



Julia Volkman

Focusing on the home environment

I was recently observing a 3-year-old girl I'll call Victoria. Victoria was unable to spoon lentils from one container to another. She intentionally tipped up the basins and reveled in the experience of feeling the lentils all over her palms. She seemed not to notice that the diaper (oh yes, a diaper) she was wearing smelled strongly of urine. I offered to help her change and in that process discovered that she had absolutely no idea that she could participate in the changing event. I gently brought her hands to her waistband again and again and again as the pants were removed. I invited her every way I knew how (pausing, guiding, noticing the points of interest, etc.) to step in and make effort to participate. She did not. Back in the classroom, the other children would take over for her. She would take out a work, disturb it entirely, and another child would come, set it back into order and return it to the shelf. It was as if Victoria's muscles were not even connected with her mind.

With lightning speed, we invited her family in for a conference. We learned more, including that she did not feed herself. We made it crystal clear how concerned we were and also how strongly we felt that these issues could be entirely resolved if Victoria became active in her own daily living. We gave a few specific recommendations. We did not overwhelm but stuck to a limited number of achievable beginning steps. The mother understood and changes began at home. We have seen a slow and steady transformation in Victoria ever since. Last week, I saw her unzip her coat and hang it up by herself ... unheard of before the conference. Clearly, Victoria's family is making effort to change their habits in order to allow her to grow.

Victoria is an extreme example of something we see again and again ... the child who is handicapped by their home environment.

In San Lorenzo over 100 years ago, the children themselves sparked a transformation in the parents. Their gorgeous attention to gracious behavior and caring for their environment was like bright sun and blue sky in the midst of the bleakest clouds. It could not be overlooked. Maybe today the surrounding clouds are not as bleak. Maybe today family lives are so overwhelmed that they are like dark sunglasses that obscure the sun. Or maybe we are not as effective in transmitting the practical life lessons that sparked the family changes 100 years ago. I don't know why, but I do note that these days the transformation of the child is not always drawing the adult's attention and, thus, the child's home environment may not allow the child to truly flourish.

In this culture, if we are working for children, we must also be working for their families. So, I suggest that we turn our pedagogical eye to our adult learners. We are grown-ups. We have domestic obligations, challenges and joys. We are brilliant and we are foolish. We are inspired to change and we stumble on old, unskillful habits. We search for meaning in our lives. We display the human tendencies!

Ah yes, the human tendencies ... Dr. Montessori's foundational teachings on the drives that exist at all ages and in all humans at varying strengths. Communication, Imitation, Independence, Concentration, Exploration, Exactness, Movement, Order, Self-Perfection, Repetition, Self-control, Meaningful Work.

And I would add to this list Compassion. These exist in me, in you and in that parent who shows up late with an exhausted child most days.

Last year I started learning more about the neuroscientific take on this topic while studying with Kurt Fischer, the director of Harvard's Mind, Brain, and Education program. Volumes could be written on what Dr. Fischer has to teach, but I would like to highlight just a few points:

- **Neuroscience**
We learn when we are inspired and feel an emotional connection with the subject matter.

- **Montessori**
The trained Montessori guide connects students with the work they need through inspiration and awe; she entices them to the work.

- **Neuroscience**
We learn through relationship.

- **Montessori**
We have multi-age/ability groupings in the classroom. We recognize that the students are also teachers and that the teachers are also learners. We encourage and rely on peer mentoring.

- **Neuroscience**
We are dynamic and need varying levels of support on the road to mastery.

- **Montessori**
We prepare the environment so students can find the support they need via the materials and other humans in the room. We present lessons, fade, observe and step back in as necessary to provide support until mastery is achieved. We embrace diversity.

Do you see the pattern? From the Montessori and neuroscientific perspectives, working with adults is no different from working with children. We need a mixed-age group, the prepared environment and a trained guide. We simply adjust the approach based on the size and sensitivities of the adult.

The trained guide

I remember when my daughter and I first walked into her Montessori school 14 years ago. We had the unbelievable good fortune of arriving in the classroom of Dominique Mouthon, a woman Dr. Montessori would have held in awe. Dominique was in the midst of tending to her classroom but stopped her work and came to us with a beaming smile. She seemed so genuinely happy to see us and she lowered herself elegantly down to greet my daughter first and then stood up to greet me. Down again, she spoke with my daughter as if she were an old friend. She was so glad to have us there and have the chance to show us around. The shelves were covered. The furniture was stacked so the floors could be cleaned and yet I knew within about 10 seconds that I wanted Devin to go to that school. Forget Devin, I wanted to go to that school! That was my first encounter with the Montessori method. It changed my life.

