

# OBSERVATION: A PRACTICE THAT MUST BE PRACTICED

by Karey M. Lontz

*Karey Lontz's article on learning how to "dominate by observation" (to master the practice of observation so as to use it most effectively for the benefit of the children) takes us from a general to specific understanding of observation. She begins with a look at the importance of observation in human history and in the history of Montessori. She discusses different types of observation: direct, indirect, and self-observation. She concludes by offering tips on helpful observation tools such as record keeping, lesson planning, and photo journaling.*

When I think of observation of young children, I think of sitting and looking at what is in front of me. I think of it as exciting as well as a little boring at the same time. Why? Boring because I want to be involved with those children that are in front of me! So the idea of sitting and not interacting with the cutest children I have ever seen, doing the things I am most passionate about, drives me crazy!

Dr. Montessori said, "The person who observes patiently, without feeling bored, has acquired an inner strength which must have been acquired through exercise" (*Communications* 19).

Clearly I need more practice.

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I also think about observation as being exciting! Exciting because I feel like I am behind the scenes and seeing secret information. That these little people are sharing with me their passion for life. They are so involved! Observing lets me feel that energy and get a glimpse of how they obtain it.

Montessori said, "That the observer should maintain perfect immobility of the soul, so as not to take part in any manifestation of feelings in the actions of the children. There must be no manifestations of enthusiasm, pleasure or joy, on the part of the observer" (*Communications* 19).

Again, I need to practice.

I have both of these emotions when I am observing and more. To examine why observation makes me excited, bored, worried, hopeful, overwhelmed, etc., I have to practice. I need to push beyond those emotions.

Montessori said about the practice of observing that, "We must prepare a person who will be calm, serene but strong, a person who knows how to dominate by her observation everything that occurs. This is observation" (*Communications* 18).

The ongoing theme then, for this talk is to learn how to dominate by observation. To have control by watching. It is somewhat of an oxymoron, right? Two opposite ideas coming together that are really impactful and create a lasting message. Like, *jumbo shrimp* or *alone together*. Dominate by observation.

I was a little worried about using the word *dominate*. It is very strong, isn't it? We don't want to dominate the children. We want to dominate our work with children by observing. We want to learn how to observe in order to prepare an environment, so that the children get what they need and we give it to them by using our observations.

This is what we are going to be focusing on with "dominating" through observation over the next two days. We will look at how human beings in general dominate through observation, overall as a species. Then we will look at Maria Montessori and how she learned

to dominate through observation. Then we are finally going to look at how practitioners, those who work with children, parents, teachers, grandparents, and trainers use observation to dominate.

#### **PART ONE: HUMANS LEARNED TO DOMINATE BY USING OBSERVATION**

Historically humans have used observation as a survival mechanism or tool. At one point in time, historically, observation was a way of life. Early humans, much like some primitive people of today who do not have all this technology, used their power of observation in order to survive while living closely with nature. They observed the skies to know when to take shelter from the storms whereas now we just bring an umbrella or put on all our snow gear. They observed animal patterns to know when to migrate to a more sustainable climate in colder months; now we just turn up the heat. They observed plant cycles to know when to harvest food. Now we go to the grocery store.

So humans have used observation, historically, for survival. We also have used it to improve our lives. Early humans used their observation to come to know their environment in order to understand how to act on it to survive better. For example, they observed animals digging with claws and then made a tool of their own to be able to dig so that they could then put their food in it to protect it. So they observed in order to improve their lives.

They also observed to connect. They observed other humans, so they could learn from each other. They observed things that they wanted to embrace. Things such as musical instruments, language,

Dominating through observation is a human necessity: It is a requirement to survive, to improve, and to connect with one another.

and clothing, and through those observations they connected with each other in order to survive better to improve their lives. You can see how there is a cycle with survival and with improvement and connecting. Observation is a natural tendency for all human beings. We have that potential from our ancestors to use observation for survival to make our lives better and to connect with one another.

Why have we lost the ability to observe?

One reason, is that observation is no longer crucial for our survival. Most of the time we no longer have to live in accordance with nature in order to survive. In the long term, this could be debatable; we don't know what is going to happen or what the earth is going to provide for us. But right now, on a daily basis, we don't necessarily have to know what is happening in nature to be able to survive as we did in the past.

Why have we lost this ability? We have tools and protection. The power was lost when it was no longer necessary to observe in order to survive. We have grocery stores, houses, clothing, phones, and cars, and all of these things protect us from really observing what is in front of us.

Another aspect that affects our ability to observe is that we have preconceived ideas about our experiences and about our interactions. For example, we come to know specific children and what they do in our environments and we put those ideas on them as they walk in the door. Here he comes again. Here comes Peter. He is going to take that new material I just put out and throw it on the floor. That is a preconceived idea. He hasn't even done anything yet and so I am expecting, based on his past actions.

