

At the beginning is a good place to be

Getting started with a classroom full of new children



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Public Montessori teachers face many challenges: Training, materials, state and district requirements—the list goes on. One challenge Primary teachers may face is introducing and establishing Montessori in a classroom for the first time, when it's new to everyone.

While neither of us taught in public schools, this situation does arise in the private sector. In her first years of teaching, my now 91-year-old mother, Paula Polk Lillard, had to start a fresh class of 5 year old children who never had Montessori before every September, for seven years. The suggestions that follow come from her experience, a few AMI trainers, my own starts to the school year, and Montessori's own writings. We offer this in the hope that it provides timeless guidance for most situations.

Begin without materials?

If you can, begin by cleaning your classroom thoroughly and removing all objects so that you can see the bare bones of the shelves, floor space and furniture. Set out any manufactured Montessori materials you might have and make the classroom beautiful and inviting. **But then, before the first day, put Montessori's materials away, out of sight.** Why? Because

your students first need to be oriented to the space and to learn what the expectations are; this is a necessary modification. Showing group lessons to the whole class may seem more like traditional Kindergarten, but this is, in fact, how Dr. Montessori recommended starting a new class. She describes this in *Creative Development in the Child* (1939):

The material is not given to the child when the school is started at first. The teacher should study the group of children, and organize some collective actions to call the children little by little to order around her...Little by little, the children begin to work. When the personality...develops to a point where the child begins to fix his attention deeply upon something, the material is taken out and presented to the child. This is when a new school is started.

Orienting: Grace and Courtesy

To establish the expectations in your classroom, start with Grace and Courtesy Lessons, which foster self-mastery, respect for others and for the environment, and awareness. If it's possible to have an orientation day, invite just half the group into your room for an hour or so, and then the second half. (You may be able to create smaller groups if another adult can take a group out of the room to another activity). It's ideal if you can start with smaller groups and a shorter school day, and then blend the whole class together for the full morning on the second day.

As each child arrives at the door, greet them with a smile and a handshake or some other chosen custom. Your school may have a tradition, or

Grace and Courtesy lessons

In the first Grace and Courtesy Lessons, demonstrate anything and everything that the children need to know, such as:

- How to move in the room
- How to take something out and replace it to the same place on the shelf
- How to take out a rug or table and place their work on it
- How to resist disturbing a classmate who is working
- How to push in one's chair
- How to clean up a spill
- How to get the adult's attention if they need to
- How to get a refreshment or water if they need it
- Where the bathroom is and when it is available

you may want to learn from parents what they prefer. Begin the custom that you intend to continue, as this is the first impression. Invite the children to join you in a group on the floor and begin an orienting game such as: *I Spy* (to orient to the classroom physically), *Say Your Name* (name songs and games), a movement game, or Grace and Courtesy lessons such as “how to carry a chair”, “how to pass one another without bumping”, “how to carry a tray”, “how to open and close the room door”, or “how to walk across the floor

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without making a sound”. Choose just a couple so that the children are not sitting for long.

The children may be quiet and more observant at first, or they might be restless and lose focus quickly! They simply may not have the capacity to concentrate for more than a few minutes. Be ready with age-appropriate games, songs, and activities up your sleeve to pull out in the moment, as you see necessary. This keeps the children connected to you. Respond to what you see—this is how you meet the children where they are.

Establishing the work cycle

After a game, a song, and a Grace and Courtesy lesson or two, introduce the concept of a work cycle where they work on their own in the classroom. Eventually this will be two to three hours long, but in the first few days it may be as short as 10 or 15 minutes at a time. Observe and ask the children to put their work away to gather again when you notice them becoming restless. When children have never been in a Montessori classroom before, working on their own with concentration may be novel, so you may need to build up gradually. Respond to what you observe!

On the first days, we suggest providing objects that are more familiar to the children and with which there are no expectations other than the most basic ones: essentially, that we handle things with care and replace them to their place when finished. You need to establish this idea before you bring out the Montessori materials. You can do this with simple objects and activities that you supply for the children to play/work with during their very first few days of the work cycle, such as drawing, puzzles, and simple manipulative toys.

Think of these objects as “placeholders” for the classroom materials, because you will be replacing them

with Montessori materials and prepared trays of Practical Life activities in the days ahead. The children need something at first that they can touch and do independently that may not be in your Montessori albums. The purpose of these objects as “placeholders” is to establish the basic routines, expectations, and how the classroom functions. The selected objects and activities you have brought in can be kept in a box that you set out *only* for the work cycle time. This is likely just the first few days of the *first year* with a completely *new* group of children under age seven. What we are suggesting should not be necessary once you have some children who have had some Montessori presentations in their past.

