

A Guide to Normalization

We all want our children to normalize and blossom and yet many of us run into similar stumbling blocks. We know that before the children will thrive in our prepared environment, they have to feel safe, welcome, and socially connected to us. So, we begin by forming a friendly relationship with each child. But, once we have established this, there are several common areas that often give us trouble:

- The Physical Environment
- The Daily Routine
- The Procedure for Giving Lessons
- Our Precision in Giving Lessons
- The Sequence of Lessons (with an emphasis on Preliminary Exercises & Grace and Courtesy)

The Physical Environment

The children's need for order dramatically affects their behavior. So, get down on your hands and knees and take a crawl around your classroom. As you do, ask yourself these questions:

- Are the shelves sequenced (from least to most complex/organized by subject area)?
- Is there space between each activity (not cluttered)?
- Does the room (including the entryway/coat area) appear sunny, spacious, clean, and welcoming? Is it obvious that this is truly a special, cared for space?
- Is everything that is in your albums on the shelves (and nothing else)?
- Are the materials in good repair/maintained/clean/complete/appealing?
- Do Practical Life materials:
 - Match the developmental needs of the children (e.g., no spooning if everyone can use a spoon)?
 - Have a meaningful purpose in teaching either a specific skill needed for daily life or as a preparatory exercise that is foundational for such a skill (e.g., a preliminary exercise on putting on, taking off, and folding the unique smock which they will need to wear when painting on the easel)?
 - Allow for independence? Does the child need assistance at any point (e.g., to put on an apron because it ties in the back, obtain a supply, etc.) in order to complete the entire activity?
- Is everything that is within reach/sight of the children *meant* for the children (e.g., teacher storage items are out of sight)?

The Daily Routine

Just as with the physical environment, the invisible environment of routines and procedures significantly affects the children's behavior. Consider if your daily flow respects the human tendencies.

- **Communication:** Is it clear that each child (even the challenging one) is a valuable part of the group as a whole? Are the children greeted upon arrival? Are they free to (and offered grace & courtesy lessons showing them how to) respectfully speak with others? Do adults model these behaviors with all living beings in the environment? Is there an overriding spirit in the room that the children are trying to do the right thing/that their motives are pure?
- **Concentration:** Are the children interrupted at any point during the work cycle (e.g., by adults, specialist teachers, other children, a loudspeaker)?
- **Exactness:** Is each material complete? Can it be maintained/cleaned by the child as part of the work (e.g., an activity to effectively clean the painting easel)?
- **Exploration:** Is the work cycle long enough for children to delve into the deeper works (3 hours is optimal)? Are they free to choose their work? Can they make an informed choice (because they have received enough presentations)?
- **Gregariousness/Socialization:** Are there limitless opportunities for the children to engage socially with others? Are they given explicit Grace & Courtesy lessons on how to engage socially with others? Are they offered collective activities appropriately (e.g., choosing to do spoken language or geography folders with more than one child but doing number rods or table scrubbing alone)?
- **Imitation:** Are the adults mindful of their movements and speech? Are all adults role models for gracious, kind, joyful behavior? Are your movements consistent (e.g., you always stand up and tuck in your chair before lifting the work tray to return it to the shelf)?
- **Independence:** Are the children free to tend to their coat, backpack, and lunchbox upon arrival? Can they get the materials they need without help? Are they given instruction on how to use the toilet and sink? Is there enough time for the child to be independent in transitioning to the next event? Are they offered work they can do independently rather than being required to work with another child?
- **Movement:** Are the children free to respectfully move about the environment without being questioned or interrupted? Are they offered grace & courtesy and control of movement lessons to show them how to move gracefully? Does the environment allow for and inspire purposeful movement?
- **Order:** Are the materials in sequence and organized? Are the walls uncluttered? Are procedures consistently followed?
- **Perfection/Control of Error:** Do the activities allow the children to correct their own errors? Do the adults acknowledge effort while refraining from praise/criticism?
- **Repetition:** Are the children not only encouraged but inspired to repeat the lessons?
- **Self-control:** Do adults pause/adjust to the children's time table as the children develop their will? Is the room calm so that the children are not overloaded by sensorial input?
- **Work:** Are the children shown how to revel in the modes of activity (including having natural conversations which are work for the young child)? Are they free to choose work that they've received a lesson on? Does the work have meaning for the child?

