

# Theory into Practice: Advancing Normalisation for the Child Under Three

by Alyssa Conklin-Moore

Alyssa Conklin-Moore, our 0-3-year speaker at conference this year, discusses Normalisation in the child under three from several perspectives. In Part one of this article she takes an extensive look at the child, including orienting parents to the Montessori environment and the child's entrance into the environment. In Part 2 (to be published in *e-zine Informed* June 2019), she will discuss the Sensitive Periods, and fostering independence, contribution, and community. She reminds us of aspects to constantly keep in mind when considering the environment, including the outdoor environment. Importantly, she reminds us to constantly self-reflect. From start to finish, she offers practical tools that are deeply rooted in a strong Montessori philosophy.

As Montessorians, we have been gifted from our training with a theory that steers the course for children to actively construct their own learning, personal success, and community well-being. What we have in our albums is tested across time and place. Knowing that the foundation is solid comes as great comfort as we step into our role as practitioner. The occasional snag within this framework is that sometimes we launch into our days and encounter difficulties that we were unable to foresee and challenges to "what we thought we knew." In these more vulnerable places, when we have been stopped in our tracks, doubt can come knocking. But we don't necessarily need to allow doubt to creep in and grab hold of the reins. If you are someone who senses yourself really having to work to translate theory into practice, you are not alone. This is the work that we all face as educators, and that as practitioners we must continue to address. The deep questioning that tends to arise from such moments of disorientation is likely to come and go throughout one's career. The beautiful part of this aspect of the journey is in the sharing and discovery process. By no means are we done learning. The legacy keeps unfolding. What we collectively advance is what we recognise as strong and potent within our tradition. The mindful implementation of what we take to heart becomes our living tribute to this great work. At the end of the day, the children reveal what this looks like. The successes are theirs to claim and carry on.

## WORKING IN SERVICE TO THE CHILD

### Orienting the Child to the Environment

When serving a birth to age three population, we are inherently working with the family unit as a whole. Bringing the family on-board allows us to gain a great deal of information about the child's lived experience, including details about her early history and some unique aspects of how each family defines itself. What I have found over the years is that the parents who feel well connected to the school environment can more readily separate from their child on her first day (and all the subsequent ones thereafter). Why? Because they feel as though they have the information that they need and a prevailing sense of basic trust in the program and staff. In other words, they have the ability to actually step back and celebrate their decision to have this child be a part of community life.





Whenever a child is being welcomed into a new situation, we can think about how to help this transition to be as seamless as possible. Allowing ample time to connect with caregivers on the phone, via email, and ideally face-to-face ahead of the child's initial visit to the environment is a worthy investment of our time. This allows us to answer lots of parental questions, share some of our best strategies and tips, and create a clearly articulated game-plan together. This also gives us a personal way to address some of the nitty-gritty practical details, such as what belongings the child will need to bring, how arrival and dismissal work, what communications to anticipate, what food is served, etc. This invites the parent(s) to feel right onboard from the start and sets them up for seeking to collaborate and communicate with us in the future. Moreover, when parents have been well received and oriented, it's not such a big leap to trust that the same attuned and attentive care will be extended to their child upon entry.

This is also our moment to shine a light on our approach and how thoroughly the child will be supported by the Montessori environment. We can advance our ideas about what young children need and protect against unnecessary obstacles. Choose to have the difficult conversations about why we refrain from using pacifiers, bottles, paper diapers, cribs, etc. at school and what the alternatives are. Discuss what good sleep looks like and the importance of healthy, whole food with regard to the child's development. We can share what we know about motor development and toileting so that appropriate choices of clothing can be purchased and consistently worn in order to advance independence. Speak to why we opt for glass dishes and why all of our materials are based in reality. We are the ones who get this ball rolling, so start off on the right track. Make these first exchanges with incoming families really count. Rather than tip-toeing around these more important matters, activate dialogue that promotes understanding. These conversations may not always be easy and brief, but they will advance the best interest of the child. The information that we provide is looking to support this family. If they are not well-informed, it is not their fault when they say, do, and provide the things that we may deem to be less than ideal. We can only work from what we know. So help new families to avoid the landmines that are out there when it comes to what is marketed and sold for babies and toddlers. Help them to know why we make the choices that we do. Often this content is already highly congruent to a family's style of living. In other cases, it becomes a matter of a few tweaks, and sometimes it can be more of a radical overhaul. The key is that everyone is invited into the dialogue. Learn what they are looking for and what initially brought them to your door. Spend a lot of time listening. Help the family to appreciate the scope of what it is you are able to provide.

