

# SUPPORTING ELEMENTARY CHILDREN IN CRISIS

by Liesl Heide Taylor

*“Just as every child is human, every child, no matter the circumstances, deserves an education that promotes his or her development to the fullest human potential.” Using Cornerstone Montessori, a public Montessori school, as a case study, Liesl Taylor sets out to show the importance and impact that the Montessori approach can have on the lives of children in crisis. Using many specific examples, she highlights how to support elementary children in crisis through an understanding and commitment to the characteristics of the child of this age.*

I had taken a moment away from my observation chair in the garden classroom to greet a guest who was touring Cornerstone. As I welcomed the guest to our environment, there was a loud anguished cry and a child stomped over to a small rug, dumped a box of picture cards onto the rug and sat, fists clenched, rocking, and gradually raging more softly. A couple of the children glanced up and quietly went back about their business, as did I, though I was wondering what the visitor would think. Just then another child approached the visitor and me and, tapping him lightly on the arm, she said, “It’s OK... he’s working on figuring out an appropriate way to be angry at school. He’s really working at that. He’ll feel better in a minute.” This is one of many favorite moments in the classroom at Cornerstone, and it represents the culmination of years

---

*Liesl Heide Taylor is head of school at the Cornerstone Montessori Schools in partnership with the Montessori Center of Minnesota. She came to Cornerstone as a guide with ten years of experience in public charter Montessori environments and joined the team founding the elementary program in 2011. Liesl holds her AMI elementary certificate from the Montessori Center of Minnesota and her elementary state teaching license with a specialty in 5-8 science, from St. Scholastica. Liesl’s undergraduate degree is in psychology and family studies from St. Olaf College. Prior to her Montessori career, Liesl worked in early intervention as a cognitive development specialist and, later, in parent education.*

*This talk was presented at the NAMTA conference titled Children on the Edge: Creating a Path for Happy, Healthy Development, January 12-15, 2017 in New Orleans, LA.*

of work towards beginning to figure out how to support children living in crisis, or struggling in another way, without taking from them the richness of a beautiful Montessori education. It represents the immense capacity of a community of children to demonstrate compassion and understanding for everyone who is a part of their community, so that all may thrive.

#### SERVING CHILDREN IN CRISIS IN A MONTESSORI PROGRAM

“Serving Children in Crisis in a Montessori Program” is a reflection of those years of work and a result of all that the children, parents, and adults with whom I work have taught us. This article is about what we’ve learned and kept; those things that have gone well. There are so very many things we’ve learned along the way that we will not do again! This work is a result of remaining absolutely committed to the principles and practices of Montessori education as they were so expertly brought to life in my training with Phyllis Pottish-Lewis and being sure that this is the very best we have to offer children in crisis because, simply, they are children.

The notion that the ideal Montessori environment, or experience, will be compromised by serving children in crisis *must be refuted*. We cannot accept statements such as “Montessori doesn’t work for these children,” which I have heard too often. If we are implementing a system of education in environments that allow, nay *demand*, the use and development of all of our human tendencies, thus fostering optimal development, we must insist that it is for



*every child*, and we must work tirelessly to make it so. Just as every child is human, every child, no matter the circumstances, deserves an education that promotes his or her development to the fullest human potential.

Not only do children in crisis deserve access to an exceptional Montessori education, it is critical. Relatively advantaged children come to school ready to access all that a rich program has to offer; often they've had numerous experiences allowing them at a young age to see themselves as capable learners and important people. Many disadvantaged children represented in our demographic have experienced the contrary. Too many of their experiences have fostered negative views of themselves as learners and as important people in society. In addition, because of more limited opportunities, they are often the children who start academically behind and continue to fall further and further behind. We must not ever compromise key components of Montessori education. These very components, when in place, bring about meaningful change in the life of a child in crisis, just as they do for other children, and yet so many let the implementation of such important principles slip. Of course we know, in a high fidelity Montessori program, that the whole child is nurtured. The multiaged classroom is set up as a community of people who are living and working together. Amongst this three-year span in age, the grades are not defined; we do not give grade-level lessons. Children don't see themselves, or each other, as behind or ahead or smarter or in the slow group because those distinctions aren't made. Children learn that they are at school to work extremely hard doing their own best work each day. We do not interrupt the three-hour work cycle; we work diligently to inspire deep concentration during that time and guard it religiously. In addition, all presentations are designed to appeal to the specific developmental needs and attributes of the child receiving the lesson. Because each child's learning experience is tailored, struggling children begin to feel like learning is something they can do. Learning feels fun! Children are invigorated by the work they have completed and are inspired to try harder, taking-on increasingly greater academic challenges and experiencing their own success. In a presentation that 2 six-year-old children gave to Cornerstone guests in our second year of operation, one child finished up by saying, "At this school, everybody's smart!"



Socially, children learn that all have strengths and all have struggles. Every child comes to realize, through repeated interactions and experiences with others in the community, that he or she has something important to offer. Setbacks and disappointments are dealt with as a community in a supportive, respectful, and nurturing way. As the community develops, children spontaneously address issues by, for example, compassionately supporting a classmate in better behavior choices the next time or by inspiring a work partner to try a tough math problem one more time.

Jadyn struggled significantly with explosive behavior as a result of near continuous trauma in his ten years, making him an easy target for Leon, who couldn't resist the temptation to get a response from 'messing with' his classmates. Recently, while talking through one of these incidents, I said, "Leon, I am going to do something I rarely do; I am going to talk about another child when that child isn't here. I am doing this with good reason and I believe you are mature enough to handle this respectfully. Jadyn is in so very much pain, did you know that? He's got things going on outside of his life at school that are hard even to imagine." "Harder'n what I got?" "Well, that isn't for me to say; you have your fair share of hard we are working on, don't you?" Leon nodding, "Yeah, but I don't do what Jadyn does." "Right. Jadyn's struggles stick out more. Everyone knows he's got 'hard stuff' because we see and

Socially, children learn that all have strengths and all have struggles. Every child comes to realize, through repeated interactions and experiences with others in the community, that he or she has something important to offer. Setbacks and disappointments are dealt with as a community in a supportive, respectful, and nurturing way.

hear his struggles, do you know what I mean?" Leon nods, saying, "That dude's messed up..." I shook my head, "That dude needs your help, Leon. You have the strength and an opportunity to completely turn around some of his days, if you choose that. It would change you inside too, Leon. I'm just saying. Will you give it some thought?" About two weeks later I was observing in their classroom. Jadyn let out a loud grumble and crinkled his paper up, shoving his chair back away from his work, knocking some off the table.

Instead of responding in a way that he often did, i.e., "Ooooooh, Jadyn" eliciting an even more escalated response, Leon tipped back his chair from a neighboring table and said, "Jadyn! You got this." Then he hopped up and handed back the paper saying, "Show me what you got" and proceeded to help Jadyn work. [To respect the privacy of families at Cornerstone, all children's names have been changed throughout this article.]

Recently, Leon shared this writing reflection with me:

Well I was at my mom's job and then I was talking about someone and my mom first said I don't know what happened with that person and don't know if they have not a lot of family to support them. And then two things she said was I did not raise you to be a bully. I raised you to be a proud and thankful young man. To be nice to other people and you got to be humble.

And then I been thinking about that for two weeks and then I realize that when you talk about people like at school that they go home and feel bad and they go home feeling like they don't belong here and everyone belongs here.

Children experiencing an authentic Montessori education believe in themselves as capable people and important members of society; children who believe that about themselves have more capacity to excel academically, whether it means remediating lagging skills or soaring beyond expectations.



Those of us working in public Montessori settings with diverse groups of children—some struggling with behavior, some traumatized, some living in poverty, some privileged in every way—must stay unwaveringly grounded in our commitment to provide access to high quality Montessori, *especially* for those children with significant deficits in their skills. Our country has followed fad after educational fad, making desperate grabs at what might close the gap, agreeing only on the fact that so far nothing is working, when all the while we have a scientifically proven method of education that supports the development of each human being to his or her fullest potential. It is only by fostering such strong development of the whole child and of loving communities, that we have children who are ready to take academic risk; these are children who are willing to try and fail and know that they will be supported in trying again. Our consultant last year said in her report, “Cosmic Education is alive and well at Cornerstone!” It is in these classroom environments, and many like them, where the most disadvantaged child has the greatest opportunity for success. Part of that is indeed gaining proficiency in their basic skills and yet we can never let education be reduced to that. We cannot be in the business of filling children with content because we can’t possibly guess at the

content our children will need to know even just a few years from now. Our children, all children, need to experience their education. They need to build connections in their brains and a foundation for future learning based on experience and grounded in true understanding in order to know themselves as thinkers, learners, and problem-solvers and strong, confident, decision-makers to be truly successful.

During the 2015-2016 academic year, Dr. Steven J. Hughes, PhD, ABPdN, and Chair of AMI Global Research, conducted a pilot study titled, “Executive Function Growth as a Function of Years of Education in a High-Quality Montessori School for Children from Disadvantaged and Relative-Advantaged Backgrounds: A Pilot Study.” This study investigated the growth of executive functions (EFs) in children from disadvantaged and relatively advantaged backgrounds attending Cornerstone Montessori Elementary School. Though the sample size was tiny and continued study would need refinement, it will be an exciting area of assessment for the Montessori community to pursue. Paraphrased, the results show that children from both disadvantaged and relatively advantaged families demonstrate considerable growth in EFs across increasing years of attendance. While children from more advantaged backgrounds showed a slightly higher rate of growth, the differences between groups were not statistically significant. At each successive level of Montessori education, performance increased to the degree that by the time they had completed four or five years of Montessori education, about two-thirds of the relatively disadvantaged children and essentially the entire relatively advantaged group of children showed performance at or beyond above average range. Dr. Steven Hughes says of the study, “The children demonstrated a level of growth with real, observable, and potentially life-altering implications.”

