

# FORZA VITALE!

*Teaching in The Time of Covid*



WINTER 2022  
OREGON MONTESSORI ASSOCIATION



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## LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR:

We asked for reflections on teaching in the time of COVID, and you answered. We received multiple submissions - some long form, some short paragraphs, even a haiku!

As the stories in this issue lay bare, teaching in the time of COVID has been complex and transformative. Not only has it been a time of navigating the challenges and uncertainties of living and guiding children through a global pandemic, it's also been a time of grappling with the realities of systemic racial injustice and its myriad ripple effects, both collective and - as you'll read - deeply personal.

We are thankful to all of our contributors, and we are particularly grateful for the opportunity to amplify the voices of members of the global majority within our local Montessori community. Thank you for sharing your stories.

*Francesca Lowes*

Francesca Lowes  
Executive Director  
Oregon Montessori Association



# THE WHIRLWIND OF UNCERTAINTY

**A Reflection on the Multiple Pandemics and Its Impact  
on the Children and Adults in Montessori Spaces**

## KEINYA KOHLBECKER

**SCHOOL ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT  
HARMONY MONTESSORI SCHOOL**

March 2020 took me for a whirlwind. I thought I was on the path to continue in the classroom as a guide, but my transformation to make systemic change in education was stirring within me. This is a reflection of my time in a 3-6 classroom in 2020–2021. Currently, I serve as an Office Administrator and coach to staff at Harmony Montessori School in Portland, Oregon. My time to leave the classroom was inevitable and here is the reason why.

The uncertainty with Covid-19; our country's long history of racial injustices which resulted in the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor in 2020; the continuation of the Portland community's housing crisis; and the 2020 Presidential Election— it was a blessing to be back in the presence of the children. It was a good distraction to be present, to observe and guide the children in their development. Although, I quickly observed this was going to be a different kind of year. I saw a shift in the community of learners who were in my care.

I observed individual and small group lessons were less frequent. More collective exercises such as gathering times for stories, “listen and do”/ Simon Says games, gross motor activities and sensory play activities were encouraged to “get the wiggles out of the body.” All of this was great, however there were less opportunities to observe the entire group in their



independent work because they were relearning how to be in the classroom with each other. The children needed to be in total community with each other. They wanted to play cooperative games much of the time. There was a need to be closer to one another— within six feet— and offer hugs. Practical Life activities such as food preparation were packed away indefinitely, which was a huge part of our work in previous years. Overall, there was a need for more tactile experiences. Friendly hugs would give way to pushes, then wrestling. Grace and Courtesies, as always, were a part of the classroom culture, and it continued to be the culture— more now than ever. The presence of multiple plush toys and fidgets were living on the shelves instead of Golden Beads, to feed their sensory needs and to feed their souls.

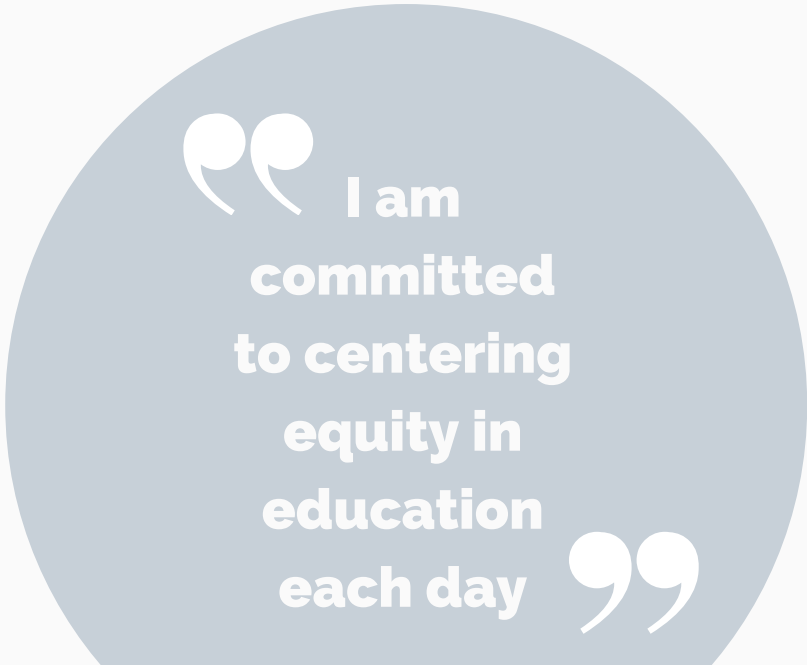
The need for plush toys and fidgets meant that social and emotional needs were urgently met during this time. Children grieved the lack of Montessori materials to nourish the hand and mind. They grieved the drastic changes of eating in solitude at their own tables, instead of the banquet style of sitting with many children, something we did in the previous school year. We learned how to wear a mask throughout the day, and be physically distanced.

Then, another interruption occurred with the week of forest fire smoke and poor air quality. Our school closed, once again, with the looming feeling of uncertainty we had in March 2020. My goal was to remain a consistent presence for the children. It was a big role to fill, even with various support staff supporting me in the space. The children, I believed, felt my energy waning. I was tired and drained. I had my own family living through this pandemic. My spouse was working from home while my young adolescent son navigated distance learning. They also needed my attention, however, the children adapted to the

changes, as did my family, and carried on as best as we could.

