

# UNDERSTANDING THE YOUNGEST CHILDREN: HOW TO BUILD A DEEP AWARENESS OF THE TODDLER WITH PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

by Nichole Holtvluwer

*Nichole Holtvluwer writes for fellow guides who work in the toddler community. Recognizing that communication with parents is the most important path to serving the child, Holtvluwer offers concrete advice beginning with the guide's most important stance: withholding judgment. She details four steps to working with parents or caregivers: building a relationship, providing knowledge, encouraging confidence, and finding excitement and joy. She concludes by suggesting that Montessori theory and parent education can be embedded into the issues that parents want to discuss, such as toileting.*

*The child is much more spiritually elevated than is usually supposed. He often suffers, not from too much work, but from work that is unworthy of him. (The Child in the Family 119)*

Every so often I will take a stroll through the toddler section of Target. Each time I leave feeling discouraged for the children that have to develop their minds using, what I observe to be, mindless materials. These materials, filled with plastic, lights, and bells and whistles, do not call to the child's inner sensitivities and tendencies, but do the opposite and simply entertain, over stimulate, and contain.

---

*Nichole Holtvluwer developed and opened a new toddler community in 2012 at a well-established Montessori school in the Washington Park neighborhood of Denver. This toddler program was the first of its kind for the school in its twenty-year history of serving primary-age children. She holds her assistants to infancy AMI diploma from The Montessori Institute of Denver where she completed her training in 2003. This talk was presented at the NAMTA conference titled The Social Relevance of the Montessori First Plane: Engaging Families, Building Partnerships, and Finding Common Ground with the Wider Early Childhood Community in Dallas, TX, January 15-18, 2015.*

Taking the above quote from Maria Montessori, the definition or idea of “spiritual” can often be misunderstood, but in this case I take it literally and see its meaning as *relating to or affecting the human spirit or soul* as opposed to material or physical things. This short and simple quote, when understood, helps us realize on a deep level that toddlers need to be a part of life being lived. Toddlers need rich language and reality. Toddlers need experiences in nature. Toddlers need authentic (not synthesized) musical experiences. Toddlers need wooden puzzles and beautiful, creative, open-ended manipulatives. Toddlers need silliness, hugs, high-fives, dance parties, and books! But toddlers do not need plastic light-up gadgets, containers, constant pacifiers, and screen entertainment.

In our work with the youngest of children, how do we aid parents in understanding and building an awareness with such depth that the child finds himself surrounded with materials and activities worthy of his developing mind? In my twelve years in this field, I have come to un-

We must keep plugging away at helping parents understand the absorbent mind, sensitive periods, and human tendencies. However, we also need to assess the parent's needs and what they are willing to listen to and absorb, and we must modify our information around that.

derstand that the first area we must tackle as an educator and guide of the child is to relinquish our judgment. As Montessori guides, we have been trained on a high level, with a depth of understanding that we often wish all parents encompassed. The moment we entrust our faith in the fact that the majority of parents out there are doing what they know to be best based on the information gathered from their own childhood, family members, friends, peers, intuition, research and, books, we are set free. Set free to gently guide the parent who is making different choices in raising their child than we might. It is our duty to educate, not intimidate.

Each child, each family and every situation that comes up requires different tools based on culture, knowledge, upbringing, education, family structure, sensitivity, awareness, and motivation.

What works for some families may not work for others, so we must be flexible, observant, and aware that we need to “follow the parent” in the same way as we “follow the child.”

Working with parents can be a challenging aspect of our work, as they often can present more obstacles than the children ever will. However, I have found that parents are often (unfairly) blamed for negative aspects of the child’s behavior. For example, we might find ourselves saying something like, “He is behaving like this because of his mom.” While in some cases this may be true, we know first-hand of the power of the absorbent mind and how this shapes a child’s reality. But again, it is our responsibility to aid, not judge, and see the child and parent for who they are in the present moment.

By the time the child has reached the age of toddlerhood, most parents are looking for information regarding the immediate needs of the family. Often parents are more interested in attending parent education nights that are based on toileting, freedom and limits, language development, and Montessori in the home rather than lectures on Montessori theory. This being said, it is important to continue to strive to educate parents on the core Montessori principles. We must keep plugging away at helping parents understand the absorbent mind, sensitive periods, and human tendencies. However, we also need to assess the parent’s needs and what they are willing to listen to and absorb, and we must modify our information around that. For example, integrate information about the absorbent mind into a toileting presentation or discuss human tendencies in relationship to freedom and limits. Because each set of parents’ desire and willingness to learn is different, we must be flexible and willing to adapt to meet the needs of each family.

