless.

Do all you can to rest apart from this unskillful cultural fad of disease seeking. Instead, focus on the positive and overlook as much as you can. Of course, if behavior is dangerous, destructive, or demeaning, you need to intervene immediately. Do so quietly and quickly. Name the unacceptable behavior and then move the child away. You will likely need to keep them near you for some minutes (maybe sitting next to you while you are giving a lesson). It will take time for them to settle before they will be able to work again. It is okay to be a leader in these situations; don’t expect the children to walk through a peer negotiation strategy. You will address that later in grace and courtesy. In this moment, you want tempers to settle and the focus to stay on the work.

The Montessori method has given you what you need to meet the needs of ALL of the children in your room. Researchers like to talk about typical development and atypical development but, the way I see it, there is just human development. We are all simultaneously your standard-issue human and your utterly unique individual.

Dr. Montessori didn’t give us a curriculum; she gave us the scientific method. She could not tell us all the preliminary exercises every child would need. Instead, she told us how to create preliminary exercises. She left grace and courtesy open-ended not only because polite behavior varies from culture to culture, but also because different children need different lessons. We must see ourselves as the scientists she intended for us to be. The children’s behavior, not necessarily their words, tell us what they need. It is up to us to notice and then apply the remedies she left us.

The key to accommodating learning variability is that when a child makes an error in their work or in their interactions with others, it is not a problem. It is an opportunity to see what is out of order inside the child. If you correct too quickly, you won’t see it. Instead, pause, breathe, and if the behavior isn’t dangerous, destructive, or demeaning, fade and observe. When we do this, we create an atmosphere that is not about being right or wrong – it is about everyone doing their own personal best.

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