Mary Browne was one of the first US women's tennis players, and she said that "preconceived notations are the locks on the door to wisdom." When I am working with children, I have to talk myself off of this preconceived idea ledge from time to time, and I have a little mantra to help me with this. My mantra is "Why not?" When I am thinking to myself, "There is no way that child is going to be able to serve bananas to himself with that spoon." I then ask myself, "Why not?" And what happens when I say that? I stay out. And usually what happens is he *can* serve bananas to himself. Often, we put our feelings onto others and we assume them to be true. We do that with children sometimes and it interferes with observing what is in front of us. We are thinking about our stuff, ourselves, and not what is there.

Observation is also affected by a lack of new and interesting activity. We tend to avoid anything new that would require keener observation skills in order to learn. We go about our routine day after

day without any variance. This makes us tune out and go inward and not be present. For example, when you go to the grocery store, there is so much that you have to tune it out. Have you ever gone to the grocery store and looked for something new that you don't normally get? You actually have to look around and orient yourself. When we try new things it helps us to observe.

Another reason we have lost this ability to observe is that we don't live in the moment. We fill every moment of every day so that we don't stop and observe ourselves and what is going on around us. We miss our own cues because we are just too hurried in thinking about what happened yesterday or what is going to happen tomorrow. Sometimes this makes us too busy to eat, too busy to go to the bathroom, too busy to get a drink of water, too busy to go to bed. Being separated from the moment has interrupted our ability to be able to observe.



Courtesy of Michelle Playoust

## Regaining the Power of Observation

Here are some ideas to help you to regain the power of observation.

- We can encounter nature on a regular basis. We can go take a walk outside. You can go sit on your porch and watch the leaves falling off the trees. Just being outside can help you to gain some of those skills back in terms of observation and make you more present.
- You can also simplify your life by saying *no* to things. We need to focus on one thing at a time. Steve Jobs said, "People think focus means saying yes to the thing you've got to focus on. But that's not what it means at all. It means saying no to the hundred other good ideas that there are. You have to pick carefully."
- We also have to let go of expectations. This is part of the judgments and preconceived ideas that Dr. Montessori writes about in *The Absorbent Mind*. "The child has his own laws of development, and if we want to help him grow it is a question of following these not of imposing ourselves upon him" (162). It is important to free yourself of the responsibility of having to know and to predict everything. Let it go and watch what happens. I think you will be impressed.
- We also need to practice and this involves taking the time to train our senses as well as to connect our observations with Montessori theory. Think about all those Montessori theory topics and watching them manifest through observation. We can think about what we are observing and notice, "Wow, he is showing a need for order by coming and sitting in my lap every time he wants to read a book." So when we observe, we can connect the theory and understand it better. Then we become better observers.

- To be better observers, we need to live in the present. Not the past or the future but right now. When observing, avoid all those random ideas that are coming into your head and just be present with those lovely little children that are in your environment that are so full of life and joy. That is what you want to be part of and we don't necessarily have to always be interacting with it to be a part of it. Observation gives us that opportunity.

Dominating through observation is a human necessity: It is a requirement to survive, to improve, and to connect with one another.

#### **PART TWO:**

#### **MONTESSORI LEARNED TO DOMINATE BY USING OBSERVATION**

We are going to talk about how observation was Montessori's tool and how she learned to dominate by using observation in her career and her lifetime.

Dr. Montessori lived from 1870 to 1952. Think about that time frame in terms of how many milestones happened. Electricity, antibiotics, vaccinations, human rights, chemical weapons, and the list goes on. Montessori saw a lot in her lifetime in terms of culture and what was going on in the world.

Her work around observation began when she was a medical student. She graduated from the University of Rome in 1896. At that time, the X-ray had just been invented. The compound microscope was still in its infancy. It was a brand new diagnostic tool. There were no MRIs no CT scans and no computers to analyze all of these medical tests that we have today. The human eye, observation, was the most important tool that Montessori used to diagnose her patients.

Margaret Stephenson says about this time in Montessori's life: "The decision of Dr. Montessori to take up a career in medicine was evidently significant in view of her life's work because this training for medicine formed in her a power for clinical, scientific observation which was to be the instrument she used during the rest of her life in work with the children of the world" (3).

After graduating, Montessori continued her studies with an interest in children. She worked at the orthophrenic clinic, and through her work with special needs children she became convinced that education rather than medicine would be the way to help these children. Those of you involved in education know that this is still a debate today. Education or medication? Montessori strongly believed education was the way to help children.

Montessori observed basic needs in these children that she saw in the clinic. When she observed these needs, she would give a lesson. For example, the children came in with runny noses and she showed them how to wipe their noses. She sat down, took her tissue, wiped her nose, and thus she gave the children a model to do it. They applauded her after her presentation because they were so excited about someone being respectful by showing them how to do something for themselves. Not just going over and wiping their nose for them; she showed them how to do it and gave them the respect of letting them do it themselves independently.

Montessori also used her observation skills to study the environment. She saw that changes in the environment affected the health of the children. Basic hygiene, such as cleaning vegetables before cooking, washing the dishes, and making sure that hands were clean, made a difference in the health of the children. A healthy environment equals healthy children.

