



THE COVID-19 POST

EXPANDING THE PREPARED ENVIRONMENT

Pandemic Montessori Challenge... Here we go!

By Trixie Johnson

In the midst of social distancing, mask shortages, virus conversations, school closures and more, there are teachers working hard to make this unique experience a positive one for their students. We invite you to meet OMA team members *Virginia*, *Emily*, *Gabriel* and *Bridgett*. These four Montessorians are making a difference to the families and children they serve through creativity, good spirits and a good deal of sheer determination. Whole school teams are also finding ways to cooperate and innovate together, meet *Harmony Montessori School's* YouTube channel.

Virginia Rogers

Toddler Community Guide Sunstone Montessori School

Can you walk us around your virtual prepared environment?

When I first started I was all over the place, sending families lists and lists of resources and ideas and theory. Now I've settled down into a bit of a routine to provide families with the best support and resources I can. I've put my class photo from the beginning of the year on my desk so I can see all their faces while I work.

- I send a daily activity email on the following schedule: Monday and Tuesday practical life, Wednesday gross or fine motor, Thursday Art/Expression and Friday parent check in/Misc topics. Sample topics include a basic food prep lesson (banana slicing) leading up to baking with your toddler, plant care, dishwashing, gross motor songs, some DIY fine motor activities, cutting, painting, gluing, salt dough, mystery bags and toileting/dressing. Each daily email will include a walkthrough for parents of the days activity, as well as images or video demonstrations (for adults) if needed. Some days will have videos for the children as well, such as songs.

- I offer a parent Zoom check in on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 1pm (while the children are napping). This is just a chance to have a conversation with me and/or other parents who might log in, if you have any questions or just need to speak to another adult/get a little reassurance!
- We have a private YouTube channel so any videos I make will be uploaded there and available for families to see again. Our Spanish teacher is also uploading videos.



- I offer daily (weekday) story time with the children via Zoom call. This is offered every day at 10am, and is a drop in optional thing. We start our story time by greeting everyone and having little conversations as people log in. My assistants also join us most days. After a few minutes I tell everyone it is time for our story and I'm going to make it quiet so they can hear! I mute the children but keep them all on my screen so as I'm reading I can comment to them and point out what I see them doing 'oh, I see that Sammy is making the kangaroo hop too!'. When I'm done reading one or two books I turn everyone back on and we sing a song. It's usually a song that involves giving each child a chance to talk such as 'Sammy wore his blue shirt' (Sammy, what color is your shirt? then we sing about his shirt) Singing all together can be challenging over Zoom so I typically ask one of the assistants or myself to be the singer. I record this call as well, so families can watch at a later time.

How has the collaboration with parents and colleagues has been?

Parents are overwhelmed but so appreciative of the resources and support we've been able to provide. I look forward to checking in with them next week now that we've got two weeks under our belts and seeing what other needs they might have that I can provide! My colleagues both at my school and through social media all over the country and world have been wonderful. I'm part of several resource sharing groups and have been adding so many things both to my distance learning ideas and for when I return to my classroom!

Any thoughts or messages for your fellow guides?

Hang in there, and remember that children are capable of resilience. What the toddlers need most right now is just to be a part of their family life. What their parents need from us is the reassurance and tools to include them! Reach out to your colleagues and peers if you need support or ideas and join the dedicated OMA group, I have a bunch of ideas to share! (See p. 4)

What has been your favorite challenge to solve?

Adapting practical life activities so they could be done at home with limited toddler sized tools. Helping parents to see the items they do have in their home in a new light, for example using the bathtub as a child sized water source.

What were you dreading the most when the news of extended closures and online Montessori reached you?

How would I stay in touch with my students? Would they remember me? How much screen time and limited independence would they have, so when they came back would they remember how to do anything by themselves?

What do you miss the most from your classroom?

The children! I miss the chance to observe and see them for more than a few moments on a screen. I can't imagine how different they will be when we all return!

Which Montessori material do you wish you could bring to your virtual classroom?

My collection of perfectly sized pitchers and a toddler sized accessible sink. I'm sending home lots of practical life ideas for families to do at home, but I know they don't have the right sized pitchers and they can't go out and buy them! An accessible water source for children to fill their own pitchers is also challenging in a lot of my families homes.

Emily Westberg

Primary Guide The Portland Montessori School

Can you walk us around your virtual prepared environment?

