

LIVING GRACE AND COURTESY IN THE PRIMARY

by Polli Soholt

Polli Soholt looks at grace and courtesy from the 3-6 classroom perspective with clear theory explanations as they pertain to the larger classroom culture. She discusses the link between older and young children and the presence of the teacher as a model for grace and takes a brief look to neural science for proof of the existence of social interest in very young children. Polli asserts that social skills are integral to a sensitive period for social behaviors with other children and adults. She has very specific ideas about grace and courtesy presentations that aid the directress and the child in the learning process for conveying social activities. The article concludes with a concept of the "little community," where individual work can be seen in the context of how it makes a contribution to the whole community, even at an early age.

If we think about the prepared environment for three- to six-year-old children, it is apparent that our work with them varies depending on their individual needs and development. We have the four areas of Montessori education to consider, and within those four areas, there exist many potential, varied experiences that serve to aid in the development of a particular aspect of their lives. The grace and courtesy presentations that take place in the primary environment are important for the children's development for many reasons. Maria Montessori wrote in *The Montessori Method*,

Considering the method as a whole, we must begin our work by preparing the child for the forms of social life, and we must attract his attention to these forms. (121)

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First, they offer specific skills and information that aids the child in the process of adaptation. The child has the task of adapting to the larger culture in which she lives, and the child also adapts to the community of the Children's House. With the help of the absorbent mind and the sensitive periods, these young children are interested in learning the social conventions of the group and are then able to use those skills. These grace and courtesy experiences allow the children a chance to practice the movements as well as the language necessary to adapt to the community and the larger culture. When the children practice grace and courtesy offerings, the repetition helps them develop the necessary language skills as well as develop the control and coordination necessary to perform the actions. As the children new to the group learn the social expectations of the Children's House, they become more comfortable. The older children will have already learned these skills, and they become models for the youngest children as they go about their days in the Children's House. As a result, the children have the means to create a cohesive social unit, which was one of the discoveries Maria Montessori made about these young children. Between the grace and courtesy presentations and the clear, meaningful limits in the Children's House, the children develop other attributes as well. As Maria Montessori wrote,

Society does not rest on personal wishes, but on a combination of activities which have to be harmonised. From their experiences another virtue develops in the children: the virtue of patience, which is a kind of denial of impulses by means of inhibition. So the character traits that we call virtues spring up spontaneously. (*The Absorbent Mind* 232)

A contemporary book called *Social* by Matthew Lieberman investigates social neuroscience. He identifies a default network that he defines as neural activity that takes place in humans by default when other tasks are completed. Lieberman theorized that this default network activity during rest may reflect a human disposition to think about the social world automatically in our free time. He writes,

Babies show default network activity almost from the moment of birth...Why does the presence of default network activity in infants matter? Because infants clearly haven't cultivated an interest in the social world yet, or in model trains, or anything. Two day old infants cannot even focus their eyes yet. In other words, the default network activity



precedes any conscious interest in the social world, suggesting it might be instrumental in creating those interests. (20)

Many Montessori academics identify a sensitive period for social relations for children under six years old. This makes perfect sense if we think about how interested these young children are with the social conventions of their community. They willingly participate and practice the grace and courtesy skills with the guide; then use them with the other children in the group; and apply them to their community outside of the Children's House. Let us examine ways that we can assist the children in this social development.

AIDING THE CHILDREN IN DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILL

We all know that the children of this age have absorbent minds that function to help them incarnate the world in which they live without filters. For the guide that means that *anything* that is said or done in the presence of the children is a presentation. They absorb and are influenced by the way we move in the environment and the way we speak, including the tone and volume of our voices. They also witness the way we respond to different children with patience and grace. All of this is related to our understanding that the child is in the process of self-construction, and we understand the potential that each child possesses. In our interactions with them, we keep faith in the child

who has not yet revealed himself to us. This steady faith aids us in our endeavors to work with these children in positive ways.

Another way we can aid in this task is to offer grace and courtesy presentations of skills that we know are important for any community of people and skills that a particular group seems to need. That means that we have to observe the children and note the social difficulties they are manifesting and design a grace and courtesy presentation to help with that issue. The brilliance of these presentations is that we attempt to give them before the situation arises where they might need a particular skill. However, sometimes it is hard to determine which skills are needed first, and difficulties arise. When this happens, it is time to plan the appropriate grace and courtesy presentation to give in the near future. If we give it close to the time of the social mishap, it acts as a correction. If there is a little time lapse between the time the need became apparent and the presentation, it is an introduction of a new skill and not a correction.