Montessori left the clinic and she was given an opportunity to work with normal children in San Lorenzo in 1907. This was a slum community with young, unsupervised, ill-behaved children. Their parents worked during the day, and the children were left to their own devices. Nobody wanted to take on these derelict children, but Montessori saw an opportunity. She hired the janitor's daughter, who was an untrained woman, to oversee what these children were doing on a daily basis. Then she observed and started to experiment with giving them different material and different lessons that she had created at the orthophrenic clinic.

She used all those methods that she used at the clinic in terms of care of self and care of the environment activities and then moved on to sensorial activities and then writing and reading. Visitors came





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from all over the world to see this work. They wanted to see these miracle children who were once derelict and dirty and ill-behaved who could now read and write. More Montessori schools opened in many parts of Italy and then started to spread throughout Europe and eventually the world.

Montessori began training teachers in 1909 and she developed her training based on the observations and the experiments that she did in these first environments with children. She continued training teachers around the world until 1951, a year before her death. She truly committed her life to observing and serving children. Her

lectures and her observations of children have been compiled into many books and they have been further used to advance her methods with many ages including the elderly with dementia. All her theories are based on her observations and her scientific studies.

### **Essential Characteristics of Children Discovered through Observation**

Through all of these observations over many years, Montessori found essential characteristics of children through these observations. First, she realized through observation that behavior indicates a need. Her philosophy is based on the gift she had of looking beyond a child's behavior in order to see what he was expressing. This is a skill we are all trying to learn and to hone and to use—to observe, to be able to know what to do with our observations, to see beyond the behavior, and to come to understand what that behavior means. For example, if a child is throwing a temper tantrum, adults usually react immediately by trying to stop a behavior and calm down the child, not thinking about why there is a temper tantrum. What is the frustration the child is trying to express? What is this tantrum telling me? Our initial reaction is to put it to a stop instead of learning what's behind it to then stop it.

Montessori was able to understand through observations that once children are in an environment that meets their needs, their negative behaviors will fall away or begin to dissipate. This is something we can observe in our classrooms. We just have to observe to see it. It can be seen when we see a child using a material to meet his own needs. He is not being forced to use the material and there is a kind of peacefulness that comes about when he is using a material that really meets his needs.

I am amazed every time I watch this. I've seen it over and over because that is what happens in our Montessori classrooms. We meet the children's needs. In my recent parent/child class for crawling babies I had children who were grabbing each other in the beginning, scratching each other's faces, throwing materials at each other, pushing each other. I had a vision and stuck to it. I gave them an environment where they could have freedom and that satisfied their needs. They could move. They could communicate with me if they

wanted to. They could choose work. And those negative behaviors stopped. It wasn't overnight. It was about six weeks in; it took a while with this class. But after that sixth class, I said to my co-director, "Did you see that? They learned to touch each other gently. They learned to look at each other and stop instead of shoving another child away. It was amazing." This happens in Montessori environments everywhere. The negative behaviors will disappear if their needs are provided for. This phenomenon is *normalization*.

A second characteristic Montessori noticed about children through her observations is that children teach themselves. Montessori discovered that when children are given the right kind of materials and the freedom to use them, they teach themselves. They learn things easily, earlier than we think they should and, a lot of the time, without us having to show them. They learn things such as dressing themselves, using grace and courtesy, and learning advanced vocabulary.

Parents have asked me, aren't they too young? Aren't they too young for me to expect them to put on their shoes? Aren't they too young to understand all of those words you are asking me to use with them? All of those different flowers, for example: a peony, a rose, a daffodil, a sunflower. Aren't they too young for that? And the answer is No. They will learn if we give them the freedom and if we model. They truly will teach themselves.

A third characteristic Montessori observed was that children become self-disciplined in the prepared environment. When children work in an environment where they can work freely with limits and with responsibility, they become self-disciplined. They want to be responsible. It feeds their sense of order. We have to observe to be able to see that. It doesn't always look the way we think it's going to look. For example, I had a child in my class who had the ball from the ball tracker. The ball tracker is a vertical maze with levels in it that the child can put the ball in at the top and then track it with his eyes or his hands and it goes all the way down. The child had the ball in his hand. The ball is neon pink. I can see it from across the room. I thought, "Oh, no, what's he going to do with that ball?" He was nowhere near the ball tracker. He had taken it from the ball tracker and he was running with it. I watched, and he ran over to

the ball tracker, put it in the tray and put it away. Isn't that great? I love that. They can become self-disciplined, and that's at sixteen months, through our modeling and through allowing freedom for them to be responsible. If we don't give them that space and we anticipate and interrupt, then they can't be free to be responsible. We have to give up control to see this happen.

Montessori says that

The first step in becoming a Montessori teacher is to shed omnipotence and to become a joyous observer. If the teacher can really enter into the joy of seeing things being born and growing under his own eyes and clothe himself in the garment of humility, many delights are reserved for him that are denied to those who assume infallibility and authority in front of the class. (*To Educate the Human Potential* 85)



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## **Guiding Principles that Montessori Discovered through Observation**

Montessori also observed some guiding principles for adults to follow. She observed those characteristics in children and then she went on to give us some guidelines to follow as adults observing children.