I'm using Slack, which is free and familiar to many of our parents who use it in their work. This platform had a feature that I couldn't find in other online educational apps. Most apps are modeled to support the traditional education model where the teacher is at the head and dispenses assignments, receives the student work back and communicates directly with the student. I had a hard time finding a way for the children to be able to connect with each other or share their work or projects they are doing at home. Slack had this option. In my Slack "classroom", I have 3 "channels". One I have sole control over, no one else can post on it but all the parents can view it. I call this "Ms. Emily's Bulletin Board" and I am treating it like it was my bulletin board at school.

There I have links to parent resources that will remain relevant for the duration of our distance learning experiment. I have a link to my Google Drive folder of Montessori At Home resources, a link to the Signup Genius for my office hours and another for the Signup Genius for the Blue Butterfly Show and Tell Show (I'll explain in a moment). I have a link to my Zoom room, where the show and office hours occur.

My 2nd "channel" on Slack is for children to share and view their friends' work photos. Here, people can comment on others photos and post as they like. It is also intended for people to share photos that are inspired by the Daily Pollinator I put out. That brings me to the 3rd channel. Each evening (Sunday-Thursday), I post a new "Pollinator" (my classroom is called the Blue Butterfly class). This is a one sheet PDF that has suggested activities within a variety of theme categories (e.g. a song of the day, poem of the day, joke, riddle, country, letter/sound, etc.). I make the next day's sheet available the evening before so parents can have a chance to see if they have what they need to do activities of interest (e.g. do they have epsom salt for the Quick Crystal Cup experiment or chocolate to taste a food that grows in Africa) for the next day.

These offer a blend of familiar and novel activities that are developmentally appropriate and Montessori-inspired. In some cases, I will record myself singing the day's song and upload that to the channel as well. I imagine that I might also create a few small groups for the collectives of children who were moving through presentations within the language and math areas. This way, if I decide to share some reading materials, for example, I can focus on getting them only to the relevant families and avoid clogging up the other channels of communication. This is an environment that parents can choose if, when and at what level they wish to participate.

For daily connection with my children, I will be doing a Zoom meeting at the same time each morning. I have encouraged the parents to schedule their child's morning snack at this time as well. During these brief gatherings, I will host and start off with a song or a story. I will then turn it over to the "Child of the Day" who will show us their favorite outfit (which doesn't have to be appropriate for school!), their favorite snack that they will have prepared, their favorite book, an activity they have been doing during this extended closure and their room if they like. All mics will be silenced except mine and the hosting child.



Emily Westberg

"There is nothing from the selection of concrete materials on my shelves that is as powerful as the group being together."

At the conclusion of their tour, I will end with a song and some type of suggestion for the children from the day's Pollinator to try to inspire them toward their next independent work at home. I'll hold office hours each day following this "show". I will use this time to connect with individual children and parents. I plan to pay close attention to who is showing up and who I might need to work harder to reach out to.

How has the collaboration with parents and colleagues has been?

Everyone has been pushed to the max with this. I feel that the relationships that were solid going into this new territory are the relationships I have leaned into the most. These have been collaborative, supportive, dynamic and responsive. My personal way of dealing with this has been very active. I feel "activated," to try to build a bridge over what feels like a very wide chasm. So much has happened so quickly that I think we are all just trying to find our grounding. Our common ground is in a desire to best serve the children (their natural, joyous development) and the families in a meaningful way. I've observed people bringing varying degrees of willingness and participation to the table.

What do you miss the most from your classroom?

It's hard to describe. The best way I can think is how a photo of a place is different from being there. For example, a picture of the wilderness can remind you of the wilderness and it is pleasant but it is just not the same as being there and experiencing it fully with all of your senses. Looking at the 2-dimensional representation vs. interacting with the trail you are hiking while birds chirp in the background, and you are faintly aware of the scent of the damp air and the rich humus springing back beneath your feet as you wonder at the many shades of green before you in the forest. I miss the biodiversity of my dynamic microcosmic ecosystem filled with curious and delightful tiny humans.

Which Montessori material do you wish you could bring to your virtual classroom?

There is nothing from the selection of concrete materials on my shelves that is as powerful as the group being together. The spontaneous socializing, mentoring and modeling is what feels the most absent in this new reality.

What has been your favorite challenge to solve?

How to offer the experience of being together as concretely as possible, for both the children and the parents.

What were you dreading the most when the news of extended closures and online Montessori reached you?

Honestly? We were in that magic moment during the year where all the indirect and direct preparations were in place for each individual as well as many small collectives and the whole. They/we were evolving to the next phase of the work, what felt like a wonderfully elevated place to be. They had just started to be able to truly play the silence game together. Those children who recognized they had ways to help others were joyously presenting lessons and offering support. I knew this would interrupt the momentum that took us all these months to build. I knew the way I worked with the children and families would shift and that I was going to have to be uncomfortable and try to grow into a new paradigm. I knew that my work was going to shift to a more supportive role vs. being hands-on and interactive, able to observe the children and respond directly in the moment.