I was tired. One year after the beginning of the pandemic, I hired a new assistant and things started to feel more aligned with what I'd hope was a more stable remainder of the year. Things felt like they were falling into place. I could start fresh after spring break and re-introduce more Montessori materials to the children, but the unexpected happened again. A neighborhood sewer main pipe broke, flooding our school, and damaged three of five classrooms (my classroom was impacted). I prepared to say goodbye to the materials that were in the classroom. Years of children touching the beautiful wooden materials were potentially gone. My diverse collection of books was possibly gone. Our building was deemed inhabitable and there were no clear dates of if or when we'd be able to return to the building.

In this time of uncertainty, I had a deep feeling in the pit of my stomach. I knew that we were experiencing another shift and I could not figure out what that shift would be for Harmony Montessori. For several weeks, we went back to virtual learning and staff worked together to find another site. We got to work! We found a vacant



**“ I am  
committed  
to centering  
equity in  
education  
each day ”**



school in Portland's Rockwood neighborhood, and leased the building from the school district for several months. During this time, I saw the greater Montessori community in Oregon reach out to support our program with a myriad of donations. I no longer felt uncertain about my materials from the old site (including my albums) being lost in the sewage. The universe was sending me a message that all was okay because the children and their families were safe and my colleagues were safe. In late April 2021, we returned to in-person learning in our new building with different furniture, new art supplies, and some donated Montessori materials. Again, the children grieved, but adapted and oriented themselves to their new surroundings as best as they could in this situation.

It came to my attention that I could no longer make the systemic change in education that I wanted to see from my role as a Montessori Guide. As a Black Montessorian in Oregon, I grew tired of seeing families of color and staff of color leave Montessori programs. I still remained in my role, but that was still not enough. I was tired of learning that families of color could not afford to stay in the program, they could not manage the commute to the program, or they did not feel a genuine sense of belonging at the school. I could say we are making Montessori more accessible with the state and county initiatives that make our Montessori programs affordable, but it's not necessarily the ultimate answer to diversification of students, families and staffing.

The pandemic opened the floodgates of my own questioning of Montessori as it is and made me think beyond how Montessori lessons have changed in the classroom during the pandemic or asking myself, "What kind of face mask do I use to lead a sound game?" This pandemic amplified my reliance on the human tendency of orientation and adaptation. For example, who's represented in our learning communities? Who are they exactly? How am I guiding them in their development? What is their approach to learning? How do I become a better partner in their learning? How do I become a better partner with the family to have conversations that support everyone in their child's learning journey? What resources can I share with families? Which families are not included in our community conversations? Which families are multilingual? How do we include families that are multilingual in school communication? These are just a few of the many questions that I ask myself.

In the end, I ended up transitioning out of the classroom and into an administrative role in the fall of 2021. It was not easy to leave the classroom, but I knew it was the appropriate step. Finally, many of our materials were returned to us, mixed up and out of order, but they were returned (albums included), and we purchased the building that we leased from the school district! We have a permanent home!

*To be continued...*



# TEACHING IN THE TIME OF COVID

**ANA  
VANDERPOL**

Primary Guide  
The Ivy School



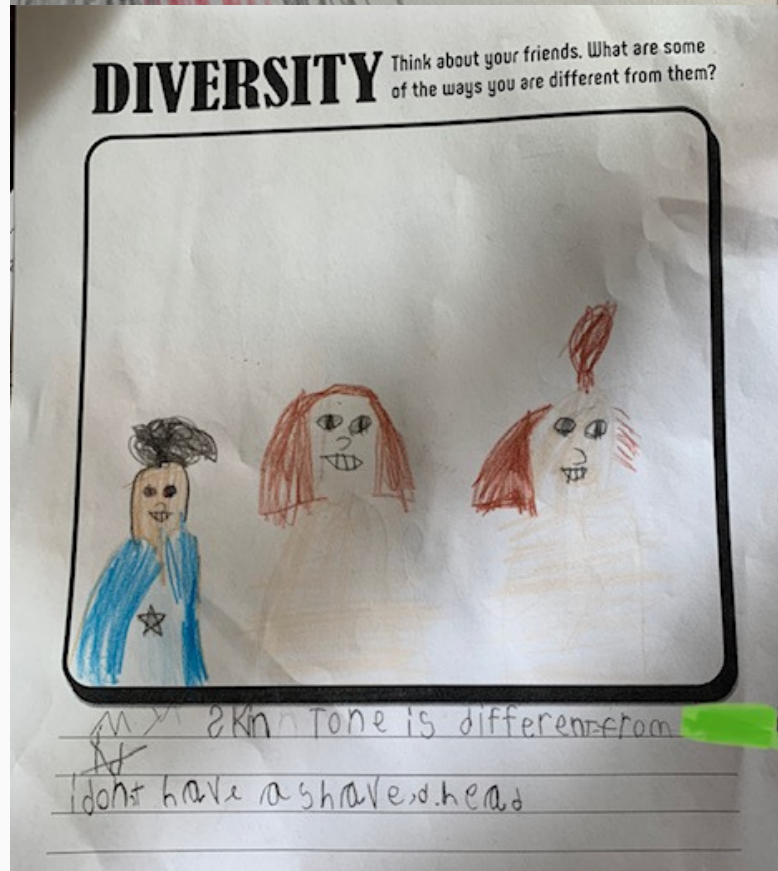
Let's be real. There is absolutely no mention of "how to handle a pandemic" in our Montessori albums. Many of us spent countless hours researching and late nights trying to figure out what "Virtual Montessori" would look like. I have to admit, I was constantly in awe of just how creative people were coming up with activities and curriculum during the early weeks of the pandemic last spring. Having to account for every minute was exhausting in a way that I hadn't experienced before and the sense of urgency was prevailing. Despite how each school managed the transition to virtual, we each had our own stories of isolation, anxiety, and family struggles that were often too painful to share. Ultimately, teaching for me in the time of COVID, and now that we're entering 2022, has been a lot about rewiring, recalibrating, and rediscovering my "why" of why I continue to be in Montessori spaces. While it feels like we're taking steps backwards as a nation, there are glimmers of hope that conversations that have happened and continue to happen are making a difference. One word, one story, one heart at a time. Even though each of us is still coping with pandemic fatigue, the real pandemic of racism and white supremacy culture are rampant in our communities, and how are we as Montessori Guides going to disrupt and show up for our students, and also for our staff?