The first one is to observe without interfering. When Montessori was training students, she noticed that her students had a tendency to jump in too soon and influence the situation rather than to continue to observe to see what developed. So Montessori gave them rosary beads. She said anytime you feel the need to get up and interrupt a child, count a bead. Give yourself something to do so that you don't interfere. Ask yourself, is this a situation that needs intervention? Or, can silence be maintained to see how it works out? Being able to just sit and objectively observe is very important.

Part of this observation without interfering is that the work of the children has to be done by them. It can't be done by someone else. We can't do their work for them. Only the individual can learn for himself. If we do for the child what he can do for himself, we are interfering. If we don't interfere, the children can make mistakes. And these mistakes are a learning tool. A mistake is not something to be punished for but an opportunity to learn.

Montessori gave us a second guiding principle in that she told us to observe in order to prepare the environment. In the first Children's House, she started with a group of children with no furniture and no materials. She had ideas for materials from those she had used with the children in the clinic, but she had no classroom prepared for these normal children. So she observed, and it was her observations that allowed her to prepare a suitable environment to look beyond behavior to see the needs the children were expressing and to create an environment around those needs.

Because of Montessori's observations, and because they covered so many years and so many children and so many countries, she's saved us all a step. We don't have to sit around and make up a whole environment of prepared materials. The essence of what she

observed is represented in those materials in our environments. It doesn't mean we don't make new materials, but the foundation is there; she's given us that. She observed in order to know how to prepare that environment.

A third principle she recommended is to observe and to link the child to the environment so that he can meet his needs. Sometimes, we have to observe to be able to create new materials that the child might need. Maybe we need to add chair washing, for example, to our environment. It's not in my album, but those slatted chairs get food in them and the children want to get the food out. They need specific materials in order to be successful. We do have to continue to observe in order to create materials for the child's needs.

Part of linking the child to the environment is to observe and to understand how children relate to the materials so we know how to give more instruction if it's needed. Those are points of interest that we might need to go back and give when we observe a child who is pouring with one hand and the water is not going into the basin. We can go back at an appropriate time when the child is pouring and ask the child if we can have a turn and model how to use two hands. "Watch." We show very clearly and slowly with our analyzed movements to accentuate using two hands. How do we know when to give those points of interest? Through observation.

Observation helps us to know which child needs a presentation, for which material, at any given moment. Toddlers are pretty good about letting us know what they need. They just show us. If we don't find a way to somehow give them some kind of purposeful activity with that material, they will abuse it in some way. Sometimes, it's just filling the pitcher and that's all the child does. We have to be open to exploring the materials and the presentations to meet the children's needs so we can link them to the environment.

If the work that we link the child with is appropriate, then it will give nourishment to the spirit rather than exhaust it. If we can match the material and the timing with the need that the child has, then it actually fulfills his spirit and his soul rather than making him tired. Don't you see this with your children after they finish an activity? They look so happy. They want to do it again. That's how we know

the spirit is being nourished. The guide's goal with this linking is to enlighten and awaken something asleep in that child; bring out a potential that he has inside of him and link it to the environment so that he can accomplish and feel good about himself.

Think about how long Montessori observed children before she even wrote about these phenomena. It took over twenty years of scientific observation before she finally said these are the universal characteristics of children, these are the universal guidelines we need to follow. She's done that hard work and we can take that into our environments and into our lives and live it, not just with the children, but with ourselves as well. Montessori learned to dominate by observation and we can learn to do so also.

### **Scientific Observation**

Scientific observation is the type of observation Montessori focused on with her work with children and her students. It's objective observation. It doesn't include judgments, feelings, or opinions, and it is not influenced by emotions or personal prejudices.

I'm going to give you an example of an observation I did in a scientific way without prejudices, without emotions, without my biases. Then I am going to give you the same observation that is unscientific with those biases and prejudices.

My husband was making breakfast one morning. Tom had a smoothie with a frozen banana, yogurt, almond butter, and milk. He put all of the ingredients into a metal cup and used a stick blender to combine them. The blender made a lot of waa-waa sounds and was stopping and starting a lot. He then walked away after saying he had too much milk and it needed time to sit. He returned about two minutes later to continue blending.

That was the scientific observation. Here is the unscientific version of the same breakfast preparation. Tom had a smoothie with a frozen banana that was too hard. There was no way he was going to be able to blend that thing with a stick blender. He used a high sugar yogurt that probably made it taste sickly-sweet. He used almond butter because he thinks it's healthier than peanut butter. He then added milk and blended right away before the banana had



thawed enough so the milk sloshed around and the banana got stuck in the blades. I think he broke the blender. He walked away to cover up his mistake saying he put too much milk in it and it needed time to sit. When he returned and continued blending the blender made a lot of loud sounds as he blended away and then it stopped. It definitely is broken.