Place a few more choices than there are children in the room, so that there is always a choice in the box. Children learn that if they want to use a certain object and someone else has it, they have to wait for a turn by you—you’re always next to the box. This is how they learn to wait until their classmate is finished with something and has returned it to its original location. During this work cycle time, present a Practical Life activity to one child with several others next to you to watch. This means you are always active, so there is something interesting for a child to watch if they come sit by you. While presenting cheerfully, you demonstrate an industrious, positive tone for the whole community.

Practical Life activities

The very first Practical Life presentations will be how to care for the room. Tell the children that this is their room, and you will show them how to do things in it and how to care for it. As with Grace and Courtesy lessons, create Practical Life presentations that you see are needed, such as Sweeping the Floor, Dusting a Shelf, Watering a Plant, or Scrubbing

a Table. Such purposeful actions help children to coordinate their minds and bodies and fix their attention, settling their whole personality. This makes these lessons foundational, and crucial.

Invite one child at a time to come to the object box and choose between two activities you propose for that child. They choose one and take it to a rug (which they by now know how to take out, unroll, re-roll and replace.) Do this in a timely but calm, deliberate fashion. Children work with their chosen object, uninterrupted, and then return the objects to the object box when they feel finished. They may then choose another activity if they would like. When a child has one of these orientation objects, do not concern yourself with what they do with it as long as they are not disturbing anyone else. Put the box of orientation objects away at the end of the work cycle.

Each day, you remove a few activities from the box and place a few Montessori materials on the shelves. Invite children to come to presentations in small groups to learn how to work with the materials. The first materials might be spooning, pouring, or window washing—activities that do not require long, detailed one-on-one presentations—so that you can keep the group’s attention. But they must have meaningful purpose! These Montessori activities will stay in the room all year with a permanent home on the shelf (unlike the orientation objects.) By the third or fourth day of school, invite each child to choose, “Would you like to choose from the orientation box or a material (the Practical Life activities) that I’ve shown you, from the shelf?” Most children will gravitate towards the shelves because activities with purpose have more natural appeal to young children. This

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allows you to phase the box out quickly. Remember, the objects in the box are “placeholders” for the Montessori materials and Practical Life, just to get a new class started.

If you are diligent about bringing in three or four new materials each day in the first weeks and presenting them to different children so that everyone has work choices, the room can be complete within eight weeks. (And the orientation objects will be long gone, all replaced with more meaningful activities that draw in children’s attention and focus.) During every day, be sure to also read to the children often, play sound games, count items, review days of the week, and introduce real items from the world, such as live plants and insects. There is so much intellectual exploration to nurture, with children of any age!

Realistically, you may need to present to a few children at once, as we have suggested here. But simultaneously, take every opportunity to make individual connections with each child by presenting one-to-one, even if just for a few seconds. As the classroom settles, such opportunities will become the norm.

Measurable signs— Is it working?

Once your Grace and Courtesy lessons and Practical Life activities are well established, look for definite signs of your presentations, such as a child rolling a rug with concentration, carrying a tray carefully with two hands, pushing in a chair, or walking slowly across the room. Give Grace

and Courtesy lessons every single day, all through the year, to foster these customary ways of moving, interacting, and caring for the environment and each other. Children love to learn these customs. It’s important to keep presenting them!

Observe to plan lessons

Jot down notes to record the positive interactions or actions you see during the day, and when you realize another Grace and Courtesy lesson would be helpful. This creates your list for the next day and helps you to stay on top of things. We each used to keep a tiny notepad and pencil with us when teaching, and reviewed the notes every evening. You might also use tools from the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector to aid your observation techniques and measuring progress.

In any Montessori classroom, we can look for respect, concentration and joy, to determine whether we are helping the children constructively. All desirable outcomes of Montessori—such as independence, self-control, focus, and confidence—are noticeable when children concentrate for periods of time. They show respect in their physical mannerisms, and express contentment—even joy—in their actions.

As always, refer to your teaching albums daily, consult your Montessori trainers, and read Maria Montessori’s work. Our personal experience has been that going deeper into Montessori, rather than away from it, pays off. Starting a class of children who have

never had Montessori previously is one of the biggest challenges one can face. With Grace and Courtesy, Practical Life activities, and establishing the work cycle as your focus, you will be on the right path!

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Paula Polk Lillard has spent over 60 years as a Montessori teacher, head of school and international lecturer, and the author of four books on Montessori, including Montessori in the Classroom (1997 Schocken Books, originally printed as Children Learning, 1980).

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