Cornerstone graduated its first group of sixth years last year. One sixth-year graduate, who has worked through some of the most significant struggles we support in the demographic we serve, shared this reflection with the community.

How did I become the person I am today? Well, when I was little I was really shy. I wouldn't talk to anybody, but then I grew out my shyness by talking to people and coming to Cornerstone. Coming to CMES opened me up. One of my

best friends, Feneti, helped me open up. She introduced me to some of her friends who introduced me to their friends. I kind of like this school. It has taught me a lot because at my old school I wasn't really learning anything but now I'm learning a lot because this school has hands-on material. The gifts I take from being at CMES are being able to solve really big math problems and knowing all my facts in my head. Cornerstone has changed me a lot because at my old school I felt like I was really mean to some people, but now I am more compassionate. Before I came here I wasn't really confident about myself but now I am. I feel like I'm going to be successful on my journey of growth.

Having established ourselves firmly in the *why* of this important work, we go forward with strength to carry out the challenging, demanding, and ultimately richly rewarding *how*. We will consider our work with the child in crisis in the context of the developmental characteristics of elementary aged children, the importance of the human tendencies, the importance of the prepared adult, and the importance of the prepared environment. In addition, we will consider this work with the child in crisis in the context of relationship: relationship with the child, the parents or guardians, and with all the specialists and support staff necessary to ensure that we are meeting our children's needs.







The child is capable of developing and giving us tangible proof of the possibility of a better humanity. He has shown us the true process of construction of the human being. We have seen children totally change as they acquire a love for things and as their sense of order, discipline, and self-control develops within them.... The child is both a hope and a promise for mankind. (*Education and Peace*)

#### THE DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ALL ELEMENTARY AGED CHILDREN

The Montessori approach to education is unique in that it is child-centered. Whether we are working with a child from a privileged background who has always been in a Montessori environment or whether we are working with a fourth-year child joining Montessori for the first time and living in utter crisis outside of school, we are working with an *elementary-aged child* and we must keep the child's unique developmental characteristics in mind.

The reasoning mind, a powerful sense of justice, the ability to imagine, a seemingly infinite capacity for big work, a drive to be with peers, hero worship...these are characteristics we all know and experience daily in our work with our beloved elementary children. It is imperative to remember that when a child is esca-

lated or dysregulated—possibly raging in her environment or our office space—we must not forget to respond to the child in a way that appeals to his or her developmental characteristics. Just as we appeal to the child’s reasoning mind when we give a presentation, or appeal to her strong sense of right and wrong when setting up a system of justice in the classroom environment, so too must we help an elementary child who is struggling, reason through a hard situation or express an injustice appropriately. We must have foremost in our minds all that we know about elementary children, especially in these hardest moments, and appeal to the child in crisis with a twinkle in our eye and with understanding in our hearts, enticing her along a path of development, just as we do with engaging stories and beautiful presentations. We have a wealth of knowledge and energy for working through the most challenging situations with struggling children when we remain firmly grounded in these ideals.

Frederick and Leon came to my office during recess, heads down, rather subdued, super muddy and roughed up. Frederick: “Miss Liesl, we need a problem-solving.” “Yeah, you know how you say ‘we’re a good kid who just make a bad choice’? We did that,” added Leon. Frederick and Leon proceeded to tell me a complicated series of events kicked off by a messed up play in their football game. Initially the two boys and their friend, Jaslene, were laughing about how badly the play had gone, calling back and forth to each other who messed up what. This quickly escalated to jabs about who was good at what, who wasn’t fast, who didn’t listen, who didn’t catch, which led to kicking mud, grabbing for the ball, name calling and a physical altercation landing Jaslene on the ground with the three of them getting asked to go in. Jaslene was not with the boys, rather she was down in the bathroom upset and cleaning up with a supportive friend. “So, I’m hearing that this went from a goofed up play and laughing, to name calling and actions aggressive enough to knock Jaslene over, is that right?” They nodded. “Do you know what we can say about that kind of problem?” Silence. “We can say the situation snow-balled. Why do you think we can say that?” The boys caught on and explained how it started small and got bigger and bigger until they had a great big snowball. They were quiet for a moment. Frederick looked up at me and pointed across my table saying excitedly, “Now we have to melt the snowball,” and turning to Leon, “we have to melt the snowball, man!” Barely needing prompts,

they continued to work through the problem, each taking responsibility for their part in it, each talking about what they could do better next time, each brainstorming ways to recognize when they are 'tipping' from fun to mad, as well as brainstorming ways to remind each other to cool it. Both boys agreed that Jaslene really didn't contribute to the problem; she was holding the ball yelling for the boys to stop. I asked them at the end how they'd like to fix this up with Jaslene. "Say were sorry," said Frederick. "Sorry ain't going to fix this with her," Leon mumbled. With just a little more time to think about it, the boys came up, on their own, with the idea to "teach Jaslene some football plays for her game tomorrow night.. They didn't think they deserved to return to recess. They decided they should write her a letter during the rest of recess and give it to her with their plan to try and help her feel better. They asked to use the side yard so it could just be the three of them the following day; they booked time with me to supervise and I stood watching, holding back tears, proud of how much they'd grown and honored to witness how sweetly the plan played out.

The following week, as a result of recess experiences such as this one and his work with our school psychologist, Frederick was supported by his guide and classroom paraprofessional and started a research project on good sportsmanship. The product of this work was a beautiful flyer Frederick designed, reproduced, and passed out to his schoolmates after presenting to them the importance of good sportsmanship. The flyer contained examples of some of Frederick's heroes not being good sports and of some of his heroes being good sports. On the back of the flyer Frederick shared the story of a women's softball team offering to carry an injured player *from the other team* around the bases so *that other team* could win the championship (had the woman's own team carried her, they would have been disqualified). Frederick was in awe as he relayed the discovery of this story to me, and forever touched.

I see Frederick and Leon often. They repeatedly remind me that there is always more to the story; it is always more complicated than one child getting in trouble and one child being the victim. Their teachers and I hold our heads, at times exhausted by the knack they have for finding themselves in an endless string of opportunities for improvement. Yet, because they are not kicked out of school or

Building a system of justice in the environment cannot take second place to academics. Stronger academics take place in a classroom when enough time is first given to establishing a community that feels safe, peaceful, and has a predictable, child-centered system of justice and of freedoms balanced with responsibilities.

sent out of their classroom communities, shamed or scolded, they are thriving. They are thriving because they are respected, given time and support to reason through an incident, given space to articulate and express injustice and come to their own conclusions about how to best remedy the injustice and, in this case, encouraged to extend the experience to great interest-driven work even involving the child's heroes. Children in crisis with similar escalated or explosive behaviors attending schools with more conventional discipline poli-

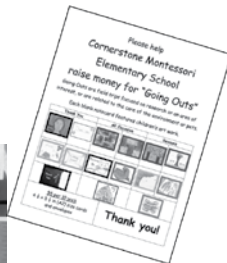
cies and procedures essentially marching them through to suspension or expulsion, are not likely to see themselves as people who have something so valuable to offer their communities. It is our job to stick with all of our children, our most struggling children especially, all the way through the incident, and there are many incidents, every day, many of which are more serious than this one. It is our responsibility to involve them, support them, believe in them, and guide them as they learn increasingly more about self-advocacy, compassion, and empathy, and being an important, contributing member of their community.

It bears its own paragraph, the elementary child's reasoning mind: We cannot underestimate the effectiveness of tapping it when even the most enraged child is struggling to follow or meet expectations. We never reason with a child when he or she is escalated; when the child is calm though, and the situation warrants, I've found it helpful to share with them three things. "First, we have the very fewest number of rules we are able. Secondly, I know it might feel maddening to follow a rule when you don't know where that rule comes from or why we have it, so I'd like to tell you why we have this rule." I tell a story and give the reason for the rule. Lastly, I tell the child, "This is a rule everyone who goes to Cornerstone has to follow right now, but you get to have your own thoughts in your head about whether you agree with the rule or not. Sometimes we

discuss rules and sometimes rules change when it makes sense for them to. For now, I'm asking you to follow the rule, but I'm not telling you that you have to agree with me. Does this help?" It usually does.

### GOING OUT AND SERVICE WORK

We must make sure to include children in crisis in the rich experiences of going out and providing service to others! We set the stage in our classrooms so that the children are enticed and enthused about the possibility of going out. They know that they are demonstrating their best choices and actions and thus their readiness to be trusted to act appropriately out in the community. There are a few children in all of our classrooms capable of navigating in their community with grace and ease and leadership and responsible choices with nary a reminder; it would be a disservice if it were only those children who had the opportunity to grow from all that going out and service work have to offer. Imagine how disheartening to be in the presence of this work and feel that it is forever just out of your reach. We must have high expectations of every child and it is our job to teach skills and break down the expectations into steps so all children have a chance to work towards, and carry out





successful goings out. We all know the glow of a child just returned from a going out; it is ten-fold for children navigating any number of issues resulting from living in poverty or a continuous state of trauma due to the crises in their lives!