Which is better, scientific or unscientific? Both. Why are both important? Because the first one gives full information, factual information, scientific information. The second gives a lot of feeling and judgment that you can learn about yourself from seeing what judgments are getting in the way of your observation. One shows a man who put together a creative breakfast. The other, an annoyed wife who is wondering what her husband is doing and tells how frustrated she is by watching him.

So scientific observation describes the subject; that's the goal. Unscientific observation describes the observer; it's that subjective information.

We need to use both in our practice but acknowledge that they are different and separate them for clarity so we understand about the subject we are observing and we understand ourselves. Scientific observation takes preparation. It's hard to observe scientifically without all those feelings or to separate the feelings. Without preparation, observation becomes biased toward our expectations. We see a plane instead of a bird. We see a tackle instead of a hug. We see a child pushing a chair across the room making a lot of noise instead of offering dad a seat. We see what we expect to see.

Scientific observation takes focus and it takes attention. Each person has a process of selecting what they observe based on their experiences. Even if we are trying to be as objective as possible, it's still selective. We choose what to observe based on our interest, based on a noise that we might hear, based on our fears. We see what we expect to see.

For example, I was packing for a trip and I was looking for a white tank top to take on my trip. I could not find it. I went to my stack of shirts in my closet where I have my clothes, where that tank



top lives, and it wasn't there. I thought about it. Where did I leave that white tank top? I thought, I went on a trip recently so maybe it's still in the suitcase that I took with me. I went to the basement and I opened the suitcase. It wasn't there. I went and asked my husband, which is always my last resort. "Have you seen my white tank top?" He said, "No, why don't you just go get another one?" I said, "No, I want *my* white tank top." He said, "Did you look in your closet?" Puffing, I said, "Of course I looked in my closet!" I went back, looked in the closet again, and this time I felt with my hands...and I found it! First of all, it was not white. It was off-white. Second, it was wool, not cotton, which I had forgotten. When I felt with my hands, I could find it and it was right on top. When we observe, we are selective.

If we are automatically selective, we need to use it to our advantage. We have to train our minds to pay attention to the details that will help us to understand children, to see what they are doing and to leave the *why* out of it. When you are observing, you are not going to be asking why. You're just observing what the children are doing. Try to be selective in that way. If you train your brain to be more receptive and aware, you will start seeing what the children are doing more easily.

Montessori says that "the purpose of the observation is to see what the children are doing independent of our presence and to examine what is seen in an objective manner in order to provide for the child's inner development" (*Communications* 16).

That's the purpose of observation: to see what they're doing without us interfering. When I stop my impulses to interrupt a child, she learns to do it without me. Not in the way that I thought that she would, but one that meets her needs instead of mine. When little Iris got the walker wagon stuck in the corner, I was across the room and I wanted to walk over and rescue her. I

With positive focusing, pick out the qualities that you want your children to continue doing and focus on those. We can take any quality that we want to capitalize on in a child and focus on that and the child will go toward that. In your indirect observation, focus on the positive in your daily work.

started walking and thinking she is not going to be able to get that out. On my way over she got it out of the corner. She sat down next to the wagon, got it out of the corner by pushing it out, and then she sat there for the next ten minutes and pushed it back and forth and back and forth.

We have to observe to see what the children are capable of without our interaction; without our influence. That is a true study of children, when we can observe them without interacting. That gives us information to assess and assist their development. We are truly watching development. Development doesn't happen because of us. It happens as a result of the child's own effort. We can't teach that child to walk. She has to do it herself.

This type of observation that Montessori practiced allows us to bring personalized education based on scientific studies of each child. Not of a group of children, not of stereotypes or generalizations about children, not of theories that we come up with, but of personalized education that is unique to each child.

We need to practice dominating by observation, which is what Montessori did to give us all of these gifts.

### **PART THREE:**

#### **PRACTITIONERS LEARN TO DOMINATE BY USING OBSERVATION**

There are three main types of observation: direct observation, indirect observation, and self-observation. Direct observation is the most powerful and revealing observation that we have. This type of observation is sitting to the side and only focusing on observing, not interacting, and writing while taking timed notes.

#### **Direct Observation**

Direct observation is challenging to do when you are working with children. It can be hard to sit down and stop working with the children and observe. However, it is extremely beneficial.

Some claim that the children will not let them observe directly. However, when you do it regularly, the children get used to it. They learn order. They have a sensitive period for order. They come to

know that when you are sitting there in that chair that you are not available. If you do it consistently they will get used to it. It is challenging, but it is extremely helpful to observe directly.

The things we see when we observe directly are more pure and scientific than when we are interacting with the children. This is because we do not have our actions getting in the way of our observations (only our thoughts).



Courtesy of Michelle Playoust

An important aspect to direct observation is that we dispel common misconceptions about children when we observe directly. These misconceptions stem from our cultural beliefs or our experiential beliefs that children are too young to do something, that children are too young to do for themselves, too young to focus for a long period of time, too young to remember from yesterday, to repeat over and over, too young not to have an adult to do for them, and too young to follow through and complete a task. These are all misconceptions, which means they are not true.