The Procedure for Giving Lessons

As Montessorians, we are constantly adapting to meet the needs of the children before us. At the same time, we are idealists striving to offer our best to each child in every moment. While we balance these two seemingly opposing realities, we can approach each lesson as a sacred event. With this perspective, the lesson becomes an honored ritual and, thus, commands our full attention along with respect and awe. We will never interrupt a lesson unless there is something dangerous, destructive, or demeaning happening (and if that is likely given the children we are with, we get help to monitor those situations so we can honor the lesson). While there will be variations in how we work with each individual child, we can maintain the intention of honoring all eight of the following steps.

1. Invite the child to do the work with you.
2. Go together to the shelf and name the work.
3. Demonstrate how to carry the work to the work area and allow the child to do so.
4. Give the full presentation, including putting the work back on the tray ready for the next child to use, before giving the child his/her turn (invite the child to help carry cloths, etc. to maintain interest).
5. Give the child his/her turn and fade/observe while they do the work (step in if necessary to clarify via a point of interest, preferably without words).
6. Inspire the child to repeat the lesson (e.g., Say, “Now we can mix them up and sort it again!”).
7. Tell the child they are free to do the work as much as they like (or, if they are not ready, clarify that you’d like to do it together again next time)
8. Return the work to the shelf together, ready for the next child to use

Our Precision in Giving Lessons

Because the child’s mind absorbs *everything* we do, the way in which we show them how to use materials must be precise, graceful, in sequence from left-to-right, and consistent from one child to the next. Each lesson is like a choreographed dance. We must memorize the movements the dance requires. Of course, children do not always receive lessons from us directly. They may observe another child doing the work, observe us giving the lesson to another child, or (in very special cases) receive a lesson from another child. If we are precise and repeatable, the children can more easily absorb the work through all of these routes because most of the children in the class use the materials the same way that we do.

The Sequence of Lessons

For a variety of reasons, we often find ourselves skipping lessons. We may feel the child really is far ahead of a certain material. We may be working with children who start at or near age 5. We may feel pressured by their parents to forge ahead. In all of these cases, we stray from our albums and either forget or intentionally choose not to follow the order of presentations. Sometimes we just don’t like a certain material and so we resist using it. When this happens, we unwittingly create cracks in the foundations of the child’s future learning.

If you trust your albums (the information you received in your Montessori training), go back to them and make a list of every lesson you are meant to offer every child. (If you don’t have confidence in your training, contact us for a second opinion.) You might be able to simply print off the tables of contents in

your albums (assuming they include all extensions as well as initial presentations). Then, make one copy of this list to use for each of your students. Check off the lessons each child has received. Then go back over each child's list and make another list of the lessons you are *not* offering. Then, think about why the list contains the items it does and what that means for your students.

Preliminary Exercises. As you look at your list, verify that it includes all of the preliminary exercises the child needs to be successful. For example, if they are using a pail for table scrubbing, they are first shown how to use a pail (in a separate lesson) and given the chance to practice that skill. Here is a sample list:

- Using the faucet
- Using a sponge
- Rolling a rug
- Carrying: A tray, A chair, A table
- Using a book: Carrying, Turning a page
- Using a napkin
- Blowing your nose
- Opening & closing containers (the ones they will find in the classroom/home)
- Passing scissors
- Using clothespins
- Disposition of items: Garbage, Recycling, Compost
- Rolling a drying cloth
- Using an underlay
- Using an apron: Folding, Putting on/Taking off, Cleaning
- Making a cloth finger pouch
- Spooning
- Pouring rice
- Pouring water
 - Matching pitchers
 - Filling a pitcher
 - Pitcher & container
 - Varying size containers
 - Stem glass
 - Cup and saucer
- Using a pail