Aman's entire year changed when he became the expert on the classroom pet snake. Aman learned so many skills in leading the research and arranging the purchase, delivery, and subsequent care of the snake, including monthly going outs via the city bus to buy food and supplies. Most importantly though, Aman learned that children don't want to join someone leading a project if that person is treating others unkindly, using harsh words, and behaving in a way that is unexpected. Aman's teacher never gave up hope that he could do this and worked tirelessly with him as he worked to practice words and actions that fostered constructive work partnerships and even new friends.

Jaslene, soon to be one of our graduates, spends hours each week with our therapy dog in training. The dog knows her voice, her cry, her mood, her high level of need and support, and they have become inseparable.



Jaslene worked for months with a few restarts, crumpled papers, tears, quitting, and try, try, trying again. The team of adults working with Jaslene maintained high expectations and never faltered in their belief that she could and would do this. Countless hours were spent patiently guiding development of the skills, academic and interpersonal, she needed to complete this work. In the end, Jaslene enjoyed a wonderful trip to a therapy dog training class and was able to come back and share information with her schoolmates about training these special dogs. We can't know, yet, the possible profound effect this kind of success may have on Jaslene; we are, however, all grateful that she has this experience in her repertoire, possibly being able to draw on it when she needs to remember that she is a person who can recover from mistakes, do really hard work, and stick with it long enough to enjoy the intrinsic satisfaction that comes from real accomplishment.

### **Service Work**

History in our environments is presented purposely to lead the child to find his or her *own* place in history or own way to serve humanity. Elementary children are driven to serve and do so eagerly and selflessly. The benefits of service work are numerous and well understood by us all. Again, they are even more important for children who are struggling in their everyday lives. Children at



Cornerstone tested and analyzed the health of their on-site wetland, presented to the school and parent community, and then went out to educate their neighbors on the importance of keeping litter and other toxins out of the storm drains. They stenciled reminders on the streets near every drain, letting all know that this water flows straight to the river.

The children decided to work at the local food shelf and have been going there biweekly. They serve and care for the younger children in their school daily as well.

Especially for the numerous children who live in the affordable housing immediately surrounding the school, they are seeing the direct impact of their work on their own neighborhood, families and friends, and young children in their school, giving them an invaluable sense of accomplishment and purpose.

#### HUMAN NEEDS AND TENDENCIES

Living and learning each day in an environment that fosters the use and development of tendencies that are the very essence of being human is ideal. Spending a majority of time in an environment that doesn't foster these tendencies will make the most normalized" regulated child cranky at least and numb and passive in their own education at worst. Tragically, just as we can forget to respond to a child in crisis with developmental characteristics in mind, often the first things to go for a child who is in crisis or struggling in the





classroom environment is the opportunity to do that which makes him most human: to explore, orient, repeat, communicate, move...

The task of the educator lies in seeing that the child does not confound good with immobility, and evil with activity, as often happens in old-time discipline. (Maria Montessori)

It turns out that much of our work in the last four years has been supporting the human tendency to orient. Human beings want to know their relationship to the environment around them. At Cornerstone we had elementary children new to Montessori, guides new to elementary children new to Montessori, and untrained support staff new to Montessori children and Montessori guides! There was a lot of orienting that needed doing! On top of that we had (and still have) much to learn about the stresses of living in poverty, the trauma and crises our children and families experience, infusing our program with an antibiased approach, and the secondary trauma and burn-out that the heartbroken staff experience.

Our work at Cornerstone is influenced and supported or affirmed by people whose work we admire immensely. Dr. Travis Wright spoke at



the AMI Refresher Course last year. Those of us working with children in crisis were deeply touched as our speaker demonstrated complete understanding of the nature of our work at Cornerstone. I welled up and glanced down the row at my lovely, hardworking, funny and fun, tired-out staff and saw tears brimming in their eyes too. “He’s talking about *our* children,” we mouthed to each other. We were filled up and renewed in our hopes for our work with the children. There are others too, that I will mention and reference in this article, though I will refer you to them and their work for deeper understanding with regards to their expertise. The rest of the article is how we have worked on this puzzle of providing a high-quality Montessori education for all children in all of their loveliness and complication at Cornerstone.

#### BUILDING COMMUNITY

When I first came to Cornerstone I took it for granted that the children would be thrilled with their new digs! Who wouldn’t?! The beauty and simplicity of the space was perfect, the lighting and coloring stunning; each material and accompanying tiny boxes and tickets and artifacts absolutely irresistible. I was experienced enough to quickly support them in finding just the right balance of freedom with responsibility and we would be all set to dive in to exceptional work. But it was *not so*.

I was instantly in love with the children; there were twenty-two of them, mostly first years with some second years and most of them new to Montessori. They were not instantly in love with me or with each other or with their environment. Many things went terribly wrong right away; things I didn't think would go wrong. Over the first few weeks several things dawned on me: The children didn't know I believed in them, they didn't know that all children were good, they didn't believe I would care just as deeply about them in the next moment or the next day if they made a mistake or did something bad, some were concerned about what I would tell their parents. They were horrible to each other, in constant competition with each other, they were manipulative, and I didn't know if they were going to do each other in first and then me or the other way around. Finally I remembered my trainer's words, "Go back to your albums when something is going poorly." I poured over my albums, especially the Theory Album, and realized, very simply and suddenly, that the children weren't oriented to where they were. For most of the children, this was such a completely different experience than what they were used to, and they were understandably floundering. Though I had been orienting them to all the lovely systems such as recording work, getting ready for lunch, using the restroom, how we use paper, care for the environment, and so on, none of that



was working because we weren't starting from a common place of understanding about each other or this classroom relative to what they'd known before. An interaction I will never forget was the day I finally got fed up with Angela's seemingly obsessive use of all the pink paper. Immediately upon her arrival each day, she went through the paper, inevitably before I saw her, and drew a big red house on each piece, stuffing them in her cubby. I knelt down with her and all the pink paper. "Angela, I keep asking you to save this paper," I gently took the pile from her, "for something very special. We are going to use one piece at a time for something really lovely. What will happen if there is no pink paper for any of your classmates?" Angela, with fire in her eyes, said in her charming accent, "I need this," taking back her pictures. "My dad is at jail." I was completely undone. When I could find my voice, we gathered all of her really special work, and I showed her how we could make a book and bind it for dad.

First we built relationship and community. I put away *many, many materials*, almost all of them; we weren't going to get any quality work done until we were a community anyways. We went for walks in the neighborhood where they could be the experts and tell me stories. We rolled down the hill in the field until I was sick and they were laughing. I taught them how to make a fort out of sticks. We rested on our backs and looked at clouds. We raked leaves.



We sang and sang and sang. We danced. The children taught me their dances. We found a way for everyone to be an expert and contribute to the community: who could reach the bandaids, who knew how to run the music, who always knew where I left my keys, who could stock paper and sharpen pencils, who could tie shoes, who could push the lunch cart. I kept their expertise away from academic knowledge and we only played noncompetitive, team-building games. I said everything out loud, assuming nothing, so the children would hear over and over again how I was thinking about them: All children are good; I care deeply about you no matter which behaviors you choose; I am smiling because I am happy to see you every day; I feel my stomach hurt if someone yells at me, so I will never yell at you; This is my serious face—I am serious when I ask you politely to stop; I’m not leaving; I will see you tomorrow right here for our handshake or hug; I will think about you on the weekend. “Miss Liesl, will you tell my mom I was good today?” “All children are good, Casper. I will tell her you made great behavior choices today that really helped our community. That must feel so good to you.” I said these things thousands of times and kept my actions true to my words even when they test-test-tested me! Jacy dropped a glass on the floor every day at lunch and then asked me, “You love me?” It took me a few days to catch on; she was making sure I meant it when I said I loved all children, even right when they were making a poor choice.

It started slowly and then exploded into a community of children who were striving to be in my good graces. The next step was to turn that caring to each other. I began expressing another whole set of thoughts, out loud, as often as I could: I feel sad when I see two people I care so much about using unkind words to talk to each other. Our community won’t work without everybody... how can we help him? Who knows how to cheer Jacy up? That is a big job, who will you invite to support you? You are people who can do hard things. It feels so good in here when you are caring for each other, maybe we should invite a guest; I am always concerned for your safety. We began role-playing things people do when they care for each other. They learned how to include classmates who didn’t have someone to walk with or who felt sad.