Teaching young people about what was currently happening in the world when my own personal world and identity were unraveling proved challenging and in some ways like I lost my footing. Even as I was pulling back layers, one by one, the reality is how I'd been teaching the previous 16 years wasn't really how I wanted to continue. Something had been missing but I couldn't put my finger on it, much like I was trying to find and be the "perfect" guide. My students were very aware of the political climate



in our community, asking me direct questions like, “When are we going to talk about Slavery?” While I wasn’t surprised that the child who asked this question was desperately seeking answers, I knew this was a moment for growth and learning, not just for my student but also for me. I would have to take a deep breath and let go of “not knowing to respond” and just be present for this child. Getting caught up in social media arguments, and watching the protests of my local police precinct less than a block away from me, I had a front seat to what was happening in my community and it was all part of my learning. Little did I know that for me, teaching in the time of Covid was really about being in the driver’s seat and my own orientation to myself, or rather, reorientation to myself. With major unlearning, reframing my identity became my work as I tried to understand myself as a melanated Montessorian, a woman of the global majority, a leader and a coach and cheerleader, and ultimately as a transracial adoptee. I had nothing but time to rewire my internal systems and internal pedagogy. I realized that I had to get clear about WHO I was, to be able to show up authentically for these young children, to show them they can also show up and be who they are. And to begin to understand that the world sees me very differently than my family sees me, or even how I saw myself, was a hard but necessary truth to unpack.

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, my body downshifted and I went into full self preservation mode. Like when you’re driving a manual transmission, you can literally feel the engine slowly and have to intuit, sometimes guess, the precise time to push the clutch in to change gears. That’s how I approached these last 18 months with work. And if I’m honest, I am struggling to find the right gears for the pivot of being back in person. Initially, when Covid turned everything upside down, I watched friends and colleagues continue to push on through, to account for every





minute of the day. The urgency to solve problems in our schools and be accessible at all hours of the day rubbed me the wrong way. While I tried, I literally couldn't. Long walks to talk to my friends around the country grounded me from the chaos in my head. I started focusing on how I would be a better educator. But it started with who I was showing up as a human being and letting go of there being the perfect answer or solution.

Much like learning how to drive a stick shift, I found myself dropping the clutch a lot. I stalled out regularly and I kept on trying. I poured over articles and books on racism, white privilege, and attended workshops on what it meant to be an anti-bias anti-racist educator. Embracing my identity as a transracial adoptee was part of this learning how to shift, where **self perfection and exactness** showed up as I learned language to name experiences and feelings that I had but couldn't previously name. Every day, I kept on getting up, greeting my students each day. How had I not seen the thing that I see every day in the mirror? That the children, especially children of the global majority, in my care and their parents saw and were drawn to. How had I managed to navigate so much white space and not recognized my privilege, my white adjacent privilege? In fact, it was actually during an OMA sponsored workshop in August 2020, on "How to Talk to Kids About Race," that the fog of my identity that I had built was lifted, or

rather blown away. For over 40 years being "adopted" was just part of me, but I hadn't really fully embraced and recognized what it actually meant. I have known I was adopted since the time I was young largely due to the fact that I come from a family of adopted siblings—none biologically related. Everywhere my adopted family went, we stood out: we didn't look like our parents or each other. It's one thing to recognize you're different, but how different is quite another.

Much of my life I've searched for belonging, mostly unconscious to the impacts or the role that it played in my life. I've wondered if Montessori provided a place for me, but also struggled in communities for a variety of reasons, like that I was usually the only person of the global majority on staff. Attending the Montessori for Social Justice here in Portland in June 2019 was the first time I had seen more Montessorians of the global majority than I had ever in my 16 years of teaching. I remember sitting in the auditorium and initially felt alone because I wasn't with my coworkers, but quickly realized that the affinity space I was in made me feel more connected to myself than I had ever been before professionally. It was a powerful and life-changing moment for me to be in the company of others who looked like me and had experienced working in white spaces. I've always



had a sense of justice driving aspects of my work, not realizing the crux of why. But as I've been exploring my identities, giving language to feelings that I've had but wasn't able to name, I felt myself becoming a person of my time and place in a way that I hadn't experienced before. I know children do this and are in the process of self-construction every day. But adults can adapt as well. Just like learning how to drive, I'm finding my new rhythm and flow, confidence and groundedness. I see the colors of what is around me more vibrantly, and am trying to be open to new possibilities. And being honest about and stepping into vulnerability about how things have been for me— while not easy, it's necessary.

