

# VOICES OF AMI TRAINING

## Social Cohesion: It's Not Just for Children

**Connie Black, AMI 3–6 Trainer**

In *The Absorbent Mind* Dr. Montessori speaks of “cohesion in the social unit” as she describes the seemingly miraculous process the children were observed to go through. Given the proper conditions, she observed that the children found a unified spirit in the Casa community. They felt a kinship and naturally took a great interest in contributing to the life they had together, no longer capricious, but putting the group foremost and working for its benefit. If we create the conditions, we can see the same phenomenon occur in an adult community.

The Duluth Center for Women and Children is a grassroots non-profit established in 2019, after several years of dreaming and visioning in collaboration with a group of women, whose common thread was finding themselves together in permanent supportive housing after being chronically unhoused, feeling invisible. They bonded around finding stable housing that gave them the opportunity to work on addiction recovery and to begin to heal the traumas of domestic abuse. These strong women refuse to be defined by their trauma and are working to break cycles of poverty for themselves and their children.

We began with Adult Education, providing courses in Parenting, Early Brain Development and Social Entrepreneurship. Honours students from the University of Minnesota Duluth attended the courses alongside the women, traveling from campus to the community room of the supportive housing, bringing this collaborative learning process to the women rather than expecting them to travel to the university. In collaboration with the UMD Cultural Entrepreneurship program, one of the first of its kind in the United States, the women have created a social enterprise.

It was the women themselves who identified the problem they wished to work together to address in their neighbourhood: lack of access to affordable, healthy food. This became their freely chosen work, and they threw themselves into it. They named their initiative “Food Forward Duluth” and designed a logo for it. Honours students in the university program helped them to create a business model, budget, and to operationalize partially prepared meal kits that are delivered in the low-income area where they live. The goal is to provide healthy, nutritious meals that can be easily finished in about a half hour with minimal utensils, and for families to sit together around the table to share the meal. These women and their children have experienced hunger and the obstacles to accessing affordable, healthy food, so they have a deep empathy with others in the neighbourhood who have as well. With some basic education we are observing that children are being engaged in the meal preparation, and that the palates of everyone to appreciate healthier food options is being expanded, leading to

better eating habits, which leads to elevated health. It must be noted that those living in this zip code have a life expectancy of at least 10–12 years less than neighbouring zip codes within the city.

The women plan the meals each week and together with university students and community volunteers, gather in a community kitchen to prepare the food and make deliveries. This initiative has provided the dignity of being employed, part-time for now, of establishing bank accounts, and becoming tax-paying members of the community. The women are experiencing a new level of independence, as well as the interdependence of working together for the good of the neighbourhood. They have embodied social cohesion.

As they have become more competent in the kitchen, learning how to use kitchen utensils and appliances they have never been able to afford, they are experiencing heightened levels of confidence. Interactions with appreciative neighbours as they deliver the meal kits each week has also boosted not only empathy but confidence. As city leaders have taken note of their work and awarded citations, they are experiencing that their sphere of influence within the broader Duluth community has increased.

Most of us prepare ourselves to create these conditions for children and youth. It is important to acknowledge that the conditions we know lead to healthy early development, also hold the opportunity for healing and continued development even in adulthood. We are living out in Duluth, Minnesota in 2024 what Dr. Montessori was able to observe with the mothers in the San Lorenzo community in 1907: deep gratitude for no longer feeling invisible and a new way of living.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Connie Black is an AMI 3–6 Trainer who currently serves as Director of Outreach programs at the Montessori Center of Minnesota. In that role, she oversees their AMI EsF recognized Montessori Partners Serving All Children initiative, whose mission is to provide exceptional, quality early childhood education experiences for underserved communities. Connie is the Director of Training for the Montessori Training Center Northeast's 3 Summer Primary Course(s) offered the satellite location in Winchester, MA. Additionally, she serves as an AMI consultant and examiner. Connie holds a B.A. in English and Theatre from the University of Tennessee Martin and a M.Ed. from Loyola University of Maryland. She has 15 years of experience in Montessori Children's Houses, as well as 8 years in public school settings working with children with special needs. With over ten years of experience implementing "Montessori Year Round" as well as "Montessori All Day," Connie is interested in seeing Montessori education being made more broadly available to all children.

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