## Articulating What We Offer

Our physical spaces highlight our values. These classrooms demonstrate our sensitivity to creating a home-like environment, with child-sized furnishings, and predominantly natural materials and lighting. When prospective parents observe, they have a chance to experience how it feels to be a child in this space. They view the kinds of choices that are available. They witness how the adults interact with each child. They glimpse the children's concentrated efforts and strides toward independence. They see the joy on their faces. This experience helps to tell our story. We further round out these initial impressions with other kinds of promotional materials: perhaps a website, brochure, chat with admissions officer, video clips, school handbook, an introductory "elevator speech" from the guide, etc. Be sure that you are familiar with all of these possibilities and continue to build on the richness and diversity of these materials. Take a good hard look at what currently speaks well (just "as it is" today) and what could use an update. Ensure that all these tools are "up to snuff" and consider how you can further strengthen your message. If this is already well-implemented within the school, congratulations. How can this kind of information carry and inform beyond the immediacy of your school property? What efforts can be made to broaden the extent of your outreach?

## Helping Togetherness Feel Easy

We want the children to feel safe with us and to readily rely on us when the going gets tough. We also want them to take as much into their own hands as is possible to actively gain independence. Welcome to our paradox. To address this inherent contradiction, we watch the children closely in order to gain information about what makes them tick. We aim to tap into their interests and utilise this understanding to further connect each distinct personality to the prepared environment. We seek to create a collaborative exchange that allows the full self to make its appearance. This can be a delicate art. Trusting that the child will build relationships and be drawn to the materials is a requisite leap of faith. We must also take the lead when it comes to being ourselves, extending a warm welcome, and being open and relaxed about what the day might hold. If we are fundamentally at peace, this feeling will be facilely received and replicated. By and large, being together will feel natural and serene. When all else fails, sing.

## Generating Hands-On Opportunity

During infancy, the child needs a great deal of opportunity to explore. The hands function is a powerful pathway to the brain. The more active the child can be in this process, the better. As Dr. Montessori made clear, "Education is a natural process spontaneously carried out by the human individual and is acquired not by listening to words but by experiment upon the environment" (*Education for a New World 2*). In reality, what we introduce to the child comes down to what we believe the child is ready for and deserves to learn. So what do we feel the child needs to experience from our world? How do we help that learning to be accessible and concrete? Knowing that children learn best when they use their hands means that we must seek to supply the child with intelligent choices. We also have to be ready to embrace their mistakes. What we need to remember is that a child's development is not always convenient for the adult. What possibly led us to believe anything different? As a practitioner, I have witnessed this kind of unreasonable expectation arise within myself from time to time. It may also be something that we notice in the attitude of a parent or the remarks of a colleague. So let's be clear, when a child is first invited to pour milk on his cereal, he is likely to spill (assuming we have offered this lesson at the "right time"). That's just the name of the game. Parents and practitioners who are proud because their children "never err" have brazenly missed the boat. Helping to ensure that children have genuine opportunity and the ability to experience the natural consequences of their actions is essential. The lessons gleaned by addressing one's own mistakes are arguably some of the most powerful forms of learning. This recognition sets us free to empower the child to become active upon her surroundings. We demonstrate with care and precision in each presentation; analysing these movements carefully. The child is invited to participate and make her best attempt to replicate this exercise. As we observe these budding efforts, we hold tightly to the vision that repetition paves the way to mastery.