Practicing direct observation gives us a clear picture of what the child is capable of and motivates us to step out of the picture. It is important to take the time to directly observe in your classroom, at home, and in life.

### **Indirect Observation**

Indirect observation is challenging because it involves observing while being active while you are with the children. There are two aspects to indirect observation. One, we are trying to do two things at once: observe and work. Two, we have to recall later what we observed.

With the first aspect, observing and working, it is important to be present. Some people call indirect observation multitasking: being able to do many things at one time. But in fact, multitasking is not possible. Research has shown that our human brains cannot multitask; we cannot do two things at one time. We can do one thing and switch to another thing really fast. It seems like we can do two things at once, but physically our brains cannot do it. So, when you are in the moment and trying to work and observe, stop and focus on what is happening.

I want to give you three guidelines that can help you to be more in the moment with your indirect observations. I adapted these from Steven Vanoy's book *The Ten Greatest Gifts I Give to My Children*. These tools will assist you in your indirect observations.

The first one is *focusing*. Indirect observation needs to involve focusing. We just talked about how you can't do more than one thing at a time. For example, you can't read, talk on the phone, and

watch TV. Although we try sometimes, we essentially can't do it. So we need to focus.

If we need to focus, what do we focus on? Often when we are indirectly observing, we look at all the negative aspects: oh no, he is not doing what he is supposed to be doing; oh no, he is throwing that material over there; oh no, he is eating the chalk. Instead, change the focus from negative to positive.

If we focus on the positive, that is what will emerge from our environments. Every action is a thought first. If you are driving down the road and you see a pothole, you are probably going to drive into that pothole if you keep looking at it. You have to look where you want to go. Focus on the positive: that nice, smooth asphalt and not the pothole. Do the same thing with the children. Do not look at the potholes just look at the smooth, wonderful, concentrated activity. Focus on the positive. If we go on automatic pilot, if we don't think about what we are supposed to be focusing on, then that is what we go toward: that negative.

Many times the negative comes out through our expression. When we are interacting with the children, we may say without thinking, "Stop that," "Don't do that anymore," or "What are you doing?" The negative comes out of our mouths if we are focusing on the negatives. The average child by the time he is a teen hears negative messages 148,000 times. He hears positive messages only a few thousand times. We have to be careful and not go on automatic pilot.

With positive focusing, pick out the qualities that you want your children to continue doing and focus on those. We can take any quality that we want to capitalize on in a child and focus on that and the child will go toward that. In your indirect observation, focus on the positive in your daily work. You will be surprised how much more you remember the positive aspects of your daily life in reflection rather than the negative.

A second guideline for indirect observation is *listening*. Indirect observation involves listening. Listening is giving one's attention to something. Sometimes it includes a response but not always. It is making an effort to hear and sometimes act on what we are hearing.

It's being alert and paying attention. We need to listen to others as well as listen to ourselves.

Think about a time when a child wanted you to listen and all you could do was direct or lecture. For example, Brandon came up to me and said, "Look at my painting!" And then I said, "Did you put your paint brush away? Did you put your apron away? Did you clean up the floor around it? I see some drips on this paper." Instead, listening is validating what the child has to say. "Wow, your painting is so bright with color! Tell me about it!" Listening is an important part of indirect observation to be able to focus and be present in the moment. We can then remember more easily when we become more present.

Research shows that leaders have more impact by how they listen than by what they say. We are all leaders for these children in our environments and for each other too.

The last guideline for helping to observe indirectly is *modeling*. When you are practicing indirect observation, it is important to model. We need to model how to focus, we need to model how to listen, we need to model communication, movement, grace and courtesy, choices, responsibility, and the list goes on.

Conscious modeling helps us to be present. It helps us to observe ourselves and the effect we are having on the environment. If I think about the way I am moving for example I become more present. I am not rushing and thinking about what is next. I am thinking and I am becoming what I feel the children need. I focus on what I want to be reflected in the environment. Children imitate us, so we

One important aspect of self-observation is coming to understand and satisfy our needs. Adults must be able to meet their own needs as a model to the children. If you can't meet your own needs, you also most likely cannot meet someone else's needs.... If we do not meet our own needs, we go into the environment and all we feel is a neediness from the children. If we satisfy our own needs in another place, we come in fresh and we can give what the children really need from us.

can use modeling to change behavior. Model and then observe the effect of your modeling.

We have to model to be able to observe results. What is the message that we are giving to children if we are running around the classroom and we tell them to walk? Or if we say follow all the rules and then we are speeding while they are in the car? We have to model what we want the children to do. Here is an example of that. I was observing a child. He was doing cloth washing and I noticed he was kneeling on the floor. I wondered why he was kneeling. I took photos that day, and when I reviewed them, I saw this. (Photo of assistant kneeling next to child to show how to clean up cloth washing.) So the children do what we do. We need to be the best that we can be and model and then observe and focus on what is happening.

These are all good guidelines for being more present while indirectly observing, but how do we remember when we are indirectly observing?

