

# VOICES OF AMI TRAINING

## Mixed Ages in the Montessori Environment

Molly O'Shaughnessy, AMI 3–6 Trainer

In her foundational book *The Absorbent Mind*, Maria Montessori wrote, “The charm of social life is in the number of different types [of people] that one meets. Nothing is duller than a Home for the Aged. To segregate by age is one of the cruelest and most inhuman things one can do, and this is equally true for children. It breaks the bonds of social life, deprives it of nourishment.”[1]

Creating and functioning in a living community—in Montessori’s words, forming a “society by cohesion”—means living peacefully and collaboratively. When humans can put the group’s needs ahead of or on par with their own, the result is unity, love, and shared goals. This is why mixed ages constitute such an essential element of any Montessori environment. Because human beings are social creatures, the opportunity to live for three or more years in a community that spans a range of ages (usually three years) supports a child’s continuous and authentic social experience.

Having peers who range in ages and abilities allows children to view their own needs and accomplishments in relation to those of others—without the pressure, jealousy, and envy that may come from direct individual competition. In mixed-age groups, children develop long-term relationships with each other and with the teacher. The children protect and care for each other. In this way, “The class gets to be a group cemented by affection,” wrote Montessori, continuing, “Finally, the children come to know one another’s characters and to have reciprocal feelings for each other’s worth.”[2]

Out of empathy, an older child in a Montessori mixed-age environment will readily help a younger classmate master a difficult task. Being close in age to the younger child, the older one has an emotional understanding of that child’s experience, resulting in a harmonious and sympathetic relationship between them. At the same time, an older child who witnesses a younger one struggling with a difficult task will often show patience, allowing the younger child to sort it out independently before intervening. Montessori explained, “They do not help one another as we do. If a child is carrying something heavy, none of the others run to his aid. They respect one another’s efforts and give help only when it is necessary. This is very illuminating because it means they respect intuitively the essential need of childhood which is not to be helped unnecessarily.”[3]

The presence of younger children in the classroom allows the older ones to take on the roles of caretaker, hero, and mentor through activities such as peer teaching. Giving a lesson they are familiar with reinforces and expands older children's own knowledge and understanding; further, it builds the self-confidence that comes from being an "expert."

The differences in the characteristics of children, even over an age range as small as three years, can open opportunities for all children in a classroom to learn from each other. For instance, younger members of a Montessori early childhood class are still in the sensitive period for order, which lasts up to about the age of five. These children's strong sense of order can serve as a reminder of classroom expectations, influencing the older children, to whom physical order may no longer feel as important as it once did.

Observing the work of the older children foreshadows for the younger ones what they will learn in the future. More than that, however, the younger children absorb intellectual concepts simply by observing. Interaction with the older children exposes them to advanced concepts and stimulates their cognitive development.

A mix of ages also allows for more individualised learning. Children learn at different paces and in different ways. In a mixed-age setting, the teacher can tailor the presentations and lessons to meet the unique needs of both the individuals and the group. A Montessori approach allows for flexibility and adaptability because it is not a traditional curriculum the teacher follows; instead, planning is based on observation.

Although the focus here has been on early childhood, the principle of mixed ages is significant throughout life. For example, Centro Tyrone Guzman, a Minnesota-based nonprofit committed to contributing to the well-being of Latine families through a holistic and intergenerational approach to education, health, and wellness, has incorporated Montessori principles and practices throughout the entire organisation. In one Centro program, Latine youth and elders work together in a company called Manos Montessori to provide the local community with culturally relevant, handmade, and high-quality Montessori materials. Everything from business planning and operations to marketing, production, and sales is overseen by youth and elders together. This intergenerational business collaboration is mutually beneficial to everyone involved. Youth benefit from positive relationships with elders that help complement family dynamics or provide support when other adult mentors are lacking. Studies show that elders are likely to feel happier and more satisfied when they are actively investing in and caring for the next generation. This kind of collaboration helps increase empathy in youth and slow the signs of dementia in elders.

Montessori discovered how to use the natural dynamics of human interaction to benefit both the individual child and humanity as a whole. Offering our children the opportunity to work, interact, and live in mixed-age environments helps them learn early in life how to shape a peaceful world society and sustains the skills for human solidarity into adulthood.

1. Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind* (Laren, Netherlands: Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company, 2007, reprinted 2021; first published Madras, India, 1949), 204.
2. *Ibid.*, 205.
3. *Ibid.*, 207.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Molly O'Shaughnessy is an accomplished AMI trainer as well as a consultant and lecturer. She has led the Montessori Training Center of Minnesota (MCM) for 20 years of expansion, growing a teacher training center into a movement to bring high-quality Montessori education to hundreds of underserved children.

A noted authority in the field of Montessori training, Molly has served on the board of the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) in Amsterdam, was a long-time member of the AMI Trainers Group and serves on the board of the MM75 fund which provides assistance for future AMI teacher trainers. She is in demand as a speaker nationally and internationally, and has presented keynotes and workshops across the United States as well as Canada, Australia, Mexico, China and Europe. She serves as Community Faculty for Metropolitan State University and adjunct faculty for St. Catherine University.

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