In my work with parents, I have found that there are four key steps in building a deep awareness of the toddler-age child with both parents and caregivers (grandparents, nannies, etc.).

1. Building a relationship
2. Providing knowledge
3. Encouraging confidence
4. Finding excitement and joy

## BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP

In my work with parents, I've found that the more effort that is put into the initial building of the relationship, the more a bond of trust can be created. For many parents, the toddler environment is the first experience of school. Through an initial parent questionnaire and home visits, transition information, parent education nights, and in-home consultations, we are able to make this first experience with school as positive of an experience as possible.



Courtesy of Nichole Holtvliwer

## PROVIDING KNOWLEDGE

The majority of parents are hungry for knowledge about their child, the Montessori philosophy, and basic child/human development. We have the ability to provide this knowledge to parents through:

- Personal blogs and links to articles
- School newsletters
- Photographs and videos
- Back to school night
- Pre-conference questionnaire, conferences, and meetings
- School observations
- Daily conversations/interactions
- Modeling
- Non-verbal communication
- Daily notes

## ENCOURAGING CONFIDENCE

As Montessori trained guides, we have a wealth of information regarding child development. That, combined with our continued experience, enables us to be confident in our craft. But for the new parent (even if this is their second, third or eighth child), each child is so different and we must know how to build confidence. We must provide parents with simple and effective techniques that we know work. We must not only provide knowledge for the parents about their child's development, but also build confidence in their parenting ability.

Acknowledge and recognize when a parent "gets it right" in a situation observed. Just as we celebrate, "You did it!" with the children, we can do the same with parents. Reach out in a respectful way when you observe a parent really struggling. It is important to

offer your help prior to actually providing it in order to avoid the parent feeling judged or criticized.

I believe that one of a parent's greatest challenges, once committed to the Montessori way, is then parenting in front of friends, peers, family members (their own moms), random people at the park, etc. and staying true to what has been learned. I recommend that parents send out a group email about what and why they are choosing this path, in order to avoid conflict within the child's presence. I also encourage parents to speak up at the park and stay true to who and what you believe, regardless if other parents think you are a little nuts. I've even had some parents invite their friends to come and take a tour of the school in order to better understand the Montessori philosophy.

The ability of a parent to tap into their basic "parent intuition" or instinct can be the best tool for navigating toddler development. Parents often lose this ability or misplace it, based on what other's may think, what research says, or what the guide has said. The parent knows their child better than *anyone* else, and we must never forget this in our path of educating.

Help parents find confidence in their child's ability to absorb pleasantries and verbal graces such as saying "Hello," "Goodbye," or "I am sorry." Help parents to simply model these behaviors rather than forcing the words upon the child by saying, "Say you are sorry" or "Give Grandma a hug and kiss."

#### FINDING EXCITEMENT AND JOY

The toddler age can be a rough time for adults, especially when there is a disconnect in understanding behavior (i.e., the terrible twos). Helping parents understand the impertinence of childhood in a way that is positive and healthy can lead to more joyful moments during seemingly tough times. However, we must be aware that a parent's fear of this impertinence can inhibit their ability to allow the child to become independent. Behavior that is deemed "cute" in the toddler years is not considered or looked upon with the same sense of acceptance as the child grows older. It is important for parents to become aware of this, so as not to perpetuate or enforce certain behaviors.

Remember that just as the children grow while in our care, so do the parents. The child we met during our initial home visit is not the same child who now enters our class. He has a new set of tools that are designed to help him succeed in his life's work. The same can be said about the parent. Most often when the child enters the community she is unaware of how to complete a cycle of work, just as the parent who enters the community most often does not understand much of the development of a toddler. The potential of growth, awareness, and knowledge that can be acquired by the parent during the time in the toddler community is not only important for the present moment, but can span well into the future.

#### REFERENCE

Montessori, Maria. *The Child in the Family*. 1936. Washington, DC: Henry Regnery Publisher, 1956.