- Keep a notebook and pencil in your pocket to help you write something down in the moment. Not pages of notes, but a few words to use as a reminder later that you can then expand upon when you are not with the children.
- Write down questions at the beginning of the day as a kind of commitment to yourself to focus on observing. What does Lucy do when she arrives? How are Stephen's hand skills? What words does Carla say?
- Take a photo and then observe the photo and see the details in the photo.
- Have others observe: assistants, administration, and colleagues. Having others help you gives you motivation and support.
- Talk with someone to bring recent activity to mind. Some people are really verbal in terms of processing.

That is what I have discovered with this parent-child class that I am currently doing. We ask, “What went well today?” Then we make a list and we write it down. “What do we want to change for the next class?”

- Write down what happened as soon as you can after it happened. If you don’t have time to put something down on paper at the moment, then sit down after your class or at a break and write down some of the things you can remember. I give myself cues while I am working with the children to remember. I will say to myself, remember he used blue paint today and he covered the whole paper. Those internal messages help me to recall a little bit more.

In your lives, this indirect observation can be challenging. That is why we have to go back and make the time for direct observation. Direct observation is the most purely scientific observation you are going to get.

### **Self-Observation**

The third form of observation is *self-observation*. Self-observation can be done in many ways: with a journal, with a therapist, with a friend, with a colleague, a partner, or just by yourself. Self-observation is not the type of observation that is typically shared on a daily basis. It is a life-long work that we do regardless of whether we are in the classroom or not. That is how we grow as human beings by analyzing ourselves and working on ourselves. Self-observation helps us as adults become more and more aware of ourselves and how we are contributing to the environment.

One important aspect of self-observation is coming to understand and satisfy our needs. Adults must be able to meet their own needs as a model to the children. If you can’t meet your own needs, you also most likely cannot meet someone else’s needs. When we work with young children under three, they have a lot of needs. We can’t just push these young children out into the world and let them be totally independent right away. We are supporting and collaborating with them in these first three years.



If we do not meet our own needs, we go into the environment and all we feel is a neediness from the children. If we satisfy our own needs in another place, we come in fresh and we can give what the children really need from us.

There are two different kinds of needs that we have. We talk about them in training with the human tendencies. There are basic needs and then personal needs.

Basic needs have to be met for any human to survive. Those needs are physical needs: food, clothing, shelter, and sleep. However, the quality and quantity of basic needs is different for each one of us.

We all need these basic needs but we accomplish them in a personal way. Personal needs have to be met in order for any human being to thrive. Personal needs are activities or characteristics that improve our quality of life. They are a must for being your true self, not what others want you to be but your true self and your best self. You feel the best when these personal needs are satisfied.

Overall, we need to think about satisfying both basic and personal needs. Basic needs in general usually come first. They are the most important for our physical survival. Are you getting the right nutrition? Are you warm enough? Do you get enough sleep? Personal needs are critical to live that life you truly love. They are must haves, not wants, would haves, or should haves. They are absolutely must haves.

When you are trying to identify your personal needs think about if you could go through a day without that need being met. That is how I came up with my list of personal needs. I have to have these things every day to feel my personal best. Some examples of personal needs are acceptance, love, honesty, acknowledgement, duty, accomplishment, safety, and the list goes on.

You need to search yourself to find what your personal needs are. Personal needs are neither good nor bad, but they can be exhibited in a positive or negative way just like basic needs. With basic needs you can overeat or you can under eat, you can get too much sleep or not enough sleep. It is the same with personal needs. You can have

too much order or not enough order. We not only need to find out what our personal needs are and satisfy those needs but we also need to find out what quantity feels the best to us and satisfy it.

Why do we need to know our personal needs in terms of our work with children? Children are in the process of learning how to meet their own needs. They look to us to help them meet their needs. If we model that we can meet our own needs, they come to understand that this is a human characteristic and that they too can meet their needs. And, if we meet our needs we feel good about helping the child to meet his needs.

Through this process of direct, indirect, and self-observation, we come to dominate with the children, with ourselves, with the environment, with others. Dominating does not mean we control. It means we understand and come to a sense of peace and acceptance.

#### OBSERVATION TOOLS FOR MONTESSORI GUIDES

There are three tools I am going to talk about that we can use as guides to help us with observations. There is record keeping, lesson planning, and then photo journaling, which you can really put under both record keeping and lesson planning. It is part of both of those.

#### **Record Keeping**

Record keeping involves recording the child's daily work. It involves organizing your observations. The purpose of record keeping is to be able to keep track of what the children are doing and how they are progressing. It assists us in lesson planning, in talking to the parents, not just at conferences, but our continued communication with parents. Sometimes it helps us with that required documentation that we have to have for our state.

One aspect to keep in mind with record keeping is to keep it simple, otherwise you will not do it. You have to come up with a system that is simple, that you can manage, that you will do. I will give you some ideas, but you will have to be the one to decide how you do this record keeping that works for you. In general, the more complex we get, the more we avoid doing it.