As Montessorians, we see something miraculous in the child. We hold children with reverence. We must hold their parents with this same transformative perspective. The most important step has already happened; they have brought their children to us. Now they need to know that they made the right choice ... and that they are not alone. Somewhere inside them, they long to be freed just as their child is set free through meaningful work.

Working with adults requires us to use scientific observation to determine

where the parents are. Do they have a healthy attachment with their child? Do they allow the child to participate in his daily care? Do they allow the child to experience logical consequences? Do they embrace their child's individual potential or are they caught up in an idea of who/how their child should be? The answers to these questions come from what we witness between parent and child. How a parent describes his/her parenting is often disconnected from what we see before us. Trust your eyes.

So, first we observe and then we connect the parent with what we believe would be most helpful. Do they need to start with a few small steps like Victoria's mom? Are they ready for finer levels of refinement? Do they need peer support/scaffolding? Can they receive the lesson from you or do they need to hear it from a peer, book, article or DVD? What is their control of error? How will they know when they are progressing? Just as with the child, we individualize our approach to education with the adult based on scientific observation. If we begin on one path and run into a fence, we turn left and find a gate. We give a lesson, fade back, observe and repeat as necessary until mastery is achieved.

The mixed-age adult group

The adults who arrive before us are coming with a rich life history. Some had traumatic experiences at school while others had inspirational ones. Some share a deep and expressive love for their children while others display a

quiet, reserved love. Others are volatile. But all of them love their children. It is this love for the child that is the key. This is where we begin.

What finally breaks the ice for us when we're in a new situation? At some point, we feel an emotional connection with another person. For our parents, this often happens when they hear another parent speak of a challenge they are facing in getting out the door on time or a solution they have discovered for bedtime. This type of exchange can happen when the parents are in the same room, but because our parents don't often share the same space, we have to be creative in finding ways to get this group of people together without overextending ourselves or them.

Start talking with your veteran families and see what you can inspire your families to do. Here are a few possibilities: an ice cream social in August, a potluck dinner for classroom families, a weekly drop-in time at the local coffee shop, a book discussion club that meets at a different family home each month, a work share/exchange (this month we're putting up a play structure at family #1's house, next month we're painting a bedroom at family #2's, etc.), a series of Montessori movie nights hosted at a different home each month, daycare shares, etc. As you work with your families to consider the possibilities, be vigilant in protecting the children and their families from scheduling overload.

It's not just the families that need to connect with each other. We need to foster

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relationships with those same people. Just as with the children, we are a role model for how parents can interact with each other. We must let ourselves be seen as the beautiful disasters we are. We have families and personal lives that are full of joy and complications ... just like the parents/staff we are reaching out to. How do we do this? We tell stories from our own lives, just like we do with the children. We encourage relationships among the other adults, just like we do with the children. We identify role models and mentors (think Room Parents) and connect them with students who need more support. Our intention is to so empower the parents and their supportive environment so as to render ourselves entirely unnecessary, so the children and parents can go right along brilliantly in our absence.

The prepared adult environment

What are the principles we follow when preparing the environment for the children? The space must be organized, logically sequenced, aesthetically appealing, sized for the child, etc. These same principles are valid when considering the adult environment ... of course, their space is not often within the classroom. It's in the parking lot, the office and the hallways. It's also on the telephone lines and in their e-mail inbox. Clearly, much of the adult space is beyond the range of our direct influence. So, we prepare what we can and then persistently inspire them to access it.

Communicating great work. People are asking our parents all the time about their children and school. How will they answer? Well, they need to know what the heck is going on at school! They need evidence of success. So, we have to tell them stories about their children and their amazing school work. If you are already documenting the children's work with digital photos, you can e-mail these to the family. We can also send regular newsletters that feature a copy/picture of some great work. Some schools set up a password-protected, secure Internet blog

where teacher's can post classroom pictures. But better than all of this is to get the parents into the classroom.