As I've become more aware of my own racial identity, the more I see that my voice has a place and my story matters. Not only that, but the importance of me being a teacher of the global majority in predominantly white schools matters now more than ever. I didn't have teachers that looked like me until high school. I didn't understand how that experience alone could have impacted me. A lot of times people aren't sure how to process or can't relate to me when I speak about how my experiences could have been different. But not talking about race, skin tones, or microaggressions didn't help me. I'm not

saying that I'm ungrateful for my education or the people who were cheerleaders along the way, or even being adopted. I'm just saying that if you really want to know how someone feels about it, you need to be ready to listen. Listen to a perspective that might not be what you thought. Montessori to me no longer is dipped in credentials and ceremonies. Instead I'm looking at systems of oppression, places where I can have some sphere of influence. I'm trying to give myself grace and pause and take time for rest. I'm trying to undo decades of learning that are steeped in perfectionism and one right way of doing it, particularly in the Children's House environments. It's easy to get caught up in all the beauty of materials.

But I think that it's the beauty of what teaching in the time of Covid has brought to light: that it's time to amplify the voices and perspectives that have been overlooked and discounted in our Montessori communities. And yes, we can do it out in the world by supporting causes that are in alignment with our values, but it begins with the child in our classroom who needs us to celebrate the joy of who they are as individuals. Let's have these courageous conversations and make the world a better place, one child, one teacher, one heart at a time.





we  
lead  
with  
love



# CHALLENGE ACCEPTED!

## GUIDING A CHILDREN'S HOUSE COMMUNITY WHILE THE WORLD SEEMS TO BE BREAKING

### EMILY WESTBERG

Primary Guide, The Portland  
Montessori School



We are in uncharted territory: a truly unsettling reality for any duration. After two years, it is now a seemingly endless indefinite new “normal.” “How stimulating!” the guide enthusiastically and diplomatically declared while in the presence of children. In the children’s house, we like some adventure but we are the most comfortable with certainty. We like knowing. We have our Keys to the World. We like preparing the environment in a thoughtful way that embraces the children in our care. So what are we supposed to do now that we find ourselves in this new world? I really don’t know! But I am happy to share what I’ve been playing around with in my Montessori laboratory. It boils down to my inner cheerleader who has been cheering me on with things like, “Explore! Seek joy. Stay curious. Connect deeply. Honor your needs. Trust your gut. Take care!” All choreographed to Cake’s 1996 song “The Distance.”

I take refuge in the fact that I don’t have to have all the answers in order to guide the classroom community. Montessori education operates from a set of principles that guide our practice. Using these principles gives us the freedom to step into the unknown every day. We never know what the children will show us, in what ways they will surprise us, or what occasion we will be required to rise to. Each morning we enter into our prepared environments equipped with the awareness that we are working with absorbent minds and children



whose behavior is influenced by sensitive periods of development and universal human tendencies. We approach our work by modifying the environment to match the needs of the group. How do we know what needs changing or adapting? Through observation. Whatever we do observe, is sure to stem from one of these developmental truths. Like the children, we learn through our experiences and we can adapt and evolve.

In my training, the role of practical life in normalizing the conditions of the environment was key. So I have mainly focused on how to use this area to support my classroom community through this uncertain time. I have enhanced several aspects of my practical life area including the food presentations, self care, outdoor environment; strengthened my conflict resolution method; and have become very explicit with my grace and courtesy lessons.

## FOOD PREP IN A PANDEMIC

The Portland Montessori School, where I teach, has been “in person” since September 2020. During the ‘20–’21 school year, I felt that omitting food prep work was the responsible thing to do. And oh how the children missed it! I reinvented it when I reintroduced it this school year. Each activity is now stored on a shelf at adult height. I took photographs of each activity and created a laminated photo card for each one. The photos are stored in a segmented box on the practical life shelves. When a child wants to use one, they take the photo card from the shelf and present it to my assistant, who then gives the complete and sanitized material to the child. The photo is then placed on the adult shelf while the child uses it. When the child is finished using the activity, they place it in a dish bin next to our disinfecting station. My assistant disinfects the materials before returning the activity to the adult self. As a final step, my assistant places the photo card for the respective activity back on the practical life shelf, where the next child can find it. This has worked very well for us and will likely continue into the future.



## LEARNING TO BE TOGETHER ONCE MORE– AS EASY AS COUNTING TO FOUR?

Social distancing and quarantining for the past two years have had some consequences. Children are coming to us with less social experience (outside of their families) than ever before. In my environment and those of my colleagues, there has been an observable uptick in children experiencing and expressing strong emotions (not always in safe or appropriate ways). Having a place for the children to specifically go and find ways to manage those big feelings independently or with assistance has felt relevant.



## THE SELF-CARE SHELF

I reimagined the shelf formally referred to as “care of the person,” which was previously donned with activities exclusively related to hygiene and how we maintain our outward appearance to the world. I now call it the “self-care” shelf. While still containing activities related to personal hygiene, it now contains activities that support inner wellbeing as well. I attempted to create concrete and sensorial manipulatives that could help guide a child to experiences of inner peace. I drew from several places for this: my own experiences with movement, meditation and stress management; pre-existing curricula such as the Zones of Regulation; and finally, resources I’ve developed through collaborations with occupational therapists and other specialists. Some of these materials were put together for a specific child struggling with a specific challenge. However, the rest of the children persisted in their curiosity and they seemed to benefit from the use of them too! In this way, adopting a “universal design” approach to the accessibility and use of these tools has benefited all of the children in the community. As with each material in the classroom, there is a formal presentation and clearly defined limits and expectations for the use of these materials. I rotate them as needed.