Most guides have a long list of grace and courtesy presentations that they give the children in their care. When it becomes obvious that even more skills are needed, this list can become extremely long. So when it becomes obvious through observation that the children are not using a skill already presented, it can be frustrating. If we understand that the remedy to this problem is to give the presentation again with the joy and freshness with which we gave it the first time, the problem will be solved.

THE ELEMENTS OF A GRACE AND COURTESY PRESENTATION

When we examine the elements of these presentations, it is clear that they require some specific steps to be successful. These experiences are small group lessons for a few children. The number of children invited will depend on the individual children or the skill planned for presentation. Depending on these factors, most grace and courtesy presentations can be given to three to five children. If more children want to join, it is advisable to tell them they can watch and another time this will be done again and they can participate. Some guides place a rug on the floor around which the participating children sit. This defines the work space and makes it clear there is a presentation taking place. It is not usually necessary to give the same grace

and courtesy lesson to every child in the room. The skills that are introduced become a part of the culture of the community and some children will learn them from observing the other children.

Many of these presentations need the help of the assistant or a competent older child. Next it is time to introduce the skill being presented. "Susan and I will show you how to hand a fragile object to someone else to admire." Then it is time to give the presentation with your helper. As soon as the presentation is complete, the helper can fade away leaving the guide with the children for their practice. It works well if the guide offers the fragile object (perhaps a new vase) to one of the children, and then invites the child to hand it back to her. This way the children see a re-presentation each time a different child gets a turn. Once it is clear that the children understand how to do the skill, they can practice between themselves. If some of the children do not want to practice, that is not a problem, as they saw the presentation and watched the other children practice. We know they have absorbent minds and will take it all in.

To finish the process, summarize with the children by stating, "now you know how to offer a fragile object for another child to hold," and they can use this skill whenever the need arises. We can also encourage practice by telling the children that they can practice this whenever they wish and they may show the other children how



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to do the skill. This results in the children giving these presentations to each other.

To conclude, the children can be told that the presentation is over and they can leave the group and select something interesting to do. For some groups of children the dismissal is best done in a more structured way such as asking each child to name the exercise that she wishes to do next. There are other structured ways to dismiss a group that needs that guidance, but that can be left to the guide to decide.

If there is time on any given day to give a second grace and courtesy presentation, it is usually wise for it to be covering a different skill with a different group of children. That way the skills that permeate the group will be varied, and many children will absorb them in the course of daily living in the Children's House.

Grace

The dictionary definition of grace is...*elegance or beauty of form, manner, motion, or action*. It is clear that grace requires refinement of movement and, with repetition; the children acquire grace by eliminating all superfluous movements. The presentation offers an introduction for the children, and practice allows the children to become proficient with the particular movements required of the skill.

Grace is integrated into all of our presentations for the children. We demonstrate grace in the way we carry materials, demonstrate materials, and move around the environment. Many of the preliminary exercises assist in the development of grace. Standing, rolling a rug, carrying a chair and sitting on a chair, all require the development of grace. Maria Montessori observed the important role that movement plays in the children's development. In addition, she writes about the connection between the movements of the body and the activity of the mind. In the *Absorbent Mind* she states,

To give them their right place, man's movements must be co-ordinated with the centre—with the brain. Not only are thought and action two parts of the same occurrence, but it is through movement that the higher life expresses itself. (148)



Tim Kahn

Courtesy

The dictionary definition of courtesy is *excellence of manners or social conduct, polite behavior; a courteous, considerate act or expression*. The manifestation of courtesy is reaching out to other people in a heartfelt manner. There are many opportunities in the Children's House for the children to experience and behave courteously. The presentations include serving food, observing another child working, welcoming a guest into the environment, moving aside so someone can pass, and introductions.