At my son Dante's school, they have a few "parent visit mornings" throughout the school year. When I arrive to drop off Dante and we see that it is a parent visit morning (not that I would ever forget or not have this marked on my calendar, that only happens to *other* parents!), Dante looks at me with such excitement and joy. "You get to come to school with me this morning!" Well ... what's a parent to do? We go inside for 15 minutes no matter how busy or hectic our day is. Dante and I greet the teacher and then do one work together. When time is up, one of the children rings a bell and says, "It's time to say goodbye to your special visitor." We clean up and Dante escorts me to the door. Class then goes on as usual. But the parents all begin to feel like we are a part of the classroom ... and have a clue about what the heck is going on in there! It is a powerful communication tool ... worth more than a thousand newsletters.

Design the space/procedures. Think about how parents interface with the school building, the staff and other school families. How can we set up systems that allow parents to develop positive relationships with other parents and the staff in the normal course of the day? For example, can parents walk with their children to their cubbies for drop-off? Can we dismiss children from the playground so families are invited to stay a while and chat while the play continues? If we must use a car line for arrival/dismissal, is the staff trained on grace and courtesy for building community/following policy during those interactions? Are the families walked through the procedures so they are able to succeed in following them?

Show don't tell. When we orient the children to the school, we also need to orient the parents to the school. Yes, we should create and distribute a Parent Handbook but that alone is not enough. We don't lecture to the children from the front of the room and then expect them to go ahead and perfectly follow the 57 steps of scrubbing a table. Of course not. We show them and give them a chance to

practice it before setting them free. The adult is no different. As adult learners, we have much more success when we are given a physical experience of something. Laying our hands upon a procedure will be far more effective than all the memos in the world. So, instead of just talking or distributing a written description of the parking lot procedure, get outside and walk it together! Then send supportive e-mail tips (like, "How I Survived the Drop-Off Line") every week or so until the procedure is mastered.

Prepare the space, give them hands on experience, fade back, observe and repeat as necessary. Hark, I hear a pattern! We can apply this to many aspects of our interactions with adults. Think of parent conferences. The "talking only" parent conference gives no opportunity for education, only for a data dump, and that's not where the information we really want (to share and learn) will be revealed. So, we prepare the space by bringing in grown-up chairs to our classrooms and offering the parents tea/coffee and the staff restroom if they need it. We physically give them a tour of what their child does every day starting with their cubby, walking to the sink to wash their hands, choosing a work, etc. We give them a lesson on one pivotal work their child is focused on and let them put their hands on it. It's only when the parents are engaged in meaningful work that their hearts and minds will relax and the deeper truths will arise ... just like with the child.

Communicating logistics. The devil is in the details. How will you let parents know about field trips, vision screenings and special projects? How will you get signed permission slips and notes from them? We must establish clear lines and methods of communication that are sane and sustainable. Many schools give students a communication folder that goes home and comes back to school each day. The left pocket is labeled "for school" and the right pocket is labeled "for home." Every day we attend to the folders (either the students do this independently or with the help of ourselves/our assistants). When the folders don't come to school, we send a note/e-mail home asking for it. If they still

don't come back, we call and note it in our communication log (which should be kept for each family—these are your scientific observation notes).

Share pedagogical resources. None of us alone can meet the needs of all families. We need each other and we need resources but more than that, we need inspiration. We must link our families with the knowledge that will guide them along this gorgeous path. Create a lending library of books/videos. Set up links on the school's website to the best parent information sites. Use e-mail/phone trees to announce parenting talks/events offered in the area (given by your school, local colleges, health professionals, etc.). In short, create a wisdom collection that can be readily and independently accessed by families and staff. (For resources, visit the Aid-to-Life initiative and Parent Information pages at www.montessori-namta.org and www.amiusa.org.)

We are in the Montessori movement for a reason. Each of us has been deeply touched by what the child has shown us. Our shielded and armored hearts have been cracked open by the love of a child. We are not Montessorians simply for a paycheck. We are part of a much larger movement. We are part of a revolution and we must not shy away from acknowledging this! If we want families to join us in this work, they must hear our battle call. Tell them why you are spending your nights and weekends doing this work. Show them a short video of a child at a critical moment of discovery. Let them participate in the joy and the limitless beauty of the child's—of the human being's—true nature unfolding before us. We must call their full attention to the work at hand, just like we do with the children.

Julia Volkman is the mother of a teenager and a 6-year-old, a Montessori Mentor at an urban public Montessori School, a master's candidate in psychology at Harvard University, an Advisory Panel Member for the Annenberg Foundation's Neuroscience in the Classroom free online course (www.learner.org), and the founder of Maitri Learning (www.maitrilearning.com).