Any thoughts or messages for your fellow guides?

"Montessori always insists that she must be a dynamic link. This requires a great many qualities...The science of being a Montessori guide consists of knowing beforehand the general function of the prepared environment [the materials, their purposes and how to use them] and the art lies in knowing how, whom and when to give the lessons." In the absence of our physical environment and tiny societies physically being together, I think we have to be a dynamic link, once removed, between the child and their environment. Our link is to the parents, who at this point in time, are inundated with information and life changes. We must not add new layers of expectation and anything we offer should be in the spirit of support and mere suggestion. The quality of suggestions will require us to use our imaginations. We have to think about what our children have at home and which parts of our "curriculum" translate. How can we support and inspire without overwhelming and creating stress? There is no way of knowing how this experience will affect our children in the long run. Each family and child are different. I think our job as guides right now is to show up, hold space, remind the children of the experience of normalcy or create an opportunity for some semblance of daily rhythm and then do what we do in our work every day: observe, communicate, meet people where they are, provide connections to meaningful experiences and resources, collaborate with others who are doing this work and continue to do the deep self-care that we each need to be doing to be strong and resilient in this time. I'm finally doing yoga every day. My dog is getting her 10,000 steps in. I've reconnected with friends and family. I've launched my Teachers Pay Teachers shop. I've learned how to host a Zoom meeting, run a Slack account and have discovered that I love creating a tiny daily newspaper for tiny humans to help their parents have tiny breaks in their day. I hope we can grow together through this.

What to join our COVID-19 teacher groups?

Sign up online! These groups are open to all Montessori guides interested in creating and sharing resources to support CHILDREN and FAMILIES at home during the pandemic.



Gabriel Barber

Elementary Guide Montessori School of Beaverton

Can you walk us around your virtual prepared environment?

We have chosen Google Classroom as our shared classroom and Zoom to conduct our video conferences with the children. We also plan to use Khan Academy for some math practice and Epic Books for some group reading activities. For hosting videos we signed up for a business Vimeo account. We didn't want to deal with YouTube's ads, and for only \$50/mth we can have 10 people sharing an account and upload an unlimited amount of videos (up to 5TB). There are some other platforms we're considering, like Padlet, but felt those five were enough to start with. One of our parents also set up a private Google Photo Album that our students have been uploading photos to, in order to share what they've been up to while at home.

In terms of how we're using each:

- We will post assignments to Google Classroom, and use their home page for a way to spark conversations between our children. For instance, I posted a sentence and then asked them to change the verb, adjectives and preposition to turn it into a new sentence. The replies have been hilarious, and has sparked some good conversations among the children.



Gabriel Barber

- For Zoom we will be holding two 20 minute conferences per week with each student. We also will begin holding group gatherings (like class meetings) three times a week, and are going to try and use Zoom's breakout groups to host a virtual lunch.
- Finally, we want to hold a Zoom read-a-loud or sing-a-long each day as well.
- For Khan Academy, we are taking the approach that this is a great opportunity to ensure our children are all super solid on the basics. So, we will be beginning back with some of their lessons on addition and subtraction for each student and then progress them along that way. I've been really impressed with what Khan has to offer.
- We are still playing around with Epic Books, but it looks to be able to sync with Google Classroom and allow us to assign different ebooks to our students to read. They have a pretty extensive library of books. Of course we still plan to mix in some Montessori lessons, just modified.

How has the collaboration with parents and colleagues has been?

Actually, this has been the best part so far. Our school has been consistent in sending communication out to the parents, as have our individual classes. My favorite part so far has been the phone calls we made to each of the families. It was so great to hear the children's voices, and hear the encouragement and appreciation from the parents. It's what has kept me going. Our staff has been great as well. Some are far more comfortable with this new digital world, but they all understand we are in this together, and have been receptive to ideas shared. It was all of us working together that has led to some great ideas, and feeling really comfortable with the platforms we've chosen.

Any thoughts or messages for your fellow guides?

I think we all have to be kind to ourselves right now, and help each other as much as possible. None of us trained for this, so of course we are going to make a lot of mistakes. I think it's important to communicate that to the parents as well, and our students. Right now we have a chance to know what they feel like everyday coming into our classroom not always confident in what they know and what they're being asked to do. Hang in there. Learn from your mistakes. Just keep pressing forward. Remember why we're doing this...for the children. Don't forget about them in the midst of all your concern or anxiety about navigating this new world. It's been a huge disruption to their lives too. We must keep that in mind.