*The current state of my self-care shelf, from top to bottom and left to right: The “What Do I Need Right Now?” Chart, The Five Senses Meditation Chart; wet wipes (we use them after polishing and gluing), hair care (the children keep their own tools in their personal storage drawers), lavender face washing, nose cleaning, the breathing ball, the glitter stick, sound canceling headphones, the “make yourself a work plan” materials, and the “How Do I Feel Right Now?” chart work, yoga.*



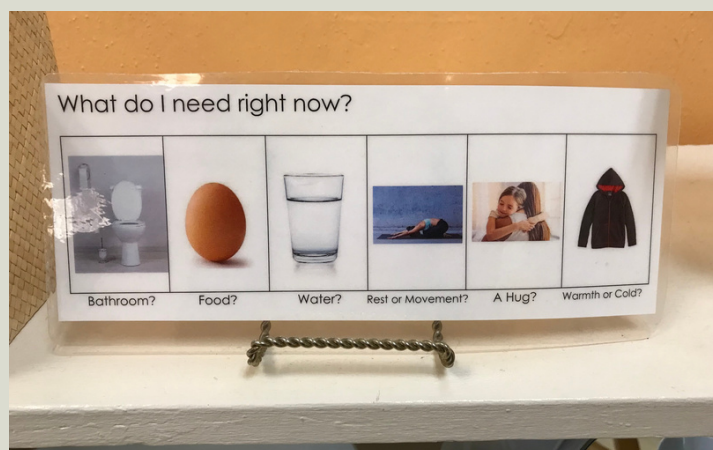
Here's a closer look at some self-care activities. Each of these are presented as group lessons in neutral times, much like a grace and courtesy presentation.



The "Five Senses Meditation" Chart is a visual aid for tuning into each sense and noticing what is happening around us. Getting "out of our feelings or heads" and back into our senses is the goal.



The Glitter Stick contains a small bubble. When you rotate the stick 180 degrees slowly, the bubble pushes its way to the top/surface and sends all the glitter into a whirlwind. Hold the stick straight up and down and observe with the children how the swirling glitter might be like how we feel sometimes. Notice how stillness allows the glitter to settle. Model slow breathing. Watch it until it is still again.



The "What Do I Need Right Now?" chart is a visual aid for prompting a child through reflection upon what basic needs (relating to functional independence) "their bodies might be trying to tell them they need."



Make a picture plan for yourself. Sometimes children do not know what to work on. I took photos of the actual materials on our shelves and laminated them. They affix them to the laminated strip using velcro. Sometimes they make a plan independently, sometimes with assistance, then use it to guide their activities during the work period. Shown above: hair care work, the decanomial square, a phonetic scavenger hunt and sewing a button.



*Our Feelings Chart is a tool I adapted from a basic feelings chart. I invite the children to check in with their feelings and choose which ones best fit them to attach (via velcro tabs) to the laminated strip. I invite the children to share this with an adult and we have a conversation around them.*



*The Breathing Ball is a jointed ball that can expand to 3 times its size. Model expanding it while taking a slow, deep breath in. Hold the ball open, then slowly breathe out while shrinking the ball to its resting size. Repeat. As interest allows, describe the similarity to our lungs or belly as we breathe.*

## MANAGING CONFLICT

Early on, it became evident that they were starving for social connection with their peers while at the same time having some difficulties managing interactions with other children. There have always been some who struggle socially so I leaned upon previous ways of helping children work through these emotions and challenges. In order to experience psychological safety, trust and understanding are paramount. We all need a sense of belonging, acceptance, and safety to learn and thrive. How do we establish that in the first place and re-establish that when something has shaken the community's sense of security?

Trust flourishes in an environment where the adults are constantly and explicitly communicating, through all of our actions, that we deeply understand that children are always doing the best they can. If they are struggling, it's because they are struggling with something and it falls upon us, the adults, to try to navigate how to best support them. So when that child who we cannot turn our backs to without something going wrong does that thing for the hundredth time, instead of thinking "Why can't they stop?!" it might be more helpful to remember, "If they could, they would!"

In my classroom, we call our mediation procedure "the peace rose." This process reflects a combination of observation, nonviolent communication (Marshall Rosenberg) and Occam's razor. Each child takes a turn holding the (artificial) rose (that lives on the language shelf when not in use) and alternates listening and speaking. I explicitly state that at the beginning of each mediation. We start by asking each child to say what they didn't like. We ask the other child what they were trying to do, followed by asking them to state



what they actually did (if they are unable to do this, we offer them the words that best reflect their actions). There is almost always a mismatch here and this is usually the crux of the conflict. Then, they state what they want the other to do differently next time. We end with agreeing to do that next time. They often need help with the language, especially if they are new to the process.