I gradually began introducing special work. One day when we were raking leaves we brought some beautiful ones back in with us,

and I got out *really special* square crayons and we did leaf rubbings and listened to music. The next day I brought out a *really special* material that would tell us something about the marks in the leaves, the veins. I offered to tell them a *really special* story about the leaf. Different children offered or were asked to be in charge of finding a *really special* place on the shelf for the crayons, for the nomenclature, and to be in charge of caring for them. We practiced dusting big empty shelves as special places to put the new materials. I didn't put anything out someone didn't care deeply about. Then little by little the children started to care for the things in their environment and then *slowly* each other. They started grouping together and cracking each other up. They invited everyone in for giant, messy, noisy, and constructive works. One day they were working on a huge mosaic sun after the story of The Sun and the Earth. There were paper-cutters and paper-sorters and paper-gluers. Scissors and glue sticks were everywhere. The children were loud and creating an all-out ruckus; it happened so quickly. I saw a child slip on paper on the carpet with scissors in his hands. I grabbed the bell and clanged it back and forth, in the way that we never do, and caught myself before I blurted out "Stop!" Instead, I took a big breath and asked, "Does anyone know why I did that just now?" Silence. And then little Alexander, who never said anything, excitedly banged his palm on his forehead a couple times and pointed to me, "Oh! Oh, you are concerned for our safety!" The whole class burst out laughing and began kind of hugging Alexander, happy that he knew what was wrong. The children started looking around. "Oh. I think it is about the scissors. And the glue is on the rug. I think it is about the paper on the floor." Sofi turned to me and said, "It's OK, Miss Liesl. You can be in your chair. We can fix this." I cried that night on the way home too, though it wasn't out of frustration or exhaustion or sadness; it was such a joy to realize how very far the children had come. Now, at Cornestone, we don't have to start where we did with the children that first year. Yet, we tell the children these things all the time. We tell children new to our school these things. In fact, the children tell the children these things. What we believe about children and what they come to know because our actions are true to our words:

- All children are good.
- Poor choices are separate from a lovely child.

- Mistakes are OK! We use them in work and behavior to learn from.
- When you are struggling, it never changes my high opinion of you.
- Every day is new. I will never ever give up on you.

### **BUILDING A SYSTEM OF JUSTICE**

What is social life if not the solving of social problems, behaving properly and pursuing aims acceptable to all?"  
(Maria Montessori)

When children are key players in building the system of justice in the classroom and in the school, they are much more likely to manage themselves according to that system. Additionally, and what we aim for, they are much more likely to implement it. Simply having a peer give a reminder or kindly invite a struggling classmate "in" can head-off several could-be problems a day. Building a system of justice in the environment cannot take second place to academics. Stronger academics take place in a classroom when enough time is first given to establishing a community that feels safe, peaceful, and has a predictable, child-centered system of justice and of freedoms balanced with responsibilities. "A room in which all the children move about usefully, intelligently, and voluntarily, without committing any rough or rude act, would seem to me a classroom very well-disciplined indeed (*The Montessori Method*). It is in this kind of environment where children are able to concentrate deeply and thrive academically and otherwise.

Building a system of justice with elementary children must be grounded in their collective experiences. Though most of my time at Cornerstone has been as head of school, I taught for several years prior to coming to Cornerstone. Every year at the beginning of the year, within reason, I "let things go" as they would. Each time something went wrong, or got uncomfortable, or looked unsafe, or someone became upset, I gathered the group. I would express concern, or better yet an older child would express concern, and ask if anyone else was concerned by what happened. It is important to establish a shared concern so that what results doesn't just come from

the guide. Once there was a shared concern, I led the children in a brief conversation about what happened and how they would like it to go differently next time. With the children, sometimes several times a day in those first days, I built a list on a big sheet of paper: On one side were the things people didn't like and on the opposite side were the ways we would like it to be instead. For example:

Work got kicked or stepped on ~ work stays on work mats; people go around work mats

A child got run into ~ walk carefully and calmly inside

People were yelling ~ use voices that stay right near you

There is no place to sit ~ pick up work before getting a new work

People were goofing around in the bathroom ~ go one at a time to the bathroom

People aren't working ~ invite people to work with you or choose other workspaces

People were calling names ~ use kind words or helpful words or stay quiet





The class added to the list over the first several days. After two or three weeks, I gathered the children and told them specifically (or reminded them if they were experienced children) that they have freedoms in their Montessori classroom they may not have had in another school setting or that children in other school settings may not have; the freedoms to move, communicate, and choose. I put those words out on big cards on the floor and began to review the list with the children. We cut apart the list into strips and then classified each strip into one of the three categories: movement, communication, and choice. What the children see is that the things they didn't like were breeches of the freedoms, and the ways they would like things to happen are examples of those freedoms being carried out responsibly. For example, "People were yelling" and "use soft voices" is one strip and it goes under "communication." The children are very invested in this and it supports their understanding so completely. The first year I suggested making a poster and, inevitably, every year afterwards led by the older children, they make a poster and enjoy adding strips to the categories over the next few days.

#### **ORIENTING THE CHILDREN TO FREEDOM BALANCED WITH RESPONSIBILITY**

One day after they've been busy adding to their list and before they tire of it, call the children together, get out the beautiful balance, and tell this story.

You all have been doing a lot of work with freedoms and responsibilities! I have a story for you and we'll use this beautiful balance. Do you know that people are usually happiest or do their best when they are able to create balance in their lives? You can work each day to create balance for yourself. We will work to create balance, too, in our environment, in fact it is in a balanced environment, an environment balanced with freedoms and responsibilities, that we will all best be able to do the great work we are here to do! So here you all are, in our classroom with these freedoms. (Place two weights, one smaller than the other, into one side of the balance; the balance is now tipped. Elicit from the children what some of those freedoms are [freedom to move, freedom to choose...])

It is your work every day to balance those freedoms with your responsibilities (place two weights totaling the same

weight into the other side of the balance, showing the children that freedoms are balanced with responsibilities; the balance is now balanced. Elicit from the children what some of those responsibilities are [move carefully around the room, choose challenging work, record work, etc.]

Now let's look at this. If you are zipping around in here with only this much responsibility (take the small weight out of the responsibility side so the balance is again tipped) it will be my job as your guide, until you can do it by yourself, to manage the amount of freedom you have by limiting it in an appropriate way (take the small weight out of the freedom side bringing back balance) until you are ready to try again with more responsibility. Elicit from the children what "limits to their freedom" might be (guide choosing work, work place, limiting movement, limiting amount of talking, etc.).

Now look at this! (take the small weight out of the freedom side as you say this, tipping the balance and showing more responsibility than freedom).

You are in this lovely environment, amazing children, here to do the great work you are so interested in doing, managing all your responsibilities... wouldn't it be a shame if you didn't have enough freedom to do all the things you came here to do and to learn? It is my job as your guide to make sure you have enough freedom (put the small weight back in the freedom side, again creating balance) to go about your business of getting a great education!

Of course the children adore this part of the story, visibly sitting up taller and raising their chins a bit with nods and smiles. It must feel so good to the children to know it goes both ways; that we are just as diligent in our efforts to not impinge upon their freedom as we are in supporting the development of increased responsibility.

The garden environment was getting pretty busy and louder, much louder, than the healthy hum we love. I observed Sofi, who was then six, march over to the balance, place weights in one side tipping it out of balance, and proceed to ring the bell, one hand on her hip and one hand gesturing for her classmates to look at the balance. The room instantly settled. Sofi then went to the shelf and held up our photograph of Dr. Montessori, "She would not want to see this," and placed it face down on the shelf before she went back

to work. I didn't see it happen, though I noticed later that just as balance was restored to the room, someone had restored balance to the material and righted our photograph of Dr. Montessori.

### OUR AGREEMENTS

In addition to a sound understanding of freedoms balanced with responsibilities, it is helpful to have agreements with the children. Through trial and error, I grew this list with my first groups of children and have found, ever since, that this particular list is an exceptionally strong backdrop for responding with absolute consistency to any situation we find ourselves in with the children; this is key for all children and even more so for children struggling in some way. At the same time it is a rock solid foundation, it is also flexible enough for implementing "fair is not always equal."

It is extremely important that we rebuild this list with the children each year; this is to say that this isn't just a list of rules we dole out to the children. Remember, they are elementary children and this work must be done in conjunction with their experiences, engaging their reasoning minds, and with their involvement every year! As the guide, you know where you want to end up: with *this* list of agreements, and so you observe astutely for situations to bring to the children's attention, that will ground their understanding of these important agreements relative to their own experiences. For example, two young girls are trying to work through a problem; they are loud and they are insulting each other and the problem is growing. We could spend our entire careers policing these kinds of interactions or we can work really hard early on to capitalize on these experiences! With two little girls having a loud, unkind exchange in the environment, I would approach and say softly and with empathy that is not artificial, "I feel so sad when I see two people I care so much about talking this way to each other. Also, we are out of balance and others can't work. I am going to ask you to be apart for a few minutes to find some space from this and a little bit of calm. (I gave little "peace rugs," carpet squares, to the children to take somewhere.) When you feel calm, come get me and I have a special way to help you become amazing problem-solvers." When the children are calm, they get me. Both have to be calm and I keep the freedom limited until they come get me; it would be terrible if

we left a problem unsolved; i.e., they don't go bobbing off to work with someone else. It stands to reason that if the children are calm enough to work with others, they are calm enough to address the issue at hand first, and this is tapping the children's reasoning minds. In the conversation, I would ask the girls how they were feeling—usually it is mad or sad—and the first thing to do is validate both of their feelings. “Yes, that would make me mad, sad, frustrated, etc., too. All of your feelings are OK to have. It is always OK to feel however you feel! We need to talk about a way to be mad or sad or frustrated or even happy at school in a way that doesn't disturb others' chances to work or be safe.” Additionally, it would be the perfect opportunity to role-play and model tone of voice. “There is a tone of voice that makes our problems bigger and a tone of voice that magically makes them smaller.” In the garden classroom, we had a joke about the four-syllable “Sto-o-op-puh!” (Stop!), being a sure-fire way to make a teeny problem bigger and agreed that a simple, “Please stop. I don't like what you are doing,” calmly said, gets much better results. If the girls accuse each other of some wrongdoing, I would jump on the chance to acknowledge, “Oh, yes. It sounds like you made a mistake. Your mistake made her frustrated and her mistake made you mad? Is that kind of what happened? All humans make mistakes! I made a mistake this morning,” and then I proceed to tell them of a mistake. I make sure the children know that mistakes at Cornerstone give us chances to learn to do something better. Immediately, one child being in trouble and one child being in your good graces is off the table, as it certainly should be.