## Witnessing a Normalising Event

With our youngest souls, this will not often reveal itself as the standard work cycle (choosing a work, completing the activity, returning the material, experiencing satisfaction). However, if we are opportunely serving as the dynamic link between the child and the environment, we will see glimmers of each of these components that steadily build into more reliable patterns with additional time and experience in the environment. Ultimately, keeping our eye on the prize of sparking concentration and connection will result in this full cycle meaningfully taking hold. Grant yourself permission to step back and take the long view of this development every now and again. Anticipating the normalisation that emerges as a characteristic of the healthy child at the close of the first plane can help us to continuously inch our way in the right direction. During infancy, we work to weave the children into activities that sustain attention and seduce them into increasingly rich explorations. This is the child's opportunity to optimally self-construct. When a child is presented with meaningful work to do, normalisation spontaneously emerges. Therefore, we offer a lesson, observe, and retreat as soon as we are no longer needed. These consistent efforts on our part help to generate a community culture that promotes and protects engagement. Activities progress from simple to complex and allow the child to feel adequately supported while being challenged with ever-increasing difficulty.



## Supporting Children to Make Choices

Some children are quite active and demonstrative upon the world. Others are more reserved and less inclined to be quite so lively and hands-on. As educators, we serve this whole continuum of personalities by honoring the impulses that are directed by the home, supporting children to take their own initiative and enabling each individual to focus on a single activity for an extended period of time. We must present as many complete and cohesive lessons as possible in order to assist the children in their ability to make choices. Adequate intellectual nourishment must be afforded to the mind. Then we observe and dutifully intervene (should this become necessary). The child's ability to will, or choose to do something with conscious intent, develops gradually during this first phase of life. Our environments enable this skill to be strengthened through practice. We entice spontaneous activity to bubble up and generate energetic learning. The key is allowing many opportunities for the child to choose. As we unobtrusively work side by side with this unseasoned being, we allow the child time to process. Time to respond. Time to decide. Then to act upon his commitment. To repeat. To falter. While all of this is being carried out, we sit back. Striking the balance between supporting a child's independence and sustaining interest is a unique dance with each individual. We have to refrain from entertaining. If you are repeatedly catching yourself as "the entertainer," then there is another whole industry that awaits you. This isn't about you. Interfering with the child's ability to tune to his own internal voice is not our place. We also cannot be control freaks. When children are presented with options they must be allowed to choose freely. We should never give the false appearance of choices or offer options that we do not actually mean to extend. This is also not the time to jump in and rescue the child or try to steer her toward the material that we secretly have in mind. Children get to make their own decisions and live out the results, whether those choices morph into terrific successes or minor calamities. This is the groundwork for growing good decision-makers and conscientious beings.

## Don't Forget the Basics

"Putting on Socks" is not in our albums as a formal material, but it certainly needs our time and attention. Many of today's children are simply being "done to" in a flurry each morning. In a flash someone dresses them from head to toe and off they go. In these instances, there is precious little opportunity for the child to experience independence and supportive collaborative work. This is not his fault. Consider that this child may not have the luxury to be supported in terms of self-dressing at home. Maybe all of his socks are stored up high in a drawer and the family is forever in a hurry. While we absolutely have an obligation to share what we know with our families, and make recommendations about helping the home environment to be increasingly accessible to the child, some homes will be able to successfully adopt these ideas far more readily than others. That being said, what suggestions the family effectively implements at home is often out of our hands. So consider how much time is being afforded to really exploring the self-care exercises within your own environment. Be sure that nose wiping, face washing, tooth brushing, hair brushing, getting dressed, etc. are evident as work that is valued. Help the child sense the power of his own efforts with regard to some of these more personal life skills.



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