GABRIEL BARBER - QUICK QUESTIONS

What do you miss the most from your brick and mortar classroom?

Seeing and hearing the children in person, and all together as a group!

Which Montessori material do you wish you could bring to your virtual classroom?

We just got brand new cubing material this year, and we have some sixth years who were nearly finished with square root and were going to be moving on to cubing and cube root. So, it would definitely be the cubing material. Plus, you can't really print it (unless you have a 3D printer).

What has been your favorite challenge to solve?

I've actually quite enjoyed the challenge. Trying to decide on the platforms. Researching how best to use those platforms. Trying to create virtual lessons that are still Montessori, at least in spirit. Although, I'm really glad I'm an Upper EI teacher right now. I don't think I'd be enjoying the challenge as much if I was in Primary.

What were you dreading the most when the news of extended closures and online Montessori reached you?

Well, I have two children. Mostly, I was initially worried for their safety and that of my mother and other family and friends. Other concerns were how we were going to keep our classroom community together when everyone was so isolated.

Bridgett Stevenson

Adolescent Guide The Community Roots Montessori Charter School

Can you walk us around your virtual prepared environment?

We have always had a Google Classroom. We are still using this as our main source of passing on information to students and parents.

As we are giving no new instruction, we are enriching what we have already done through various platforms such as the Big History Project and ixl.com, and sending video emails via the bombbomb app. We also check in with each of our students at the beginning of the week to make a plan, and at the end of the week to see how the week went via Zoom.

How has the collaboration with parents and colleagues has been?

It has been great. We all have the student and their needs at the center of all the decisions that we have had to make. Because parents understand this, they are supportive and encouraging.

What do you miss the most from your brick and mortar classroom?

I miss being on our farm campus during Spring. There are so many projects that the students have been planning and preparing for, sometimes for months, that will not get off the ground. Because of this, they are not going to get to enjoy the fruits of labor in a way that truly valorizes them. They are not going to be able to welcome the baby goats and get the goat dairy up and running, a project that they started in October.

Which material do you wish you could bring to your virtual classroom?

Goats? At the adolescent level we have very few materials. This makes it easier for us to offer virtual classes than most other levels.

the goats!

Geer Crest Farm - Student Project



BRIDGETT STEVENSON - QUICK QUESTIONS

What has been your favorite challenge to solve?

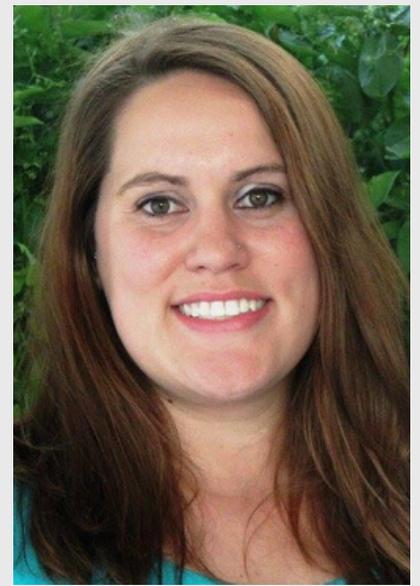
Equity! I want to make sure that the supplemental instruction that I am giving is equitable. I know that I have students that do not have internet or computers at home, so how can I also make sure that they have access to what I am putting out there for my other students to do?. I also have students that have other responsibilities, watching siblings for example, or parents that cannot support them in distance learning. How do I support them and their needs during this time as been a huge challenge to think through.

What were you dreading the most when the news of extended closures and online Montessori reached you?

How we are going to keep Montessori first. It is easy to assign math, writing, reading from afar. But how do we keep and maintain engagement in the things that excite each individual, without creating a prescribed online classroom? How do we prioritize emotional stability and practical life, both of which the home environment supports.

Any thoughts or messages for your fellow guides?

- 1) Don't stress the academics. Adolescence is all about practicing adult life. What better way to practice it than helping out during this time?
- 2) Give more avenues for self-expression. What better way to process what is happening than to make poetry, write, paint, dance?



Bridgett Stevenson

MEET HARMONY MONTESSORI SCHOOL'S YOUTUBE CHANNEL

Harmony Montessori School found a wonderful way to connect with children and families. During their first day of closure they started to create their own YouTube channel to share songs and more. Here are a few examples:



Group Song with Social distancing!