It is up to the guide to capitalize on these moments with children and articulate how handy it is to have an agreement about this or that. Depending on the problem, sometimes you gather your whole group and sometimes you just work with the children involved.

As the new children, or your whole room if you are starting with a new group, gain experience with these ideas, begin using them and reminding them as often as possible. If you can do it with a twinkle in your eye and a smile on your face as you walk by, for example, quietly: “Ooop. Remember we have a tone of voice that will either shrink or grow your problem? Can you guys keep that in mind while you work through this,” and then walk on by fully expecting that they've got this. Your unwavering belief in the child

who is not yet there speaks volumes; the children must feel this from you. (After you have gone through a three-year cycle with the children, the older children are very skilled at pretty much taking this over!)

Our agreements:

- We agree to respect each other, our environment, and our pets.
- We agree that every child gets what he or she needs; every child is different so some of our needs are different.
- We agree that everyone makes mistakes, and we learn from our mistakes.
- We agree that we have a tone of voice that will help or hurt our respectful communication with others.
- We agree to use “I” statements.
- We are people who can do hard things.
- We agree that we do not talk about people who are not with us.
- We agree to participate in our problem-solving routine.

### **Our Problem-Solving Routine**

This is one of our very first grace and courtesy lessons each year.

- One person talking (tone) at a time.
- Each tells his or her story.
- Each asks for what he or she would like to stop.
- Each tells what he or she could do better next time.

- All come up with a solution.
- People might need time to be mad or sad before they are ready to solve a problem.
- Regular activity does not resume until the problem is solved; this is key as it ends the drama so many of us find utterly exhausting! Children are allowed as much time as they need before the problem-solving conversation, but they are not working with others or participating in other aspects of their day until the problem is solved. It doesn't take very long for the children to be pretty invested in getting their problems solved and getting back to the business of their days. With rare exception, this works. Occasionally, there is one child ready to solve the problem and one child struggling significantly with problem-solving as a result of their disability or traumatic experiences, etc. In these cases, I have a conversation with the child who has already calmed. Elementary children are so reasonable and have such a capacity for understanding another's struggle. I might say something like, "Thank you for being so patient; it is hard to have an unsolved problem hanging over you, isn't it? When \_\_\_\_ comes back into the room, we can solve the problem. Until then, you may continue with your day, though we need to remember the agreement that we do not talk about this problem with your other friends or work partners because that would be unfair to \_\_\_\_\_, right?" This happens only very rarely.
- The adult mediates only (children look at each other and talk, not tell on each other to the adult supporting).
- The adult accepts the children's solutions, always, within reason. Or the adult gently prompts with questions to support the children in reaching an acceptable solution.

A special note about “I’m sorry”: It is important never to tell a child to apologize. We are working towards supporting understanding and a genuine sense of empathy. We don’t want children parroting “Sorry” because they believe it is what we want them to say or because they think that is actually how to be done with a problem. If a child does offer “Sorry,” I make sure to articulate, “You don’t have to say sorry just because you had a problem. You may say it if you really feel it, and I want you to know what it means if you say “sorry.” It means that you are going to work so, so hard, your very best, to make sure this doesn’t happen again. Is that what you mean?”

While we do want the children to learn from their experiences, we must remain mindful of helping them process past experiences and prepare for upcoming ones that may be similar. For example, before we let a group of children transition to times of the day that are notorious for challenges (lunch, recess, hallways), we must spend time with the children to prepare them for success. When you do this with the children, or when any adult in the building is referring the children to their agreements or reminding them of their freedoms and responsibilities, keeping these things in mind supports the children in becoming increasingly independent in managing themselves and each other in their Montessori community:

- Can you give the reminder subtly and with a twinkle in your eye?
- Are you giving the children a directive or referring them to the system of justice they helped set up?
- Are you helping the children to reason by asking prompting questions rather than telling?
- Are the children coming up with the solution?
- Do you step back long enough to allow the children the ‘a-ha’ moment that shows they understand?
- Are you inviting work, skits or role play as opportunities for the children to share with other children

what they've discovered or learned about living more harmoniously in their community?

It is interesting to see how little by little, these children become aware of forming a community which behaves as such... once they have reached this level, the children no longer act thoughtlessly, but put the group first and try to succeed for its benefit." (*The Absorbent Mind*)

### Behavior and Work Contract

In mid October we send this "Behavior and Work Contract" home with all the children after discussing it with them and supporting their understanding of how it is tied to the freedoms and responsibilities and agreements they've been working on in their environments at the beginning of each year. There is a place on the back of the contract for the child, parents or guardians, guides, and the head of school to sign. When all the children have brought their contract back in an environment, I go out to sign off on them with the children and we make a pretty big deal about it; it is going to feel awfully good to spend the day where people are agreeing to work their hardest at upholding this contract.

### ORIENTING THE CHILDREN TO THEIR ROLE

The children must know their role and, eventually, everyone else's. The children are at school each day to do their own best work: work on academics, behavior choices, and the work of growing a wonderful community. Tell the children what Dr. Montessori discovered about their brains; about their amazing capacity to do the hardest work and learn the most *right now*, between the ages of





#### Purpose

This contract is an agreement between the children, teachers, Head of School, and each child's parents or guardians, to support respectful, safe behavior in the classroom and the development of exceptional work ethics.

#### Our Freedoms

In our Montessori classrooms, we have the freedom to move, communicate, and choose.

#### Our Responsibilities

With each freedom comes responsibility.

- **Moving** responsibly means we move with purpose, carefully and quietly so that others can continue their work.
- **Communicating** responsibly means our words are respectful, they do not disturb others' work, and they are words about our work.
- **Choosing** responsibly means we choose challenging, meaningful work. We choose appropriate materials and supplies to respectfully do that work. We record our work choices in our work journals and conference with our teachers about those choices. We also choose work to master required skills as defined by the Minnesota State Standards. We choose to use our time wisely.

#### Developing Freedom Balanced with Responsibility

When Freedoms are not carried out responsibly:

1. We agree to accept polite reminders from others. We accept the reminder politely and make a better behavior or work choice.
2. We agree to accept help from an adult if we cannot make a strong choice by ourselves.
3. We understand that an adult may set a limit on our freedom when it is not used responsibly. We agree to work and act respectfully within a set limit until we are able to demonstrate the necessary responsibility to work or behave without the limit.
4. We understand that if we are not accepting our responsibilities or limits, our parents or guardians will be contacted.

#### Our Precious Community

Cornerstone is an extremely unique school community founded and absolutely dependent upon the principles of respect and decency towards all of our members, and the development of exceptional work ethics. We will not tolerate teasing, or disrespectful and unsafe behavior. Aggressive and/or violent play is unacceptable. At Cornerstone, we believe every child and adult is both deserving of being shown the highest level of respect as well as capable of showing that same level of respect for others. We seek and expect the involvement of all parents in supporting the growth of a safe, respectful and inclusive community in which learning can happen at the deepest level and exceptional work can be enjoyed to its fullest. Please discuss this contract with your child and return it to school after you have signed in the spaces on the back. Thank you!

six and twelve years! "It is important that you don't waste a moment!" Model love of your own work, and excitement and joy it will be contagious!

Tell the children the story of the "Public School Curriculum." Let them know that you have made an agreement with the state of Minnesota, in our case because we are a public school, to support them in developing the skills expected of them in the state standards. Remind the children of all the choice they have with regards to their work in the classroom and let them know that agreeing to work at the standards is one of the corresponding responsibilities to the freedom to choose work. Their role is to balance interest-driven work with the required work and you will support them with that.



### ORIENTING THE CHILDREN TO THE ADULT ROLES

At Cornerstone, in addition to a guide in each environment, we have four teacher's assistants, two special education teachers, four group paraprofessionals (paras), three one-on-one paras, a literacy specialist, an ELL teacher, a school psychologist (serving the special education program and also providing school-based mental health support to all students, funded in part through our general education budget and in part through a grant), as well as our contracted specialists, an occupational therapist, speech and language therapist, and a nurse.

It is extremely important that everyone understand his or her role—all children and all adults. Much of this can be done at the same time, as long as you are sensitive never to undermine another adult in front of the children. Just as we observe the children and present lessons they are ready for based on our observations, we do the same with the multitude of interactions between our supporting adults and the children. Once the adults are oriented (a later section of this article) you can have different adults come in, or take advantage of situations that arise with adults already in your room, and the adults can join you in a fun and funny role play about roles. For

example, when Susan, our special education teacher, comes into the room it is not her role to help you get the tape you are not supposed to have! It is also not Susan's role to give a child a limit because that limit cannot be upheld consistently by someone coming in and out, though she may relay an observation of a situation that the guide would want to address later. Susan's role, in fact, is to make sure that some children get their needs met (remember we've already agreed that all children have different needs and everyone gets what they need at Cornerstone). Susan may also give a polite reminder as to our agreements. It is as matter-of-fact as that. Do this with all the adults who come to your room. You can have endless fun with this and it will really support the children and your support staff in having more adults in and out of your environments with everyone feeling comfortable, welcome, grounded in their important work, and without compromising concentration and the development of independence.