A second aspect to think about with record keeping is to examine why you need it so that you can come up with a system that works. Why are you going to keep a record of what the children are doing? Is it because you are just doing something that you have to report to your administration? Hopefully you are doing it to help the children. That will help us to keep doing it. If it helps us in our work then we want to do the record keeping.

There are different kinds of record keeping. The first one I am going to talk about is daily notes. Find a way to keep track of daily recording of both exercises and your direct observation. I make a page with all the children's names on it with a few lines next to their name. I write the exercises and I write a few notes as well.

A second type of record keeping involves charting. You need some way to look at the whole picture with this data that you collected with your daily notes. I just like a simple list for each child that I can check off. I have a chart of all the exercises in my environment and all of the children and I put a date when I have presented each lesson. You can get complicated with this. You can use color for which month it is or which season: some people do fall and spring. I just like the simplicity of looking at the whole picture and being able to say there is a hole and they haven't had this yet. I transfer the daily notes to this chart.

A third type of record keeping is journaling. This is indirect observation and really gives you so much information about the children and about yourself. What do I do? How do I journal about these children? I sat down once a week and I wrote about half the children in my class. I realized I couldn't do all of them every week. That meant I wrote about each child twice a month.

I am faster at typing so I did my journaling on my computer then I could just copy and paste when it was time to do some kind of report with it. I sit down by myself when the children are not around and I journal using my daily notes about more detail in terms of what the children did. One way that helps me to recall information is thinking about the overall areas in my class and the areas of the environment. I think about what Aidan did in language, what he did in movement, etc. I kind of walk through my class to

help focus my observation a little bit. This really gave me a lot of information and I did this twice a month.

### **Lesson Planning**

Lesson planning is how we link the child to the environment. It is done for each child by assessing his skill level, following his interests, and preparing the environment. With assessing the child we must observe to know what his skill level is so we know how to plan what exercises we are going to give to him. Does he have the strength to open and close scissors or does he perhaps need work with other manipulative materials to gain that strength before he does scissors? We have to assess his skill level to help with lesson planning.

We also need to follow the child's interests. I should have put this first because if the child is not interested in something, he is not going to work with it. First and foremost, you really have to follow the child's interest when you are lesson planning.

The child shows us through his actions what he is interested in and then we have to translate that into purposeful activity. However, sometimes we think we have laid out the best plans. We create what we think is the perfect lesson plan for a child based on what we think are his interests, and then we go to present it to him and he just walks away or abandons the material along the way. We have to be humble in this process, in terms of figuring out the child's interests. Be persistent. Don't take it personally when you are trying to meet a child's needs and you think you know his interests but then he is not into it at that moment. You have to keep trying in different ways.

For example, sometimes I may get work out and start doing it by myself. I just start wiping that table or I do the bead stringing by myself. Usually that child I thought it was for does not come over and another child is interested. We have to be humble in this whole process; this is the nature of toddlers. We all have different interests on different days, right? Some days we are into the sponges, some days we are into the bead stringing, some days we are into chalk, and other days we are not. We have to be really patient in this process of following the child and lesson planning.

Another aspect to this lesson planning is preparing the environment. We use our observations to prepare the environment according to our lesson plans. The item has to be present and it has to be ready for the child to use if we want to give it to him.

We have to also reflect on what might be an obstacle in the environment. We might have to replace a material that isn't working or that isn't complete. Also, we need to make needed materials.

The prepared environment is a classroom management tool that we use to assist children in developing on a normalized path. It includes preparation of the physical and the human environments. We are changing materials and furniture and ourselves when we prepare the environment.

### **Photo Journaling**

Lastly, I want to talk about photo journaling. Elliott Erwitt, a French photographer said, "To me, photography is an art of observation. It's about finding something interesting in an ordinary place... I've found it has little to do with the things you see and everything to do with the way you see them."

That quote kind of encompasses everything we have been talking about, doesn't it?

Photographs are a reflection of the environment and the children's work. Like the absorbent mind, cameras take in all the details in a split second. We can use photographs to capture a moment and then reflect and share later. If only we could do it with every single moment like the child does!

It is important to combine photo journaling with indirect observation. Photos are a combination of direct and indirect observation. We use them in the moment; which is direct. We capture that moment and then we reflect on them when the day is complete, which is indirect.

Taking photographs can assist us in not interrupting children's work and in helping us to focus. We take photos of what is happening and stay focused on the moment. Rather than judging and saying

“This isn’t something the child should be doing. I am going to stop him and redirect him.” Taking the photos stop us from doing that. We are more present with that. We notice more things.

Record keeping, lesson planning, and photo journaling have one key element in common: observation. These tools cannot exist without observation.

### CONCLUSION

In your lives, I hope you dominate by observation. I hope you use this all-powerful tool to understand yourself as a human being, to understand the Montessori method, and to understand your role in using observation in your daily work.

“There is only one basis for observation: The children must be free to express themselves and thus reveal those needs and attitudes which would otherwise remain hidden or repressed in an environment that did not permit them to act spontaneously” (*The Discovery of the Child* 48).

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