

Building Trust with Infants and Toddlers

By P. Donohue Shortridge

How do Montessori infant and toddler communities meet the needs of children who are trusting while creating a safe haven for those children who are not?

A young child learns in infancy whether or not to trust the world. If his mother can interpret all his signals and respond appropriately, if she provides him with abundant comfort, nurturance and security during these crucial early months, the child establishes a basic trust with his limited world. Secure that his immediate needs are met, this child explores the wider world as a confident learner, moving into the Montessori infant and toddler communities and beyond.

However, if trust has not been established, if responses to his needs are inconsistent, hostile or ambivalent, the child learns to be wary of others, to fear the unknown and thus becomes a reluctant explorer.

Montessori infant and toddler communities welcome both trusting and wary children.

What can we do as Montessori infant and toddler guides to support the children who are already eager explorers, and help establish trust with those children who are guarded? Here are some strategies.

- **Consistency of attendance.** Be there every day. Your predictable presence is the most important factor in trust building. Children under three years old are in the peak sensitive period for social order; sorting out all the people in their lives. The fewer number of caregivers and the more consistently care is provided, the easier it is for the child to establish his internal orientation to others.
- **Consistency in routine.** Create a routine of the day that children can rely on. Predictable routines speak to a child's sensitive period for temporal order. It instills in him the confidence to predict what will happen next, which helps make him feel safe.

- **Consistency in response to situations.** Responding to a situation the same way with the child from one day to the next enables him to come to trust you and trust that the world is an orderly place. In addition, responding the same way to the same situation with every child allows all the children to see that the rules are the same for everybody. No one will be allowed to hurt other people, himself or herself or the environment.
- **Positive redirection of inappropriate behaviors.** Your calm response, enunciating what he may do, allows the child to maintain his dignity, while offering him a strategy for a positive alternative. Conversely, telling a toddler that what he just did was wrong is ineffective because a) he only hears the last part of your sentence, e.g. "Don't hit, that hurts your friend." The child hears, "Hit your friend." And b) it leaves him shamed and thus unable to learn for a period of time from a few minutes to an hour or more depending on the depth of shame he experiences. Use a short sentence clearly stating what the child may do, e.g. "Hands are for your work." And then, gently refocus him on another activity. Stay calm yourself.
- **Voice tone.** This is critical. Young children hear voice tone before they learn words. If they can't trust your tone, they won't tune in to what you say. Is your voice tone rhythmic and well modulated? Too high-pitched? Loud? Your voice tone need not be sing-song-y, but rather naturally melodic.
- **Have a personal, individual encounter with each child every day.** Eye contact upon morning greeting (unless a child is very wary), getting down on the child's eye level when speaking to him, being present in that moment with the child; active listening, giving the child

your full attention and an opportunity for him to speak to you, saying the child's name with enthusiasm and life in your voice all advance his individuation. Your seeing him as a person enables him to, also. The key here is that your warm greeting be natural. If you are forcing it, you might ask yourself why it is not natural for you to open your heart to every child. Nevertheless, the children will spot a fake a mile away.

- **Are you neat, tidy, clear-faced, with fresh breath?** Is your hair or the way you dress a distraction or cause for mistrust? Strong perfume, lots of makeup and nail polish, gum chewing and big earrings, harsh or noisy clothing or clacking shoes can be disturbing for some children.
- **Be a model for trustworthiness.** Your face is the map a child reads as to whether or not you, and thus the outside world are trustworthy. Your open face, calm, accepting and expressive, offers the child a mirror for his own naturally open heart. Your smile: is it genuine? How do you hold your jaw? Is it tight? Do your eyes sparkle and focus? What does your face look like when you are not smiling? Is it calm or stern? You could take your glasses off to show the child your face. Note too, that sunglasses hide your eyes and can be frightening to a new child. Let the children see who you are.
- **Modeling.** The adults in the environment model for the children all day long how people talk to each other, laugh with each other, sing and dance and exemplify grace and courtesy. The children imprint everything you do, so model the ideal for them to imprint.
- **How slowly can you move through the environment?** Can you move in and out of a child's space without breaking his personal

boundaries? A skittish child needs a wider zone of personal space than a trusting child. Learn the cues for each child's zone of personal space. Are you a swooper? Do you swoop in and pick up an infant or toddler without him seeing you coming? Let the child see by your slow, smooth movements that you are approaching.

- **Give the wary child lots of time to adjust to the prepared environment.** You could put something of interest near him without him even knowing you meant it for him, and then give him wide latitude to explore when he is ready. Very wary children may also sleep longer than the others. This is a good sign; it means they feel safe here.
- **Can you get still?** The children will be calmer if you can get still.
- **Each child is different,** but if you can read the cues, you will know when a child needs you not to come too close or to not ask too much of him too soon, and conversely, when to approach. By some mysterious power of natural empathy, the other children already innately know this.

92% of what we communicate is non-verbal. This is especially true for communication with young children because they have not yet come fully into language. How we Montessorians present ourselves to infants and toddlers determines the level of trust they feel in an environment that should be fully theirs.

P.S. Sing every day.

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