#### **ORIENTING THE CHILDREN: THEY ARE PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER!**

Children new to Montessori, especially older children with limited outside-of-school experiences, don't understand the endless possibilities available to them for big, beautiful, interest-driven work! Even more so, in a young school, younger children don't have the oldest children to look up to for ideas and inspiration. Much of the guide's work in establishing a program with inexperienced or struggling children is modeling great big exceptional work. When a presentation is over, it is essential in the early months of starting a new group to stay with the children in the presentation and model "follow on." Work right with the children as one member of the group work, modeling excitement, courtesy, tenacity, and pretty soon the children will have a whole repertoire of ideas for follow-on. When that begins to wane, it will be your cue that they are ready for more ideas.

Introduce the children to the work of other Montessori children. Have them become pen pals with children in more established Montessori programs. Tell the children stories of famous Montessorians. The children love seeing Anne Frank working on a checkerboard! At Cornerstone, we are lucky to have the Montessori Museum on site; the children are *fascinated* by materials used over one hundred



years ago, materials in other languages, and the countless stories about Montessori schools around the world in addition to the stories about Dr. Montessori. Even without the museum, these are all things you can and should share with your children! As we were taught in our trainings, we must model for the children, gratitude for those who came before us, for the work they did that gives us a foundation for our great work. We can tell them of Sir Isaac Newton who said, "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

Tell the children the story of the establishment of their own school! Younger children never tire of this story, usually leaning forward in anticipation for the part that includes them! Older children especially enjoy passing along the story of their school to their new classmates or to visitors. When your school or program is new, the children who are your pioneers play a really special role in passing along the story and specialness of their school. I used to tell the story of the beginning of Cornerstone Montessori

Elementary to the pioneer children all the time. I told them that Molly O’Shaughnessy, whom they visited often when they needed to finish unrolling the last bits of the black strip down the hall and into her office space, or on other occasions, dreamed the idea of Cornerstone before most of them were even born. The children reveled in the rest of the story of all the people who worked so hard to make her dream come true so we could be in the garden classroom living and working together and building a new school together. The children used to tell our many guests, “Molly dreamed us and now here we are for real!” Indeed.

### ORIENTING THE ADULTS

The adults, too, must be prepared. We’ve all been through training or know many who have and know how intense, wonderful, transformative and *key* to our best work with the children becoming prepared adults is. Though we aren’t able to fully train every adult in the building, every adult deserves the courtesy of being given a clear picture of how he or she fits into this tricky work of adding adults and expertise without compromising the child’s Montessori experience.

Montessori guides are enlightened generalists as opposed to experts in subject matter. We have enough knowledge to excite interest, and to guide the work of the children in all subjects. When the child’s thirst for knowledge exceeds what we are able to provide her in the classroom, though, we encourage the child to tap the knowledge of an expert, perhaps by going out or inviting an expert in. We must work with our support staff in our classrooms and schools in this same way. Our support staff, from paraprofessionals to highly

Most children who are struggling with trauma and crisis, or who have special needs, are in extra need of a supportive community and of knowing they have an important role in that community. So often, though, these are the children who are repeatedly sent out of their classroom communities. ... Many children have systems set up with their guides allowing them to walk out of their rooms and into various other areas of the school, such as the greenhouse, ... to “reset” and get ready to go back to their rooms and keep working.

specialized licensed special education teachers to English language learner teachers to literacy specialists to school psychologists, and contracted therapists, have expertise we *must* tap and rely heavily upon when we are working with children in crisis, children with special needs, and children new to Montessori. Our support staff members are our partners in this huge work. We must set up work cultures that embrace and welcome different areas of expertise and then support our whole team in ongoing, positive sharing of ideas as we seek to best serve each child.

Elena Aguilar, the author of *The Art of Coaching Teams; Building Resilient Communities that Transform Schools* writes about creating equitable schools for children and coaching and sustaining equity-driven teachers. I highly recommend her work. She says, in her opening paragraph:

Artists are notoriously messy...their processes can be haphazard, full of false starts, revisions, and crumpled pieces that never make it to completion. The drafts and sketches left in the studios suggest that the creative process itself may be essential to produce great work. While artists often refine their practice in private, much of our growth and development... is public. Furthermore, there isn't a formula that can be used to build an effective team.

I share this with my faculty and staff as an acknowledgement of the situation we are in of building a new school and sticking to our mission, which is AMI Montessori in the public sector. As an invitation to be in a safe, messy place together and as we practice our arts and produce great work, I expect these things of the staff, always:

- Assume good intentions! Everyone is here because they care deeply and want what is best for the children. If something isn't going well, consider, "What did that person probably intend?" Invite a conversation to seek understanding and proceed from there. Don't assume anything else! Confirm understanding between you and your team members and don't act on assumptions other than assuming good intentions.
- Speak directly to people who are involved in what you have to say. Gossip, or speaking about another staff

member when that person is not present, has absolutely no place at Cornerstone. Our work is too hard and we need each other's support too much to create a space where people feel unsafe or vulnerable.

In terms of their work with the children, we have these expectations:

- We work towards absolute consistency with the children. This happens most easily when we are not directing children, telling children, scolding children, managing children's problems, but instead, referring the children to the system of freedoms balanced with responsibility and to our agreements.
- We do not yell. If we yell at the children they will certainly continue to yell at each other and us. If we yell at the children, we are compromising, if not completely undoing on the spot, the trust many of them are so gradually gaining in us. If we yell, we are destroying the opportunity we have to show the child the utmost respect, which will leave huge gaping holes in establishing all that we've spoken about thus far. The children must feel something different from us. Leon spent a lot of time with me, as you all know. One day he came into my office after lunch and sat, fuming, with his elbows on his knees and head in his hands. "Aw, Miss Liesl. When you gonna just yell at me and get it over with?!" I glanced up from my work and smiled. Before returning my attention to my work, I said, "We're not taking the easy route, Leon. Besides, I would never treat you that way. Take your time and let me know when you are ready to chat."
- We do not lecture. When we lecture, we are gradually teaching the child to tune out adults. We are robbing the child of an experience from which to learn. We are robbing the child of an opportunity to reason through to his own solution. We are robbing the

child of growth in the very area we so desperately wish he would grow.

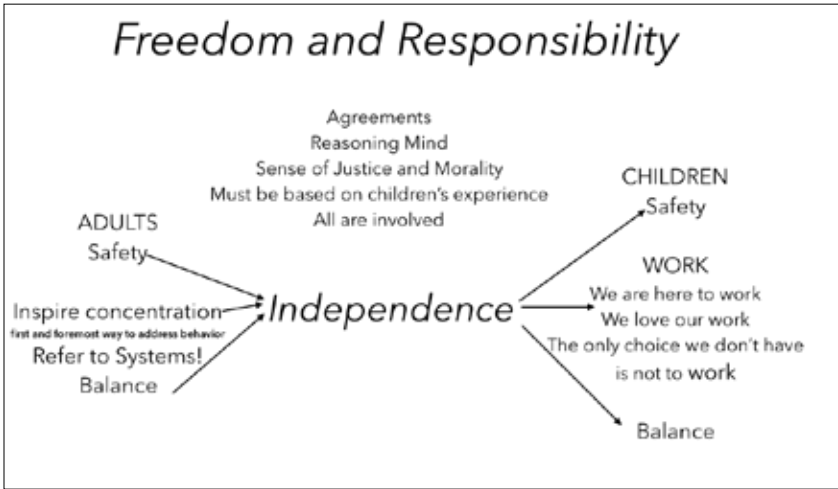
- We allow a child time and space to calm herself before we address behavior. We empathize and comfort before we address behavior.
- We validate feelings! The effect is almost magic for an escalated, embarrassed, angry, sad, or traumatized child when a trusted adult simply validates what the child is experiencing. So often a child in crisis is yelling, “I don’t want to do this or I don’t want to do that...” and the whole thing is so easily diffused by just saying, “I know. I know you don’t. When you are calm you can tell me about it and I will listen. I’ll sit here until you are ready.” Or with older children, “I know. I see. You know I’ll listen to you when you are ready; do you want space or does it feel good to have me near right now?”
- Think inclusion, inclusion, inclusion! Most children who are struggling with trauma and crisis, or who have special needs, are in extra need of a supportive community and of knowing they have an important role in that community. So often, though, these are the children who are repeatedly sent out of their classroom communities. There are times when children come out of their communities at Cornerstone, though we like that to be a last resort or to be instigated by the child as a way to help herself calm down proactively before a problem occurs. Many children have systems set up with their guides allowing them to walk out of their rooms and into various other areas of the school such as the greenhouse, a room called The Nest, the sunny table in the main hall, or my office, to “reset” and get ready to go back to their rooms and keep working.
  - Our actions and words must convey to the child, every moment, what we believe:



- All children are good.
- Poor choices are separate from a lovely child.
- Mistakes are OK! We use them in work and behavior to learn from.
- When you are struggling, it never changes my high opinion of you.
- Every day is new. I will never ever give up on you.

There is a quick reference chart [on the following page] we use as a reminder of the adult roles in the school. In the middle are key ideas for the adults to remember while working with elementary children. To the left the adults can see that it is their role, in whatever capacity they are serving, to monitor safety, inspire concentration, support balance, and refer children to the systems they helped establish in their classrooms. This is all to foster independence so that the children may begin to do these things for themselves.