Civility

Civility can be described as behavior that is respectful, considerate, and compassionate. It allows groups of people to live and work together locally and globally, embracing their shared humanity and interpersonal connections. The children acquire civility through the grace and courtesy presentations as well as from their observations of the adults interacting with the children and the other adults. It is worth mentioning that at this time, there is a concern for the lack of civility that is manifested in our culture. Sara Hacala has written a book called *Saving Civility* in which she discusses this lack of civility and what we can do to help solve this problem. She writes,

In a cacophonous sphere, where everyone talks at once but no one listens, where we say hurtful things and do harmful deeds at will without remorse or punishment, and where

outrageous exploits are protected by a veil of anonymity, we are fast approaching [a] danger zone. Without any resistance, bad behavior continues to spread, threatening to become the new normal. Enough is enough. (2)

If we think of the social guidelines of our culture, we can understand which grace and courtesy presentations are necessary. They are preventive medicine that allows us to introduce the guidelines for behavior, which in turn eliminate the need for constant correction of behavior.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Naturally there will be conflicts in any community of children or adults. It is important that we provide the children with guidance to resolve their conflicts in a cooperative and respectful way. We must never forget that the experienced children know how to do this, so they will be providing constant guidance to the newer children through their use of their conflict resolution skills. There are ways we can give grace and courtesy presentations that will cover some of the issues that might come up between the children. One way to do this is to offer one that focuses on *what we can do if someone is bothering us or our work in some way*. This can be done by telling the children in the group that sometimes we want to tell someone else to stop doing something that is bothering us, such as stepping on our rug. When demonstrating, have the assistant step on the edge of the rug we are using and then demonstrate to the children what can be said to change this situation in a respectful way. For example, we can say, "Susan, you may not know this, but your foot is on my rug. Will you move it please?" Then this situation can be practiced with the children as with any grace and courtesy presentation. At the end we can ask the children what other things might happen in the environment that would make them want to ask a child to change what he is doing. They will probably offer examples

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such as touching my work, talking too loudly, or jumping over their rugs during work. Granted all of these issues can be addressed with grace and courtesy presentations, but in the meantime, we have given the children a way to address other children that are bothering them one way or another.

There are times when it becomes obvious that children will need our immediate assistance to resolve a conflict. This becomes apparent when children are hitting or pushing each other. (It makes sense that we do not want to give a formal presentation on dealing with these kinds of problems as we do not want to show those behaviors to the children.) When our assistance is required, the first thing we want to do when we get to the scene is stop the children from hurting each other. Once that takes place, we want to check with the child who has been accosted to see if she is all right and tend to her needs. Then we can turn to the child who was mad enough to hurt the other child and invite him to talk about what happened. If the other child does not agree, she can have a turn to talk about it after the first child is finished. Perhaps there has been some infringement of rights that can be pointed out to the children. So, if for example, one child took another child's pencil without permission, we can help that child say to the other child that he did not like it when she took his pencil. This might mean that we need to give the child the words to express his concerns as he may not possess this skill. Of course then we need to do the same with the other child so that all of the parts of the disagreement are brought to light. Naturally, with each disagreement, the adult will conclude the work with the children with the appropriate guidance. When the children are new to these concepts, the adult will need to spend more time with them during the resolution phase. However, it is sometimes surprising how quickly the children understand and appreciate the negotiation process and become proficient at it. It is also interesting to watch the older children sometimes step in to these situations and play the role of the facilitator. There is no recipe to resolve all of these conflicts. It is up to the guide to use his or her judgment, knowledge of Montessori theory, and understanding of the individual children involved to provide the right guidance.

THE LITTLE COMMUNITY

If we look at all of this social guidance we are giving the children, we can see that it will benefit them in the Children's House as well as in the larger social context. In the process of acquiring these skills, the children become conscious of the little community to which they belong and are motivated to make contributions to that community. They feel the unity that the shared values of the community provide and are proud of their contributions. The older children play a large role in bringing this about, and the younger children look to them for guidance. Maria Montessori wrote about this unity and called it *social cohesion*. In *The Absorbent Mind* she wrote,

This unity born among the children, which is produced by a spontaneous need, directed by an unconscious power, and vitalised by a social spirit, is a phenomenon needing a name, and I call it "cohesion in the social unit."(241)

It is clear that if these small children are in a community that offers guidance in social issues and at the same time offers respect to the individual as well as the group, that this will have a lasting effect on the children's social development. Their absorbent minds are still active, and they will incarnate all the aspects of the environment including the limits and social guidance. As they mature, we hope that they will be in Montessori environments so that this type of society will continue to be a part of their lives. This will give them



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the tools and means to seek out and form communities of this type when they are adults. It is obvious why Maria Montessori thought social change was only possible if we begin with the children.

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