It pays to take the time to do it mindfully and to look at it as an opportunity (as the guide) to model mediation for the assistants and older children. The process seeks to understand, and models listening and reflecting back someone's words. The questions, "what were you trying to do?" and "what did you actually do?" offer a contemplative moment to compare the difference. The natural pause that almost always ensues lends itself quite well to the restating of permissions/limits/ expectations. When one of these has been transgressed in an unsafe way, we clearly send the message that "that is not ok/ allowed here/ we need this to be a safe place." Putting all the emphasis on "what we can do differently next time," is the definition of grace and practicality in action. It shows how we move past this uncomfortable moment while providing clear guidance for future action. We can then revisit the agreement as needed.

When the misunderstanding/conflict/ transgression was not directly observed by an adult, it can get confusing. Enter Occam's Razor: the principle that in explaining a thing, no more assumptions should be made than are necessary. I then might gather information from the older children who may have seen what happened. Children often spontaneously gather to listen and observe and are eager to contribute to the peace process, letting us know if someone misperceived what actually happened. They are hungry for models of handling conflict calmly. At times, we have to send observers on their way as the parties involved may be sensitive to the presence of others. More often than not, this peer-initiated, adult led/ supervised mediation resolves the upsets and the problem seldom recurs between the same children. The longer a child is with us, the more independent they tend to become with this process.

## **GRACE AND COURTESY**

Grace and courtesy lessons have always been an integral part of managing and setting expectations for how we interact together. We lean on these lessons during conflict mediation, knowing that the children have already experienced them. In Montessori education, where we understand that we should not seek to control children (nor would we want to as their developing will is their volition and we seek to support the natural emergence of independence in every child), we understand that we control the environment. Tending to the absorbent minds in our care means we are aware (through intentional observation) of what social dynamics are at play in our space. We are aware of the actual concrete images of social interactions, even when they might not match what we are trying to do. Our job is to figure out what we need to do differently or what images need bolstering to preserve harmony and build toward a progressively more sophisticated and peaceful social community.

My list has expanded and become very explicit in the past two years. Things that children picked up effortlessly through experience in the past are now things that we have to isolate and break down into smaller bite-size pieces for them to digest.

# EMILY'S GRACE AND COURTESY LESSONS

## ON "REPEAT" FOR 2021–2022

- How to wave hello to greet someone (vs. handshake)
- How to respond to someone when they ask you a question
- How to make sure someone knows you're talking to them before you speak
- How to get someone's attention
- How to show you have an idea in a gathering (raise your hand) and wait to be called upon
- How to sit in one place in a gathering
- How to choose a place to sit where there's enough room and space around you in a gathering
- How to make space in a line (or in a gathering, at a table lesson, at a rug lesson...)
- How to tell someone, "No thank you," or "No more help is needed."
- How to ask a friend if they want to play
- How to ask if you can observe someone's work
- How to ask for help
- How to ask if someone would like your help before starting to help
- How to tell someone to move along when you're trying to concentrate on something
- How to actually move along
- How to observe someone's work
- How to wait for a material that's in use, at the self
- How to ask someone if they can tell you when they're finished with something
- How to take turns
- How to pass by someone who is working
- How to politely interrupt a conversation when it's urgent
- What is an urgent situation?
- How to match the magnitude of your reaction to a situation
- How to choose a different game
- How to tell someone when you're done playing
- How to choose work
- How to choose a different path to walk
- How to leave a game
- How hard to tag and where to tag
- How to find a different person to play with
- How to ask a friend before touching their work or their body
- How to say, "Stop" in a strong voice
- How to shout "Stop!" if you are being hurt
- How to run away from someone who's making you feel unsafe, and to an adult
- How to properly wear a mask over your nose and what the parts of a mask are called
- How to remind a friend to pull up their mask
- How to ask a friend to wash hands after their hands have been inside their nose, eyes, mouth, or pants



## THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Support staff are typically the adults (often without any Montessori training) who supervise outdoor play while guides take their lunch break. While it is a difficult choice between supervising lunch or outdoor play, after several observations of both times of day, it became clear to me that the children needed me more for social guidance and leadership during the outdoor playtime.

One of the first outdoor observations I made was that the children did not seem to know what their options were during outdoor play. We have equipment such as balls, hula hoops, and wooden planks for balancing, wheelbarrows, rakes, small boulders for climbing, long logs for balancing, short logs and stumps for rolling and carrying, and small trees for climbing. However, just as in the classroom, children need a dynamic link to connect them with these activities and someone to model how to use them properly and navigate difficulties. We know what can happen when children do not know what to do or do not have a strong model to guide them: things can get chaotic quickly. Children need Grace and Courtesy lessons that specifically address the social skills they need to be successful in the outdoor environment. They also still need a reliable procedure for mediating conflict with an adult who always holds space for seeing the best in them.

Further still, I encourage mindful rough playing. Using specific limits and guidelines, I have found that vigorous games, such as tag and soccer, are deeply adored by the children and provide wonderful opportunities for the expansion of social skills. During these games I reinforce prosocial behaviors and the refinement of motor skills, explicitly acknowledging and bringing their attention to them in these neutral times. Cheering them on, we encourage them to take appropriate



and manageable risks. We invite everyone to play and try to keep both the interest and spirits of those participating elevated. We put a lot of emphasis on noticing other children's faces and reading their emotions. We talk about stopping when the fun stops, and checking to see that everyone is OK and having a good time. I model these skills while playing along.