On the flip side of the chart, we have a list of phrases we do *not* want to say:

- I need you to...
- I want you to...
- How many times have I told you to...
- We don't \_\_\_\_.
- What are you doing?
- Why are you \_\_\_\_?

We also have a list of things that work much better when guiding children to use their system of justice:

- I noticed it's time for you to...
- I'm concerned for your safety.
- We have an agreement about \_\_\_\_.
- I'd like to share an observation with you.

- Please reconsider the choice you are making.
- You have a responsibility ~ can you fix this?
- How are you doing?
- Do you need any support?

With regards to work, instead of saying “I’ll give you a hint” try saying, “What is your material telling you?” Support with your hands in your lap, not on the child’s work and use prompting questions. Instead of this, which is all about the adult: “I need you to get your work journal and show me what you’ve done today,” consider this: “It is time for you to get your work journal and check to see if you balanced your choices today.” Frederick is telling about his weekend football game, literally at the top of his lungs, at lunch. Instead of, “Frederick we don’t yell,” consider this, smiling and sharing in the excitement: “Frederick, you are so excited. Remember your responsibility about how to communicate in here with all the people...” Then when he ducks his head slightly, knowingly, and continues his story a little bit quieter you can give him a subtle thumbs up; he has corrected it instead of the adult. This may seem like a little thing, but I assure you it is not.

We want to help our support staff and all adults working with the children to understand that we are working towards longer-term goals. If there are paper scraps on the floor, for example, rather than telling every child to pick up ten scraps we might ask the children to look all around and see if they are feeling really pleased with the way they are leaving their environment for the day, or ask if everyone has carried out their responsibilities. We would prioritize a few scraps, working towards an independent desire to care for their room, over giving the children an order that accomplishes all the scraps being off the floor but does nothing to support the children’s growth towards independently caring for their environment. We will embrace the messiness that comes with prioritizing long-term independence in making good choices for oneself, over blind obedience and it is important that we share these ideas with our support staff.

## SEEKING THE SUPPORT OF OTHER EXPERTS

The entire community has benefited from some exceptional workshops by some exceptional people. Four years ago, Jodi Pfarr presented to us on “Understanding the Cycle of Generational Poverty.” Staff has asked repeatedly to have her back and I cannot recommend her highly enough.

The staff has studied together with our school psychologist and the social worker from our partner program to learn about secondary trauma and raising awareness of and participation in staff and self-care practices. Staff has also begun studying the work of Dr. Ross Greene, a clinical child psychologist and author of the book, *Lost at School*, which we have been reading together. Dr. Greene was the keynote speaker at the AMI Refresher Course; it was an experience similar to hearing Dr. Travis Wright speak the year before in that Dr. Greene’s approach to supporting children who struggle is completely in line with what we believe about children. Dr. Greene has given us a bit more structure in the form of tools and systems to support the work we are already set up so well to do.

Learning about the effects of trauma and crisis on a child’s ability to access education is critical as we go forward with the mission of increasing access to high-quality Montessori programs for all. Our children are in crisis. Administration, guides, and support staff must have access to expertise for increased understanding of how to best support our children. We were so fortunate to have Dr. Travis Wright visit last year after we heard him speak at the Refresher Course! He spent an entire day helping us more deeply understand the effects of trauma on children’s behavior, sharing story after story to help us understand why the behavior happens as well as things we can do to decrease the likelihood of the behaviors. He helped us understand the effects of trauma on a child’s ability to sequence as well as understand cause and effect, two skills critical for success in school, and gave us tips for specifically addressing those deficits with our children. We learned also, and perhaps most importantly, that what constitutes trauma and crisis for an individual, is individual!

High-quality Montessori programs must become leaders in analyzing everything we do through a lens of antibodies and then infuse our programs with a truly antibody approach. We have been reading

and working with Lisa Delpit's book *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, which I also highly recommend. The book has inspired staff to continue the work we started in training has inspired us to look very closely at ourselves and our biases and work to shed them in our approach and in our interactions with every single child every single time.

To open a safe space and engage in excellent conversation as a community, parents and staff recently enjoyed a powerful presentation by Alicia Sojourner, who is a racial equity consultant manager at the YWCA here in Minneapolis. She spoke to us about the developmental stages of understanding race, racism, and how to have healthy conversations with children of different ages. Sojourner also began work with staff and parents prompting us to look more deeply at ourselves relative to understanding race and racism. We are currently deciding how to continue this work together and, again, I cannot recommend the work of these women highly enough; it has profoundly affected and will continue to affect our work in every way.

In our first year of operation, several of us had the opportunity to hear Dr. Robert Anda present his research on adverse childhood experiences. According to Dr. Anda's Adverse Childhood Experiences



study, children who are exposed to adverse childhood experiences may become overloaded with stress hormones, leaving them in a constant state of arousal and alertness to environmental and relational threats. Children understandably have difficulty focusing on schoolwork, and consolidating new memory, making it harder for them to learn at school. In the same presentation, he explained that significantly high levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, over time can even be passed on to a child in utero. Dr. Anda said that it was as if a little piece of DNA would get pulled out of line, crumpled up, and then put back in with wrinkles—perhaps in the same spot and perhaps in a different spot. The implications of this are utterly disheartening; we must embrace the work of serving not only the children but their parents who may be traumatized as well. You can access more information about the ACE Study at the following site <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html>

### **When Something Goes Wrong**

When we are working through a significant issue or struggle with the child, it can never be about what is wrong with the child or the parent. Guides must consider deeply the possible roles of:

- the environment
- themselves
- the other adults

In addition, we must never forget to *ask the child!* Children have so very much to offer us in our approach with them both directly and indirectly.

Sheylinn was working very hard to follow her behavior and work choices plan; she had had a rough start at Cornerstone and over a long period of time, after trying different approaches, we settled on a plan that she would share with her parents at the end of the day, at her parents' request. After a day or so, Sheylinn was frustrated by a presentation and began going around the room tipping over chairs. Her guide got out her behavior plan; Sheylinn noticed right away and asked the guide what he was doing. He gently reminded her that he was recording her poor behavior

choices. She was still and quiet for a moment and then said, "Are you recording the good things I do, too?"

### THE PREPARED ENVIRONMENT

It is necessary to share with our support staff the importance of the prepared environment. A school environment that is well-prepared to serve all children must have several prepared spaces. At Cornerstone we have a couple designated places to which the children can run when they are feeling escalated and unable to cope in their regular environment. The children also have access to the greenhouse, my office, and the sunny spot in the main hallway. Almost all of our work with the specialists is done by having them push in to the classroom as opposed to pulling children out. We do have a lovely smaller room where the specialists can take smaller groups or individual children when that best supports the child's needs. All of these additional spaces are prepared with the same attention to the principles of beauty, simplicity, and order we give our classroom environments. Children who are feeling terrible will feel much less so in a beautiful space; we must never underestimate the importance of lovely space, well-prepared to meet our children's needs.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIP

The impact of the environment and the relationship to the trained teacher and with peers in the environment cannot be overstated. Community violence, drugs, and institutional poverty destabilize families and children. A sense of belonging and accountability to their friends and community creates an atmosphere that fosters connection and respect. In turn, this enables the child to find greater peace and engage with materials and activities in order to learn.

I sincerely hope that everyone has had an opportunity to read *Children Who are Not Yet Peaceful* by Donna Bryant Goertz; she has given us all a treasure!

If the group dynamic does not allow for any child to fail to thrive, if the group's integrity and inclusiveness invites healing and growth, and if each child is genuinely wanted, loved and supported by children and adults, does life become simple and easy ever after? No. Every day the guide, the assistant and the children [and in our case all of the support adults] work vigorously to bring out the

best in each other and themselves. Working in this way adds an entirely new dimension to the curriculum. Now the teacher is dealing with relationships as a part of the core curriculum.





She goes on to quote from *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than I.Q.* The author, Daniel Goleman,

emphasizes how crucial this focus is: emotional literacy expands our vision of the task of schools themselves, making them more explicitly society's agent for seeing that children learn these essential lessons for life—a return to a classic role for education. This larger design requires, apart from any specifics of curriculum, using opportunities in and out of class to help students turn moments of personal crisis into lessons of emotional competence. (Goertz 7-8)

At Cornerstone we are in our first year of implementing school-based mental health services precisely to capitalize on these moments. The effect we are already seeing on the entire program is profound.

We must not underestimate how rich our environments are for this kind of development. Montessori children are known for their emotional intelligence! These lessons are even more important (and there are more opportunities for them) for children in crisis or struggling with other aspects of development. Developing relationships with the children and fostering their strong relationships amongst each other and with the other adults is the absolute foundation for all of the other hard work we have to do together.

#### OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PARENTS

We must treasure our relationships with the parents; they are of utmost importance, especially when we are working with a family of a child in crisis or struggling in another way. We must orient the parents to all that we have oriented the children to with regards to our unique program and approach. We must establish partnerships grounded in trust and honest, open, two-way communication.

