

Classroom Observation

We welcome your visit to our classroom. Parent observation is an opportunity for you to get a glimpse of what life is like in a Montessori classroom. This may be your first exposure to the Montessori experience, your first time at our school, or you may be here to find out more about your child's day. In order to give you as clear a picture as possible, we ask that you observe the following procedure. We also offer hints for observing and interpreting what you see.

A Guide to Observation in the Primary Classroom

When you enter the classroom, you will find adult-sized chairs. Please be seated and wait for the teacher to speak to you.

*When you sit down, children may come up to you. Please try not to engage them in conversation. A polite "Hello" and a direct response as to who you are is fine; then quietly *ask the child to return to work.* The children understand that observers come to watch them working and they will understand your response in that context.*

If your own child cries or clings or is silly or ignores you completely, do not be surprised. Children respond differently to having their parents in the classroom than they do in the normal course of the school day or at home. It is the talent of the classroom teacher to deal with your child's response, and it is fine for you and your child to spend the observation time watching the class together if s/he is not able to leave your side.

The teacher will not be able to take time from their classroom duties to converse with you during or immediately after your observation. If questions occur to you while you are watching, please write them down. The teacher or administrator will be glad to answer these questions.

Some hints on observing:

We have found it helpful to offer a guide to observing and interpreting the dynamics of the Montessori classroom. Many parents, upon first entering the environment when it is abuzz with children, feel overwhelmed by the diverse activities that are going on. The suggestions below are intended to be a focus point for your attention.

Visual Perspective: There is more to the Montessori classroom than the activities of one particular child. Naturally, the first tendency of parents is to focus and follow their own child's activities. First time observers may be attracted to one child or a group of the oldest or youngest children. Try to observe in a context - alternate between a wide-angled view of the entire classroom and a focus on a particular child.

Auditory Perspective: Listen to the noise level as it rises and falls. Try to see which groups or individual children are generating the sound. You will hear the normal hubbub of children being together and the special pitch of the children being excited about learning. At times there will be a special peak of excitement of discovery. See if you can differentiate.

Learning: Notice that children learn in different ways. With some types of materials you will see groups of children working cooperatively, and with others you will find an individual child working alone intensely. Still other children are walking through the classroom seemingly not engaged in any direct activity. Very often, this last type of child is engaged in actively absorbing information through

observation of the children and the materials in the classroom. It will help if you alternate your focus on these three learning patterns. Note the ease and joy with which the children work. You will see the intense self-gratification that the learning process affords the child.

Child-child Interaction: Listen to the way - the child and the content - in which children talk to each other. Listen for the level of respect as well as for the normal pushes and pulls of childhood. Very often observers new to Montessori are surprised that a child will zealously guard his/her work and tell another classmate that they are disturbing this work, and that, as a result of this verbal communication, the other child will leave. Other new observers are bemused by the politeness with which one child asks another if s/he would "care for a piece of banana" and the other responds "yes, please".

Teacher-child interaction: Watch the way teachers interact with children and compare it with the traditional classroom mode by which you were probably educated. Notice the way in which a teacher corrects a child, and look at the instances in which she does not. Listen to the teacher's tone of voice with the child. Many parents have asked how one directress can "handle" a group of 36 or more children. The answer lies within this interaction process. The directress is a facilitator of the child's autonomous learning process. She guides rather than insists. She prepares the environment, gives the child the tools to utilize the materials and then does whatever else is necessary to help the child interact with the environment without assistance. Sometimes this involves direct encouragement, at other times indirect appreciation, and even judicious absence. There is a basic respect for each individual child's particular style of learning in the Montessori classroom. See if you can pick this up.

Sociability: Watch the ways in which the children offer assistance to one another - with the materials and with everyday tasks - and the ways that they are directly sociable with one another. The snack table is a good area to keep an eye on to see this dynamic.

The Montessori classroom contains a wide range of both ages of children and of materials that are appropriate to the different developmental levels. Note how the children go to the materials that are appropriate to their developmental level. Note also how the younger children absorb the older children's work simply by being near them, and how, conversely, the older children will assist the younger ones with work that they have already mastered. These seeming "academic" activities have a strong social component to them - one that inculcates a sense of responsibility for and community with all those in the class. There are always pockets of purely social activity present in any Montessori classroom as the child's natural desire to form friendships and be part of an ongoing community is ever present.

Autonomy: Absorb the independence of the children as they do for themselves in the classroom environment. Watch how even the youngest child takes responsibility for his/her personal environment. Watch how, however precariously, a glass pitcher of water or a tray with fragile materials on it is carried. Watch as a child chooses a piece of work, takes it from the shelf, completes the work, and returns it to its place so that the next child can use it.

The generation of autonomy is a function of the prepared environment of the Montessori classroom. What this means is that the child will have available all needed materials, in good working order, to complete a task that has usually been self-chosen. The structure of Montessori provides the child with as much time as s/he needs to complete the task to his/her satisfaction, and success is the primary reward. As you look around the classroom notice the materials, how attractive they are in placement, color, cleanliness, quality, etc. The child is attracted to learn by this environment.