

Follow the child—and their family

The pandemic has changed the meaning of family engagement



BY **LETTY RISING**

Educators who have been heavily steeped in Montessori philosophy and pedagogy are passionately prepared to uphold Maria Montessori's undeniable directive to "follow the child." For many, this phrase has been discussed, debated, and teased out endlessly in training centers, conferences, and staff meetings alike. But what does this phrase exactly mean? Do we follow the child's developmental needs? Do we follow their wants? Do we follow them off the proverbial cliff?

There have been many rich and engaging conversations about this topic, and Montessori educators far and wide are in agreement regarding following the child's developmental needs as well as their interests, and also that there are some guidelines and limitations to this "following" that we do. Maria Montessori's ideas are rooted in balance, and so the notion of following the child while at the same time attuning the child to the needs, desires, and even limitations of the community of people and the surrounding environment is in alignment with her thoughts around balancing freedom with responsibility.

The Montessori approach centers on the relationship among the child, the guide, and the prepared environment, and the lectures given in Montessori training centers around the world focus on this crucial systemic triad and the ways in which these three aspects interact to support

development. However, in all of this grand work that Maria Montessori accomplished in regard to the needs of the child, there is less published work on what her thoughts might have been regarding the child in the context of their family.

This is perhaps due to the fact that her focus was on schools that would mimic the best aspects of a home environment, and that Montessori schools were designed as communities for children. It was no accident that the earliest classroom was called the "children's house," or *"casa dei bambini,"* as there was much work done to integrate the more salient aspects of the home into classroom life.

Whether this absence of family in this equation was intentional or accidental, it resulted in a certain kind of culture that developed in Montessori

which ended with the proclamation "just trust us!" when she asked if she could walk her anxious 3-year-old daughter to the classroom on her first day, made a beeline for her car and never looked back. While these practices have raised both questions and eyebrows, the idea of having the parent on the periphery generally became the norm, and Montessori schools continued to be somewhat mysterious places for parents.

Now, let's fast-forward to the year 2020. During the seemingly continual reorganization and rearranging that happened during the outset of COVID, and in midst of several educational pivots in the span of weeks and months, Montessori education made an unparalleled shift that felt, to many, like nothing short of a monumental earthquake. During this shift, Montes-

The need to partner with parents is more essential than ever

schools that created a clear separation between home and school. Unlike the play-based preschool co-op down the street, parents of children attending Montessori schools were asked to drop off their children at the front gate, schedule observations at convenient times for the school, and were discouraged from being "classroom helpers" unless the help involved taking home materials to cut (after a tutorial from the school or teacher, of course!), sewing costumes for the class play, donating items, and maybe accompanying children on a field trip or "going out" experience. One parent, upon hearing a speech from an admissions counselor

sori educators discovered that it is no longer an option to simply follow the child. We now have no choice but to include and integrate parents, siblings, and even grandparents. Just as the red line at the end of the long "black strip" in the elementary material denotes a new period in time, we are now entering into a new phase in the history of how we approach the child within the context of their family. We have transitioned from a focus on "following the child," to embracing the wider lens of "following the family."

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Montessori is a pedagogy based on adaptation

Montessori education has quickly evolved from an environment where teachers with specialized training work with children whose parents come for an occasional observation and yearly parent conference, to a more active and continuous level of family involvement. Children are now learning at a distance, their parents within earshot, or at the child's side. Teachers are giving lessons via videoconferencing, while parents listen in, trying to figure out how to extend what is happening online at home, frantically cutting out paper DIY Montessori materials, and scouring the internet for any and all Montessori lessons to show their children. Teachers are seeing parents hand-deliver their child's paper and pencil to the lesson—the very same children who were independently gathering materials for lessons in the classroom! Siblings interrupt to show their favorite plastic dinosaur toy; pets bark, meow, and jump onto computer consoles; and parents invite themselves to lessons to give their own thoughts, insights, and feedback.

If Maria Montessori were alive today, she might be pulling her hair out along with all of the Montessori teachers who are exclaiming “Montessori is not supposed to be delivered online or from a distance!” Or, more likely, she would put on her scientific hat, observe what is happening, and identify ways to adapt so as to be as developmental as possible in the current reality. She would notice that the family is a part of the everyday equation, and would expand her horizons to include the bigger picture. We need to evolve from “what does the child need” to “what does the family need?” Relegating parents to the sidelines is no longer an option.

The partnership between home and school

If you are teaching from a distance, the need to partner with parents is more essential than ever. You no longer have many informal and spontaneous opportunities to observe the children in action. Instead, you have whatever time period is designated for videoconferencing—a different kind of observation than what can be conducted in an environment where children are working independently. Therefore, the eyes of the parents will be your windows of observation. You'll need to connect with them on a regular basis to ask how things are going, and also let them know to contact you regarding observations in the home environment that they think might be important to share.

What can teachers do to include the family in distance learning/home learning?

- *Send out a memo to parents regarding your expectations.* If you want to make sure that the children aren't interrupted during your lessons, let them know! If you want the children to gather their own materials and supplies as they ready themselves for lessons, let them know! Teachers can get frustrated with parents about things that parents would willingly and happily adjust if they had the communication about expectations.
- *Collaborate with parents as much as possible.* Brainstorm; share ideas; get their insight, opinion, and advice. Ask them about their expectations. This will lead to a better functioning classroom as well as a closer bond with parents.
- *Be flexible.* Remember, many of your families are not choosing this kind of schooling, and many

might be overwhelmed. Parents have reported that long videoconferencing sessions are not easily incorporated into family life, especially if there are multiple children. However, daily videoconferencing for connection, collaboration, and working on things together can be vital for your students to maintain a connection. If possible, sending recordings to parents so that they can opt-out from online if need be, would be ideal for families who need greater flexibility.

- *Adjust your mindset.* Even during non-pandemic times, so many teachers express that they had no idea before becoming a teacher just how much interaction with parents that they would be having on a regular basis. Now, during times of COVID, parent interaction has increased, both directly and indirectly, as teachers are finding themselves in their students' homes.

What happens if we don't follow the family?

Whether you are teaching at a school that is learning from a distance or back on site, the landscape of education has changed. Parents have either been intimately working with their children on projects and activities at home, or have been listening to teachers via Zoom, and they have become accustomed to being more integrated into classroom life.

Although many parents will find it a welcome relief when it is deemed safe for students to return on campus, many parents and children have also enjoyed aspects of this integration of their child's education into their home life. One parent recently remarked that this has been an opportunity for parents to feel more involved in their child's learning experience, to see more clearly how their child thinks and

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responds, and that the bits and pieces of lessons they hear become fodder for dinnertime conversation. “What did you do today?” has been replaced with “I heard you talking about the population density of different states in your geography lesson, and your teacher mentioned Colorado. Did you know we are going camping in Colorado next month? Do you want to look at the map and see how many people live in Colorado?”

Parents who have come to enjoy this kind of involvement may feel some disappointment as children return to classroom life, and there will need to be a way to continue some aspects of this blending of family and school. If we don’t do this, we risk creating a division between parents and schools

during a time when the world is feeling heightened mistrust and uncertainty. If Montessori education is a pedagogy that is built upon the idea that humans are adaptable, then now is the time for teachers and school leaders to embrace flexibility and collaboration as strategies to employ not only for the whole child but for the whole family.

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