

## WORKING WITH YOUR ASSISTANT

By Shannon Helfrich

In most pre-school Montessori classrooms, there are two adults responding to the needs of the child. Dr. Montessori would most likely consider this too many adults for a group of 20-25 children. However schools in most states are bound by the day care codes or education statutes mandating a specific adult-child ratio and authorities are reticent to vary from this standard regardless of the nature of the program. For Montessorians the challenge is to accommodate this situation in a manner that still frees the children to act on their own behalf, fostering functional and social independence, while at the same time utilising the expertise of the second person. This may require education and adaptation on the part of both adults.

There are four keys to success in a pre-school class with two adults: • establishing a working relationship between the guide and the assistant, • clearly defining the roles and expectations, • modelling behaviours and manner of interacting with children, • utilising the skills and abilities of the assistant in ways that preserve his/her self efficacy.

First and foremost is the establishing of the working relationship. Some guides participate in the interviewing and hiring of their assistant, others do not have that opportunity. It is my experience that neither approach guarantees success.

The question is how and where does a solid working relationship begin? It begins before school starts and the children arrive. Most programs have a period of weeks prior to the arrival of the children that is intended for the preparation of the environment and the building of the school community. This is a great time to get to know your assistant. Engage them in creating the environment. This can accomplish a number of purposes: • a bit of basic philosophy can be shared while explaining why the environment is arranged as it is and how this benefits the children, • this can be a time to discuss how the environment is cared for, • it is a time to discover specific areas of interest or talent that the assistant brings to the class community, • this can be a time to discuss together the routines for the first few days and the routines that will provide a structure for the children's interactions.

Take your assistant shopping as you purchase those last few things needed for the beginning of the school year. This is a more relaxed and casual time when you can get to know each other a little. The value of communication cannot be overly emphasised here!

As the year begins, establish a time and routine for communication with your assistant throughout the year. Failing to plan and organise for this aspect of on-going communication is dangerous. Most of us believe that we will make time for whatever needs to be discussed without any overt structure. This usually leads to a lack of communication and the escalating of difficult situations because there is no forum for discussion built in on a regular basis. This is too important to leave it to chance! Some guides plan a set time daily or at least weekly for discussion, others offer the assistant a notebook in which the assistant can record observations of things she enjoyed, things that bothered her, things that are confusing and about which he/she would like clarification or has questions. Sometimes, the guide's response could be written directly in the notebook and didn't require further dialogue, but many times it brought issues to the surface or to the attention of the guide at the very time the dialogue was critical. These are only two ideas of things that can be done to foster on-going communication. Each guide needs to find his/her own format. What is important is that you have one!

The second task is that of defining roles and expectations. Many a new guide responds to this by saying, "But I don't know what I want the assistant to do." Even if this seems common or appropriate for a new teacher, it is fraught with danger. The guide is the one Montessori trained

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adult in the environment. It is the guide's responsibility to create the basis for a harmonious atmosphere. Even more important, the assistant can't feel confident and secure in their interactions with the children or the guide, if the expectations are a hidden or undefined agenda. We many times function with the erroneous assumption that she'll just know what to do and how I wish it to be done. Certainly, our expectations have to be appropriate to the needs of the group and how they are best served by the two adults. Some assistants are best suited to doing observations and having limited direct interactions with the children. Other assistants have learned, or are learning, the techniques for interacting and take on a much more active role in the environment. A lot depends upon the individual's personality and background. Regardless, think through completely the roles and responsibilities of the assistant. Show where the materials are that will be needed, just as we would do with the children. This brings us to the third challenge.

This challenge requires modelling for the assistant those behaviours and patterns of interacting that we ourselves model and in turn, wish the children to adopt. Where to be during the morning greeting and entrance procedures, how to greet, and how to offer help when it is needed. Social interactions are the life blood of a smoothly running preschool classroom wherein the adults and the children apply their "grace and courtesy". The children learn from both adults what to say in certain interactions and situations. If we offer a mixed message, we leave them confused and the assistant feeling incompetent or humiliated. It is impossible to anticipate each and every situation that is going to occur during the year, but we can be prepared for those common occurrences encountered in all groups of children. One of the most important things we can model is how not to intervene when children do not need our help. It can be a new learning experience for many assistants to know when to stay out of the way, or how not to attract attention to the adult, thus stimulating independence, It is no small task to overcome our natural instinct to "help".

It may sound to this point as if we have established a strong framework for a non-functioning assistant. As most of us know, the assistant can be a great asset to the class community. This brings us to the fourth challenge: that of using the talents and interests of the assistant for the benefit of the community. At the beginning of the year, that extra pair of hands are vital. New children require great attention from the guide as they are helped to orient to this new place. The assistant can be a help in helping the older children settle into work choices while the guide attends to the new child. At the beginning of the year, there are fewer children who are independent in getting their own supplies especially for practical life related activities. This is one area where the extra hands are critical.

As the year progresses and the group becomes more self-sufficient, the assistant's role will change. I'm not sure if this is the right moment to insert one of my well-known "soap-boxes", but I am going to anyway. There are really only two things that assistants may not do: these are give presentations and serve as class disciplinarian. The assistant is not trained to do presentations and has not spent time honing the analysed movements necessary to connect children to the materials. To then assign the assistant to the role of class disciplinarian so you are freed to do presentations is just as inappropriate. It is the guide's responsibility to define, establish within the group and follow through on the limits and behaviours appropriate to the group. It is the guide who models these behaviours and attitudes and who is trained to build this atmosphere as a part of creating and maintaining the environment. Beyond these two "shall not's", there is great diversity in the things that the assistant can do and these activities are at the discretion of the individual guides. I am reluctant to give any list of possible activities, as there are so many strong opinions about what assistants can and should do. However, let me offer you some possibilities to think about. Assistants, within the parameters of their own comfort zones and abilities can do these types of activities: • Read to children; • Sing songs with the children, or teach new songs that they have checked out with you for appropriateness; • Listen and Do language games, once they have learned the technique and use your guidelines for different levels of vocabulary; • Bring Me games in language or mathematics; • Story problems as summaries of decimal system operations with golden beads; • Naming language cards or map pieces • Writing slips for those children who are practicing reading • Telling true stories • The Sound Game, after you have assessed his/her ability

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to articulate the phonemes and to mix a variety of experience levels according to the makeup of the group of children; • Assisting the guide with the organisation of outdoor activities – either in the garden or in the play areas.

These are all activities that involve direct interaction with the children. As the group becomes more able to meet their own needs, these more active roles diminish.

Here are some ideas for the assistant that do not involve direct interaction with the children: • Material-making – this can be a great help in a class, especially in keeping the language area alive; • Assisting with the initial preparations of snack and/or lunch, even though the children may be able to do much of the work after the initial gathering; • Assisting the guide with the care and maintenance of the prepared environment. This is a never ending task and requires two sets of hands, although I have had groups of children who were incredibly eager and efficient in taking on this role.

All in all, your assistant can become a great companion as you journey together with the children. We talk of the pre-primary environment as a Children's House. In a smoothly running class, the children feel as if they have two loving, sensitive, caring "caretakers" who are there to assist them along their path. Just like parents, we serve best when we facilitate and can avoid being an obstacle to the process unfolding in front of us.

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