Joline shares Naw Ruz



Millie explains animal research at home



Zeke reads from "The Zones of Regulation" tool

MILLIE LANG, Forest Room guide:

How did the idea start? What do you hope to achieve?

Our hope for making the YouTube channel videos is to stay connected with our Harmony Community. We want the students to see us, to know we are ok and to show our families that we are committed to the education of their children.

We know that not everyone is fond of seeing themselves on camera: how did you overcome that? What advice do you have for guides getting ready to post videos online?

I've never had a problem in front of the camera but I know many do. My advise for those folks are to remember why we make the videos. To remember the smiling faces of the children, and to practice privately, record when by yourself, or record with a family member.



We know that Harmony has equity and social justice as core values of the school, what role did those values play in your approach to Montessori distance learning? Do you have any message to other programs or families regarding this important topic?

As the Elementary moved forward with the virtual classroom, we wanted to make sure each child had the tech and materials they needed to participate in lessons. We called each family, asked them what they needed to make things work. We stayed at school so families could pick up supplies, and delivered materials to families who couldn't make it to the school. We lended out classroom materials and laptops, so everyone's remote education journey can be successful. Something our school did was reduce tuition. This allows families who have been financially affected to continue to be part of our classrooms and allows for some staff to maintain income. I would suggest if at all possible for other schools who are moving to remote teaching to consider the families in their community, including the employees. Many have had to quit their jobs to care for their children, or have had to pay for alternative child care, and many people have lost jobs due being nonessential workers. Reduced tuition gives families a financial break and will help ensure enrollment so we all have schools to return to when this pandemic ends.

ZEKE Thomas, Lake Room assistant:

Are you planning to share a post-corona video with bloopers?

I don't know - on the one hand there are definitely a couple clips with some silly and unexpected camera movements/early experiments. But something I actually advocated for was to not practice very much, to be unscripted, to leave mistakes in. On the one hand, the Montessori method encourages practice and preparation before presenting to the child (and some of the prep for my videos has taken much much longer than the video itself). However since we are on screen, I thought it would be more authentic and valuable for the children to see our mistakes, the times we trip over our words or read something wrong or have to pause too long to come up with something to say. They get to see us make those kinds of mistakes every day and model grace and kindness to ourselves and others - mistakes are how we learn! And we sure are learning. I wanted to continue to model that even though we weren't in person together.

We know that not everyone is fond of seeing themselves on camera: how did you overcome that? What advice do you have for guides getting ready to post videos online?

Honestly the very first response/picture/video I got back from the children made it all worth it. We sang a song and one of the children's parents posted that they had another song request and we were able to film it that day. Not only does that child get to have a video of that song for the foreseeable future, but also we were able to connect to that child through name (just first name, no other identifying details to keep them safe/their info private). It isn't about what I look like or the fact that I'm really insecure about my voice - it matters that I project all the love I have for them through my words, face, and gestures. Rethinking your perspective on what your goals are (*is it to look good? Nah it's for the children*) helps shift your thoughts in a positive direction. Also it was my birthday and several of the children sent me videos of themselves singing or saying something and it was just so sweet!!!! I'm going to treasure those forever. Encouraging their activity is also something I'm trying to be mindful of - asking questions and offering prompting suggestions not necessarily as if they were right in front of me, but continuing to talk to them (I read a book on clouds and noted that I couldn't see any from my window, invited them to look out there's or to go for a walk and see if they could identify clouds by their scientific names, or if they saw any cool shaped ones. A dinosaur?? A car??)

We know that Harmony has equity and social justice as core values of the school, what role did those values play in your approach to Montessori distance learning? Do you have any message to other programs or families regarding this important topic?

It was important to me that everyone had the technology to be able to engage with the school's online connective efforts (access as a first priority). When we talked about connecting to the children through name I immediately went home and brainstormed a book or activity for which each child had either demonstrated love/excitement through their words/actions or in their repetition with that topic/material to make sure each child would get a shout-out or mention (inclusion). We are planning to have "office hours" for parents to contact us with questions, concerns, feedback, etc. and if/when parents don't call in, we're planning to make sure we're contacting them (contact/connection and centering). As an hourly worker without children supporting a disabled partner, and as a queer/trans person, I feel particularly vulnerable in this crisis (as I'm sure we all do, with our intersecting identities, marginalizations, privileges, etc.). So far the school is doing their best to give me the hours I need and to support my continued employment, which I really appreciate and makes me feel valued. One of the things that attracted me to Harmony was its core values of justice and equity, and I appreciate the ways that we support our entire community, staff included.