

Modeling Peace through Grace and Courtesy

"If we are to teach real peace in this world... we shall have to begin with the children."

—Mahatma Gandhi

Montessori education has been referred to as "peace education"; Montessorian Sonnie McFarland calls peace education a "Montessori best practice" (*Montessori Life*, January 2005); and even Gandhi praised Montessori's approach to world peace. So, how is peace cultivated in a Montessori classroom?

The Quiet Hum of Peaceful Activity

Visitors often marvel at how Montessori classrooms seem to have a "hum" to them. It is no wonder that children in a Montessori classroom seem joyful, relaxed, and happy. They are able to choose an activity and work at it as long as they like. The children interact with their peers and move about the room freely. The teacher's main goals are to make sure children are engaged, to connect children with the prepared environment, and to protect their work once they are immersed in concentration. One can sense a spirit of purpose, satisfaction, and joy permeating the room.

But this does not happen magically! It is the teacher who helps to protect children's work by showing other children in the classroom how to watch, how to walk around a work rug, or how to interrupt politely. With ongoing Grace and Courtesy lessons, we are able to give children tools for resolving conflicts peacefully and ways to cultivate a peaceful and productive environment for learning.

Although the process of engaging in purposeful work itself evokes a sense of calm, it is also due, in large part, to our Grace and Courtesy presentations. Based on observed behavior, these related presentations contribute to what can become a harmonious state. It is also through the Grace and Courtesy framework that we are able to teach in a proactive, rather than reactive, way.

Constructing Grace & Courtesy Lessons

Grace and Courtesy lessons can be carefully planned, or done in an impromptu fashion. By keeping a few of these lessons in the back of one's mind, they can be a great way to fill in the gaps during transition times. These lessons can be modeled by the teacher and/or rehearsed and modeled by the children themselves.

In the beginning of the year, it may be necessary to introduce and practice up to seven or eight Grace and Courtesy "skits" per day. From modeling "how to walk around a work rug" to "how to ask for help," these quick lessons - sometimes with words and sometimes without - give children tools to navigate their environment and social landscape. Other lessons are more social and provide a way to establish a classroom management technique that is child-driven rather than teacher-driven.

Always relevant to the classroom community, Grace and Courtesy lessons empower children to be responsible, self-aware, and independent. These activities are about respecting children's needs and considering the whole classroom community as a collective unit. Practicing modeled behaviors at neutral moments allows children to discover much-needed tools, and they are grateful to know what to do and say in frustrating or difficult circumstances.

Through the structure of Grace and Courtesy, children are able to practice respectful communication, and they are given tools to respond to others. Grace and Courtesy lessons are an invaluable tool for the teacher in the way that they allow us to put a special energy on behavior we want to support. The lessons serve our classrooms well because we can revise what lessons are given, as needed, in response to observing how the children interact with certain objects and/or others.

The Value of the "Invisible Curriculum"

Angeline Lillard, in her book *Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius*, wrote that the lessons of Grace and Courtesy "are on a par with lessons in math, music, and language." (2007, 198-99) There is no physical material on the shelf to remind us of the importance of Grace and Courtesy; these activities cannot be seen, but they mustn't be forgotten. Ginni Sackett (AMI trainer, Montessori Institute Northwest) has said that Grace and Courtesy is a part of Montessori's "invisible curriculum." Other "invisible" activities which can be considered a part of this curriculum are Spoken Language, Silence, and Walking on the Line. This "invisible curriculum" is one of the most significant components of the Montessori environment. In fact, because of the invisible aspect of these activities, it is all the more critical that the Montessori teacher be conscientious about implementing them.

Grace and Courtesy presentations are an ongoing, collaborative aspect of our curriculum that invite the children and teachers to work together to forge a culture of responsibility, tolerance, and harmony. Every classroom is unique,

and the great beauty of a Montessori classroom is that its educational construct and style allows each classroom's own definition of peace to develop and flourish. We are not teaching to a test or moving children along, and we are able to pause to explore the dynamics of an issue or problem.

How to Make Lessons Most Effective

When presented, Grace and Courtesy lessons should have the same points of interest and analysis of movement that a Practical Life or Sensorial lesson would contain. Emphasis on body mechanics, body language, and enunciating words clearly (if the skit includes words) are all critical, as children may absorb every aspect of the modeled behavior. Often we take for granted the behavior we have mastered as adults, whereas children might see our actions as a flurry of movement that they couldn't possibly master themselves. So backing up, and even reviewing what you might do to execute a specific series of motions that make up a complete action, can be helpful when emphasizing certain aspects of a Grace and Courtesy lesson to children.

Just as a scientist evaluates his data, the Montessori teacher is advised to watch and discern what is and is not working as a result of a Grace and Courtesy lesson and to revise the variables accordingly. For example, if a Grace and Courtesy lesson on "what to do when you say excuse me" isn't working (i.e., the children are still bumping into each other), you could follow up by isolating the words and then the movements. Re-present the lesson with not just the words "excuse me," but 1) by first verbalizing "excuse me," and 2) by then making a very clear demonstration of how you would move your body by stepping to the side.

A Framework for Peace

Grace and Courtesy lessons are our framework for modeling peace. Participating in Grace and Courtesy skits gives children the confidence they need to function independently in the classroom, and since the classroom is a microcosm of the larger world, these rehearsed social scenarios are great tools for life. As Montessori teachers, we have a built-in foundation for peace education - all we have to do is come up with the appropriate Grace and Courtesy lessons to model.

A Sampling of Grace & Courtesy Lessons:

- How to walk around a rug

- How to ask for a hug
- How to blow your nose
- How to greet a visitor
- How/when to say "excuse me"
- How to ask for help from a teacher/friend
- What to say if someone says "you're not my friend"
- How to walk with scarcely making a sound
- How to tell someone you want to be alone
- How to watch someone do work
- How to clean up your snack
- What to do if you're really angry
- How to agree to disagree

— by Alice Lawson Miller, Educational Consultant for Montessori Services. Alice holds a B.A. from the University of Virginia, and a Masters in Montessori Education (ages 3-6) from Loyola University, in conjunction with the Montessori Institute Northwest (AMI). It is her fourth year teaching and her second year at San Francisco Public Montessori School, where she is proud to help bring Montessori into the public realm. Her favorite part of teaching involves witnessing children become independent and develop a love of learning. Outside of the classroom, she enjoys soaking up the Bay Area's natural beauty through gardening, hiking, and kayaking!