



Moments in Time



Scaffolding Kindness

As our teachers individually reflected on these early weeks of school, a common thread ran through their responses: "My class is filled with kindness!" For teachers in Toddler through Upper Elementary, this simple and powerful truth resonates for each of them. The Cambridge Dictionary defines kindness as "the quality of being generous, helpful, and caring, or an act showing this quality." As we consider the social and emotional development of our children, we are comforted in knowing that the Montessori philosophy deeply supports this area of growth and refinement. It is interesting to consider the myriad of ways that social/emotional development is woven into the fabric of our children's days; and even more interesting to consider how this is then woven into their developing minds and hearts during the formative years when brain pathways are being created. Through ideas that Maria Montessori generated more than a century ago—the prepared environment, mixed age classrooms, and personalized learning—we are able to see wonderful scaffolding for kindness.

The first time a child walks into a Montessori classroom, the expression on his or her face is often one of wonder and amazement! To enter a space that has been so carefully prepared to serve one's developmental needs sends an immediate message to the child that he or she is loved and respected. The prepared environment is peaceful, beautiful, simple, and purposeful. It is filled with natural light, plants, small objects of beauty, didactic materials, and carefully displayed artwork. Everything in the environment is just the right size for the child, and therefore, the room invites one in, as if to say, "You are so important, and this space has been created just for you!"

Once he or she settles into the community, the environment continues to speak to the child. Through systems of order, limited quantity of items, and natural consequences, children learn about care and trust and patience. Should a fragile item fall and break, one learns to be more gentle and careful; and if a particular material is not available, one is able to

practice skills such as patience, sharing, and observing..... or maybe even the skill of flexibility—to make a new plan and move on to something different. When materials are displayed in an inviting and orderly manner, children find comfort and security in knowing where things belong and how to put them away. As trust settles in and independence blossoms, confidence and responsibility takes hold.

In a mixed age classroom that is designed to meet the developmental needs of each individual, one is able to feel safe, and valued, and appreciated. When one feels good about him or her self, and one's needs are being met, there is an inner peace that then permeates outward. With everyone working toward discovering and becoming his/her best self through deep individual learning, collaboration, and open communication, the desire to encourage, celebrate, and hold each other up becomes the foundation for a loving, intentional community. The very essence of humanity is respected in a community that values the self in relation to the society.

Returning to the same classroom community for several years not only allows one to build deep meaningful relationships with teachers and peers, but this cycle also gives one the opportunity to internalize and practice important qualities such as empathy, compassion, and acceptance. The younger children are often guided and supported by their older classmates. This love and kindness from someone just a bit older often makes a lasting impression—one which is then carried forward and passed along to those who come into the community later. Older children seem to instinctively relate as they consciously or unconsciously recall their own feelings of being new in the class, or learning a new skill, or making a new friend; and therefore, these elders naturally nurture and guide others who join the class. As a result, there is a beautiful ecosystem of strong values that is embedded in a Montessori classroom community.

This kindness that the teachers speak of may be seen in small moments at every level, in every classroom, within each day. While watching an older Toddler child help her new friend put on his socks, the compassion and patience was evident as she positioned her body carefully behind him and held his little hands with hers so that she could show him a new skill. Who passed this love and care on to her so that she could be its keeper? Perhaps it was a friend who has now moved on to the Primary level and is experiencing what it is like to be the youngest in a new community again. The Primary teachers speak proudly of their elders, who have risen up to become the new leaders, as they care for the younger students and their classroom with such joy and delight.

Helping and supporting one another is part of a Montessori classroom's culture. In Lower Elementary last week, two students were joyfully taking turns as they asked each other to recall math facts. Not only did this help to solidify the information for both, but it also demonstrates collaboration and respect in a supportive learning environment. Whether in the classroom, on the playground, or in our after school program (Late Day), one is likely to see acts of empathy, kindness, and social responsibility. Just the other day an Upper Elementary student was playing hide-and-seek with the younger Primary children in Late Day—it was so wonderful to see kindness peeking behind every corner as the children squealed with delight! Whether we are helping a friend learn math facts, putting on socks, caring for the classroom, or delighting in a simple game, may the ability to find common ground through the goodness of a generous heart carry all of us forward.

Have a wonderful weekend!

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