

VOICES OF AMI TRAINING

Transitions into the Casa

Jennifer Shields, AMI 3–6 Trainer

“The age of about two to three years is the most important age of life. All the psychic organs of the personality are formed during this time; all that which will form the man to be, his potential, is created. The child is like a spiritual embryo which develops everything necessary for the formation of man.”

Maria Montessori, The 1946 London Lectures, Lecture 19 The Most Important Age p. 138

“I’ll take two two-year-olds over a new five-year-old any day.”

As a primary teacher, I was excited to welcome new two and a half or three-year-olds into our community. Why wouldn’t I want a new five-year-old who is less likely to have toileting accidents, would be more verbal, might seem more “civilised?”

Yes, I did welcome some four- and five-year-olds over the years into our casa. But the littles were fresh, sometimes a bit unconscious of themselves, and an exciting addition to our social group. While the transition might be demanding, I knew we would have three and sometimes four years together and I would have the luxury of time and the privilege to support and witness their development.

How can we decide if a child is “ready” for primary? How can we honour and cherish the new child as they join our casa?

If a child is coming from home or non-Montessori care, we first meet their family. Give them a chance to observe the casa and debrief with them afterwards. Remember this is a transition for the family too. The caregivers are facing a new separation from their child and need to feel trust and accept the change.

The guide can also meet the child and observe for readiness. Consider spoken language and basic movement. Does the family have buy-in with Montessori philosophy and, more specifically, with toilet independence?*

A child who can make their basic needs known through language, who can carry objects, and whose family is open to a Montessori approach and is willing to support toileting at home, should be ready to join.

When a child is coming from an Infant Community (IC) (aka toddler** class, aka young children's community), the IC and primary guides should communicate about readiness, inviting an observation by the primary guide in the IC. Again, the guides will discuss language, movement, and social behaviour. A child who can consistently choose work, take it to a table, work with it, and return it, is usually able to move up to the primary. Conversations with the family are important for all to prepare for the transition.

A word of caution: a child who is kept in the IC once they are ready to move up may regress as the IC will no longer meet their needs. Unfortunately, adults sometimes take this as proof the child is not ready. We can see similar difficulties if a child remains in the casa once in the second plane of development. The decision should be made based on a child's needs, not by the calendar or adults' preference. That is why thoughtful and observant guides might move a child at a time other than September and January. The academic year is an academic and organisational construct, but we should always focus on what is right for the child.

In the move, we support children's human tendencies for order and orientation. Take them on a tour of the casa with their "old" guide in advance. They can identify the child's new cubby; the child can see, flush, and even use the new toilet, and wash their hands at the sink. Perhaps they can bring a flower arrangement from their IC to their new casa.

Once a child has visited and makes the shift to the casa, the primary guide must with great care honour the abilities of this new community member. If they come from the IC, they will not need the first presentations in the practical life album. They have been carrying trays, rolling rugs, and folding cloths already. Or, they may only need a short lesson on a "new" way to do some things.

A child who is "brought back" to the beginning by an unknowing guide may be bored, feel thwarted, and regress. A mistaken interpretation would be, "This child is not ready." In fact, the adults were not ready to meet this child's needs. Children in the IC bake bread, arrange flowers, set the table, water plants, and more. Imagine how far they can go once in primary if we can allow them to build on these experiences.

A new child of two and a half or three can be an incredible asset to our primary community. They will grow to be "solid citizens" at age 6: children who can practically run the casa without the adults.

By taking time to transition our newest children with care and sensitivity, we are investing not only in each child, but in the future of our casa community and building peace in the world, as Dr. Montessori reminded us. One of my orientation course trainees told me, “We are not laying sod. We are growing redwoods.” Yes, it takes time to help the littles adapt, but it is worth every ounce of effort.

NOTES

* We avoid the term toilet training as it connotes an adult-driven process rather than a developmental one coming from the child. Adults prepare the environment and support the process, but independence must emerge from the child. Most children are interested and willing to begin toileting if it is introduced early, around the time they begin to walk, and without pressure. We offer thick, cotton training pants and a low potty or a step stool and full-sized toilet. See Toilet Awareness by Sarah Moudry, and <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1183194.pdf>

** Many Montessorians may avoid the term “toddler” as it connotes an instability on one’s feet and may feel disrespectful. Isn’t that a sensitive take on terminology?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Shields is a primary trainer for the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI). She holds both the AMI Primary and Assistants to Infancy diplomas. Jennifer earned a B.A. in English Literature from Georgetown University and an M.Ed. from Cleveland State University. She worked for over fifteen years in Montessori schools as a teacher, assistant, and administrator. She is an examiner and consultant for AMI and presents at workshops and conferences locally and worldwide. Jennifer joined the Board of the AMI Global in spring of 2019. Jennifer loves observing in classrooms, coaching teachers and teacher trainees, and spreading the insights made by Dr. Montessori.

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