I called Jacy's parents and requested a meeting about half way through the school year. I was struggling significantly to support Jacy. Her behavior was relatively calm and she accepted redirection sometimes and then for long periods of time her behavior was extremely escalated and dangerous. I had only met her mom once, briefly, and felt worried about a meeting that was likely to be hard when we had literally no relationship. Jacy's mom, Denise, con-

firmed that she would be at the meeting. She had no way to know how invested I was in supporting her daughter's success in, and enjoyment of, school. Denise arrived for the meeting; she was quiet and her dark eyes looked guarded at best and, at worst, possibly full of pain and maybe distrust. I asked her if she was comfortable and she said she was fine. I was very tense. It was quiet for a moment. Suddenly it became clear to me what I wanted to say; what I wanted her to know: "Denise, thank you for coming. We have to have a hard meeting. I asked you to come here and work with me so we can help Jacy feel good at school and get the most out of her days here. I want to be able to talk openly about some of the things she's been doing and saying and it's important you know that I don't consider her to be "in trouble." I want to help her. I don't have a drop of judgment towards you." I was going to keep going and Denise began talking, her eyes instantly brimming with tears. She told me that everyone in her family judges her for being gone at work when her girls need her. She said her whole family is against her and no one thinks about the fact that it is she alone who is paying rent, buying groceries and clothes, and working two grueling jobs to do so. I asked her details about her work and her schedule and she talked and talked. We began talking about Jacy. We had an amazing exchange about what Jacy's days were like at school and what her time was like at home. We connected and laughed about Jacy's personality and love for science. Denise shared openly with me that the things Jacy was saying were flashbacks from a violent incident she had witnessed between she and Jacy's dad. Both of us cried. I learned there was a social worker we could reconnect with and draw on for support, and this was the beginning of an incredible relationship with an amazingly strong woman who taught me so very much over our years of working together with her children. Most importantly, she taught me to risk being absolutely present with our parents—honest, open, vulnerable—so that we can be in a relationship grounded in trust as we work together in our efforts to support our most struggling children.

Shacora told her friend at school that her cousin raped her three times on the weekend. He was visiting family over Memorial day. Shacora's mother was rocking on the floor of the office after relaying the news. I couldn't bear it. I put out my arms and said, "You

are not alone. You are not alone. We are all bound by how much we care about Shacora,” and with that she curled into my arms.

The beginning of last school year brought many challenges for Andreas. With many new children in Andreas’ environment needing lots of attention, Andreas’ community felt very different to him. Expectations were higher too, and peer relationships, now becoming so important as a five year old, were equally harder to navigate. Andreas’ behavior was explosive and unsafe. After a particularly hard morning for Andreas, Carlton, his father, and I were talking in my office: “Ya’ll aren’t thinking about not having him here, are you?” I was surprised. “Carlton, we are absolutely not in here talking about kicking your little guy out of school. We, you guys, and his teacher and I, are making a little net around him and we are not going to let him fall through. I will probably have to call you a lot for the next few days and then it will get better. That’s what we are talking about; we’ve got him.” Carlton asked, “Can I be here at school? Do you need volunteers? I’ll do anything.”

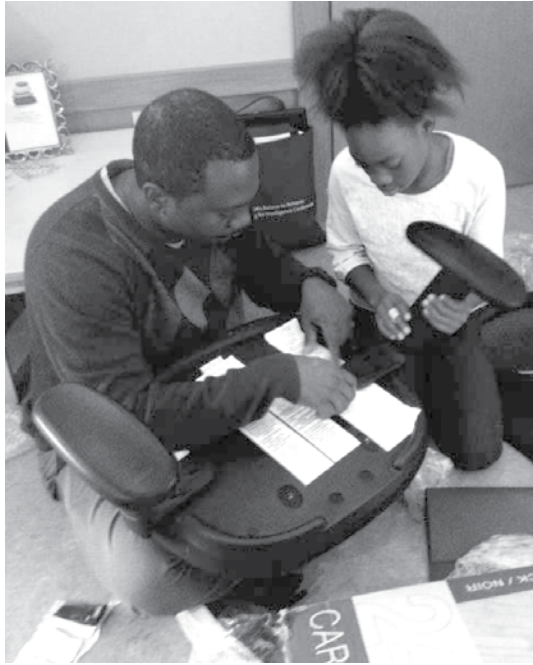
Andreas’ parents were at school every day for a couple weeks to talk with Andreas and support him proactively. At school we



observed carefully and documented antecedents to behavior and learned that most of Andreas' struggles stemmed from his fierce sense of justice for his friends, his attachment to his teacher, and his sensitive and compassionate nature. (Andreas can often be seen helping a younger child button an apron or slip a heel into the back of a tricky shoe.) At home, Carlton and Linda adjusted schedules and changed routines allowing for more downtime for Andreas and an even more consistent bedtime; they read stories to Andreas that inspired conversation and skill building around understanding his emotions and friends. Linda came to school one day when Andreas was lying on his tummy in the office crying; she knelt down and Andreas sobbed, "You are going to be mad at me." Linda said, "Andreas, look at my face. It isn't a mad face. I'm here to help you feel better," and the situation instantly turned calm and productive. On another occasion Carlton visited with Andreas in my office, holding his hand and reminding Andreas that he was smart, so smart and strong and strong enough to choose safe ways to have all his feelings at school.

Over and over Andreas was hearing and experiencing that his parents believe in him. Time and time again, Carlton and Linda sought resources and expertise and engaged in invaluable, heartfelt conversations about how to support their son. In one such conversation, Carlton welled up in tears: "My young black son has to be successful in school. I lost my dad when I was a kid. If something happens to me tomorrow I have to know Andreas will be successful in school. I was thinking back to what my dad did and I would've gotten a whooping. How can I whoop him when I'm teaching him not to hit? How do I do this?"

I told Carlton that I believed all the pieces were in place for Andreas to thrive. I let him know that it is an honor to work with his family; to witness such intention, honesty, and absolute dedication in seeking resources, sharing knowledge with regards to their son, and putting it all into practice for his benefit. The behaviors we were concerned about were melting away. More importantly, the impact of such a strong partnership with the parents bringing so very much themselves in wisdom, experience, time, and love most of all, will have a profound and lasting impact on Andreas' success in school and overall well-being.



Sadly, we had a terribly violent incident in one of our classrooms this fall. Thankfully no one was seriously injured, though the children were extremely upset after witnessing the incident, seeing their teacher so upset, and being evacuated to the outside. After hours of processing with all staff, calling the parents of the child involved, and consulting with our lawyer, I composed and sent the notice to the parents of the children in the classroom.

I was worried about their responses. Here is what the parents said,

- “Thank you for keeping us updated and informed, Liesl. Glad you are working with the kids and taking care of [the teacher], as well. Please let us know if we can do anything else to help!”
- “Thank you for your thoughtful response. [Our son] has said he was scared, and we have talked to him about it. Anything [my wife] and I can do to support [our son, the classroom, the teacher, and you] please do not hesitate to contact us. Thanks again!”

- “Thanks for taking such great care of our kids and for you and the staff keeping them safe.”
- “Thank you for the update. [My son] told me what happened and we were able to process in a healthy way. He was more mad than scared as the child took his work during breakdown. We talked about compassion and how when people are out of control it is then they need the most understanding and help from their community. Good discussions. The silver lining to all these incidents in life...we can learn and gain greater understanding for the human condition. We are all doing the best we can with the tools we have procured.”
- “My heart goes out to child and family tonight. Hopefully they can learn and progress from this incident. I am glad no one was hurt. Slow and steady. We are all on a journey. [My son] and I wish her peace and self-compassion.”
- “We talked about it quite a bit, and I suggested that [the teacher] was probably sad because she was concerned for the child having a hard time and for all the children. We told [our daughter] tonight that [their teacher] will be resting tomorrow and that you’ll be there.”
- “Thank you for your care and concern and for the extra attention for the children. I’ll be keeping [the teacher] and all of [the classroom] in our thoughts and prayers.”

I feel humbled and honored every day to work with people who have such wisdom to offer, not only in our work with their own children, but to the community and program as a whole.

### **In Conclusion**

When the weight of this whole big work washes over and consumes me, I think of the children. I think of their voices singing their many songs...of the light in their eyes...of their awesome dance moves...

their resilience...the depth of compassion and understanding they are capable of showing each other when given the skills and the space.

There are some children in our school who live very privileged lives. Many of the children in our school are in the midst of ongoing crisis from living in severe poverty; others have experienced significant trauma from witnessing their uncle stab their father, to living in a car for weeks, to rape, to caring for parents with severe mental illness, to being involved in acts of violence in their neighborhood, to being held at gunpoint, and on and on...

We have learned so much about how trauma affects children's abilities to feel safe and learn at school and, yet, they come to school and shed so very much to engage in working *so hard*; they laugh, they learn to make friends, they care for younger children and each other. They also struggle, they scream, they run, they swear, they break things. In all of their loveliness and complication they need, and so deserve, for their adults to be one hundred percent invested in this work. They need us to do better, dig deeper, and challenge ourselves, a fraction of the challenge they overcome each day, to give them our very, very most-genuine best. Of course it is hard work; our children will tell us, though, that we are people who can do hard things!

Children are human beings to whom respect is due, superior to us by reason of their innocence and of the greater possibilities of their future. (Maria Montessori)

#### REFERENCES

- Aguilar, Elena. *The Art of Coaching Teams: Building Resilient Schools that Transform Communities*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2016.
- Delpit, Lisa. *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. New York, NY: The New Press, 2006.
- Goertz, Donna Bryant. *Children Who Are Not Yet Peaceful*. Berkeley, CA: Frog Books, 2001.
- Greene, Ross. *Lost at School: Why Our Kids with Behavioral Challenges are Falling Through the Cracks and How We Can Help Them*. New York, NY: Scribner, 2014.