For the first plane, it seems to work best to simplify the rules of the games. This is especially true for highly competitive games or those that involve someone being "out" and eliminating that wherever possible— instead, taking more of an "everyone gets a turn" approach. For example, we only have one team in soccer, despite using two goals. We all just try to kick the ball and can score on either goal, rotating goalies often. In tag-like games, I interrupt the game and we choose a new tagger before everyone is tagged. I include Grace & Courtesy lessons that model good sportsmanship and winning and losing. The feeling we go for is, "we're all on the same team," and we acknowledge that everyone has strengths. This type of play is ideal when the environment lacks opportunities for purposeful outdoor work. An excellent resource on rough play can be found here : [Rough Play PDF](#)



This seemed like a great moment to establish a garden in our outdoor environment. My goal was to expand our opportunities for purposeful outdoor work. After observing the space for the most direct sunlight, I collected large cardboard boxes and began the process of transforming some of the edging of the grass into a new garden. (The boxes became “slides” on the grassy hill for a week before placing them in the garden area and the children had riotous fun!) We followed a permaculture technique called the “lasagna method,” beginning in the fall with all of the leaves the children helped rake. In the spring, we had a community outdoor work party to haul the soil (which I was able to get donated) from the trailer beds to the new garden site. Every parent and child with every bucket, wagon, wheelbarrow, and shovel helped move our soil. It was the first gathering we had since the pandemic began! What a joy it was to work and be together!

We turned the soil into several garden plots including a three sisters garden, an herb garden, a flower arranging garden, a blueberry patch, a strawberry patch, a raspberry patch, a snack garden, a pollinator garden, a mushroom patch, and a pizza garden where we grow the ingredients for pizza sauce that we use in the pizza work (my kindergartners who can read are eligible for this lesson). What a feast of the senses and sciences! As a result, the most popular outdoor game the children invented and lovingly play daily is a game they call, “Baby Turtles,” a family-type of game where the mama turtle gathers lemon balm, mint, and nasturtium and feeds it to the baby turtles, who love to be cared for and eat a LOT of greens!



*Above: November 2020. In-progress: transforming lawn into garden space in-progress (cardboard boxes covered with leaves and composting matter). Below: April 2021*







*Above: June 2021. Below: September 2021*





## **DISTANCE LEARNING (SIGH...)**

During the spring of 2020, I anticipated the challenges that distance-learning would continue to present long into the future. Remember when we thought the vaccine would take years to develop? I felt perplexed on how to bridge the gap between the Montessori environment and children's homes, given that we work with concrete sensorial learners. I worked vigorously to try to translate as many of the materials as possible into printable PDFs that allowed opportunities for movement (e.g. via cut and paste). I could share these with parents via email. The language and math materials lent themselves well to this. I also created several presentations that mirrored real time lessons using Google slides. By combining these two aspects, I found that I was able to effectively work with some of the children in video conferencing lessons guiding them visually in real time while they worked with something concrete at the same time. I felt like a preschool professor. It required a lot of planning and coordinating and was a major investment of time. To share these resources, I opened Ms. Emily's Montessori Shop through TeachersPayTeachers.

While we have been in person most of the time, there have been occasional prolonged closures in which I was relieved to have these lessons prepared. I have also discovered that some of these resources make a great opportunity for repetition of a concept and something that can be sent home for the children to share their learning with their families now that we are in-person. For example, I created several series of "mini books." These are one page printables that fold into four black and white mini pages that can be colored by the children if they choose. Some of the sets include phonetic sounds of the sandpaper letters (that I now offer to the children after we have concluded new sandpaper letter lessons); phonetic mini books that offer the children exclusively phonetic words and a variety of topics to support their practice of decoding; books that focus on one phonogram at a time with minimal introduction of new puzzle words; mini counting books; stamp game books; function of words extensions; and more.

As we contemplated the return to in-person learning, we had to navigate new licensing requirements, operating at that time as an emergency childcare facility. This meant maintaining stable groups that did not interact with other groups (both children and adults). At my large school, where we have five primary classes, this required us to change some things. Where previously all the classes had shared one large playground, we created subsections and each class received their own area. Previously, we had a shared nap room where all the nappers from all the classes slept together; we now had to find space in our primary environments. Where we had been able to combine children from different classes in an aftercare clubroom, we now had to staff separate groups that remained within their classrooms. To solve this, we shifted to an All Day Montessori model. This meant that the children stayed with both the adults and the children with whom they had very well-established relationships. This meant that their environment only changed one time each day as they went outdoors (our building is not conducive to direct outdoor access, so going outside is a formal transition). This drastically reduced the number of transitions the children experienced, which should be a driving goal with young children anyway. It reminded me of the nesting model that co-parents sometimes adopt. Again, being the adults, we have more knowledge and experience. We have the ability to control certain aspects of the environment in a way that children lack. The responsibility falls on our shoulders to adapt the environment to meet the needs of the children, whatever the current moment in time demands of us. This particular shift to the All Day model has been incredibly beneficial and feels like a shift to a more truly authentic Montessori practice.