Grace & Courtesy. Check also to see if you have covered the essential grace & courtesy necessary for the culture in your geographical location. Here is a sample list (remember that this list will vary based on the child's place, time, and social group; we must match what we teach to the child's highest possible cultural experience):

- Using a door
- Organizing in Line: Forming a line; Walking in line; Making room for someone
- Excuse me
- Where to put a work rug
- Walking around rugs
- Yes, Please; No, Thank you

- Making introductions; Greeting a guest
- How to get someone's attention
- Observing work: How to observe; How to respond when someone forgets how to observe
- Helping: Offering help; Asking for help; Declining help
- Sharing; Taking turns

New Five-Year-Olds. In many cases, it is easier for a younger child to (1) absorb the skillful means of being in the prepared learning environment and (2) direct oneself to purposeful work than it is for a new older child. Some older children (aged 5 and up) will require more direction. Some, however, will not. In all cases, we must trust the sequence of activities while keeping in mind that new older children may need dramatically less repetition than younger children and dramatically more guidance on what work to choose. For example, a new five-year-old may only need to fill, empty, and dry a pail once before being ready to incorporate that skill into table scrubbing. Or, a new older child may only need to do a single cylinder block once before being ready for the added challenge of multiple cylinder blocks and/or a blindfold. If this seems to be the case, you can add challenge immediately after the child has his/her turn by saying, "This is too easy for you. Let me show you something more challenging." Then, go together to get the blindfold.

Even though you may move quickly, we must be sure that older children receive every FOUNDATIONAL lesson that a younger child receives. Again, they may receive it directly from us, by observing others, or from another child. In all cases, we must observe the children to see what they are able to do, where their interests lie, and how we can match the timing of our presentations with their abilities/interest. While you don't have to force them to crawl if they can already walk, you also want to make sure their bodies and minds are prepared for the tasks ahead. For example, they may not need a preliminary lesson on how to use the faucet or a sponge but they will certainly need a lesson on polishing.

Resist the temptation to skip sensorial work and dive straight into math. The sensorial activities directly prepare the child for later work in mathematics. You may proceed quite quickly through the sensorial materials, but do not introduce the number rods until the child can align the red rods (from a pile that is in utter disarray). Once you get to the math work, they child may be able to show you quite quickly that they already understand a concept; they may be able to easily repeat the work after only one presentation. This is lovely when it occurs. While balancing the volume of lessons among all children, move this child promptly ahead to the next activity in the sequence.

Similarly, if a new older child can already read or write with their hand, you must adjust your plan. You should still present the sandpaper letters (pink, blue, and green) but the child may be giving you a lesson by simply telling you the sound each letter makes. They may not be interested in tracing the letters repeatedly, but will trace them once and try to draw them perfectly on the chalkboard. Similarly, if the child can write with their hand, they may choose to write with a pencil and paper/chalk and chalkboard rather than the movable alphabet. Present all of the options so that they can choose the tool that best matches their abilities and interests.

Making Changes

If you discover that improvements need to be made in your environment or work with the children, tackle them one at a time. Make your own list and create a schedule that is realistic; intentionally avoid the difficulties of setting an unattainable timetable. Small steps will incrementally lead to improvement. Do a little bit each week or take a weekend and do a lot. If you need to change procedures, simply give

the children a new lesson and say, “I have a new way to show you how to.... This way is better than the way we used to do it so I’m going to try to do it this way from now on.” If the children still follow the old procedure, don’t correct them but simply re-present the new procedure at another, neutral moment. Do this as often as necessary until it becomes the norm. Whatever your plan, bring your patience and light heart with you.

If possible, enlist the help of a colleague as you go through this work. Try to unconditionally support each other, without judgment, and with appreciation for the effort you each are making. For this journey, you need courage, exertion, and persistence. Having a companion to help you along the path can make a rather extraordinary difference in the fruits of your labors.