After a spring of digital learning and months of social distancing, it was such a treat to get to be together in person when the fall of 2020 arrived. It was clear everyone was happy to get out of their homes and connect with people outside of their families. We were hungry for a social life! We learned how to read people's eyes. It seemed like the laughs were deeper and the smiles bigger. Just being together felt important, despite the risks. It felt more imperative than ever to be a fully present, loving adult in the lives of the children in my care. While lessons happened, their importance took a supporting role to the goal that informed my work: that the children feel seen and safe and loved. I got to know my children better, and who they each are as people. It felt good to really take the time to connect with each child each day. This transformed me from the directress who works hard to get as many lessons to as many children as possible each day into the guide I aspire to be: someone who never forgets what a privilege it is to get to work with these unique humans during such a formative time in their lives, and who is striving to serve the wholeness of their development, even in difficult times. Even though there are a lot of unknowns, I know that is still my purpose.

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# CLASSROOM REFLECTIONS



"Teaching during the pandemic has really taught me how important it is to talk with children about mental health. As a class, we take a mindfulness moment weekly, and have enjoyed many other books and activities that help us reflect on meeting our spiritual needs. As a result, I think the classroom culture has changed to one that centers more on empathy and understanding of each other."

*-Rachael Morris, Lower Elementary Guide, Childpeace Montessori*

"We are working with an amazing group of adolescents this year. They have never seemed so appreciative of the space, their peers, and their guides. As good as we feel our distance learning offerings were, considering, they cannot compare to this hands-on, minds-on adolescent learning environment. We have started going on field trips (four separate river trips with my occupation group so far) and things are returning to normal in many ways. In some ways things are forever changed, all students have school-issued email accounts and they present digital portfolios, but students do not object to using the computers only as work tools. In years past, they took a little more advantage of having the technology in the building, but it is not as novel as it once was to them. They are much more into woodworking, basketball, and real chess with a real chessboard."

*-Jon Erickson, Adolescent Guide, Metro Middle School*





**Nervous families,  
children in recovery.  
The Method still works!**

**-Anonymous**

"I would say that it has been so challenging trying to remain connected to my families during the time of covid. The children are doing well, even with all of the safety precautions in place, because they get to be together! They have time and space to create social cohesion and to experience the many wonderful gifts it offers. The same cannot be said for the parents. Our community is deeply missing the opportunities to connect parents to the classroom and to each other. I am looking forward to being able to gather my families together once again."

*-Maren Thomas, Primary Guide, Childpeace Montessori*





# OMA NEWS

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As we have done for many years, the Oregon Montessori Association continues to partner with key advocacy organizations to support policy that will benefit and protect schools, children, and their families. The 2022 short legislative session just wrapped up in early March, and we had a lot of wins, including an almost \$100 million child care investment package!

Click for Legislative Recaps:

[Our Children Oregon](#)

[Early Learning Division](#)



## UPCOMING WORKSHOP:

### ***Exploring Identity, Culture, and Exclusivity***

This workshop will begin to examine how the many moving pieces within equity came to be, and how they continue to be used today to create and uphold oppressive systems that harm Black and Brown communities.

Presented by Dora Perry & YWCA.

*April 9, 2022 – Virtual*

- Workshop planning is underway for the '22/'23 school year and the OMA planning committee would love your input. If there are any workshop topics you would like to see offered, please email us at [ed@oregonmontessori.org](mailto:ed@oregonmontessori.org)!
- If you haven't seen it yet, go explore our [new website](#)! We have a brand new Community Bulletins that is free to all OMA members-- use it to share events, buy and sell used materials, and more.
- Our annual Spring Tea and award ceremony is postponed this year. The OMA Board is in the process of re-imagining this tradition and we look forward to sharing a new format for our spring celebration in the '22/'23 school year!



## OREGON STATE MONTESSORI DAY

Every year, OMA requests that the governor of Oregon declare State Montessori Education Day. We hope you found a way to celebrate with your Montessori community!

STATE OF OREGON  
**PROCLAMATION**  
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

- WHEREAS:** The State of Oregon is dedicated to an educational system that fosters excellence for every learner through innovation, collaboration, leadership, and service; and
- WHEREAS:** The Montessori approach to education has, for over a century, supported the development of the whole human being – encouraging discovery, self-confidence, and deep respect for others; and
- WHEREAS:** Montessori education imbues independence, initiative, and self-regulation in children of all ages, helping to create passionate collaborators, stewards of equity, and leaders with a sense of global responsibility; and
- WHEREAS:** Oregon's Montessori community has been established for over 50 years and has served thousands of children, supported by a statewide advocacy organization and multiple teacher-training centers – all with an international reputation for excellence; and
- WHEREAS:** February 20-26 is being celebrated nationwide as Montessori Education Week.
- NOW,  
THEREFORE:** I, Kate Brown, Governor of the State of Oregon, hereby proclaim **February 24, 2022** to be

**OREGON MONTESSORI EDUCATION DAY**

in Oregon and encourage all Oregonians to join in this observance.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I hereunto set my hand and cause the Great Seal of the State of Oregon to be affixed. Done at the Capitol in the City of Salem in the State of Oregon on this day, February 16, 2022.



*Kate Brown*  
Kate Brown, Governor

*Shemia Fagan*  
Shemia Fagan, Secretary of State

## CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS!

The theme of the 2022 spring Forza Vitale is  
*Seeds of Spring!*

We invite all members of the local and regional Montessori community to share reflections, songs, stories, games, traditions, or lessons that you incorporate into the classroom to celebrate springtime. Please email your writing and/or photographs to [oma@oregonmontessori.org](mailto:oma@oregonmontessori.org).

Submission deadline: Tuesday, May 3rd

