



A Guide To Parent Observation In The Elementary Classroom

When you enter the classroom, a teacher will show you to a seat. If possible, she will give you a tour of the classroom and briefly explain the nature and the purpose of the materials. If class is already in session, you will have to do this at another time.

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 the class at work and they will understand your response in that context.

The teachers may 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 by telephone or in person at a mutually convenient time.

We ask that you stay for the pre-established time period. You are welcome to remain longer if you make arrangements beforehand.

Some hints on observing:

We have found it helpful to offer a guide to observing and interpreting the dynamics of the Montessori classroom. There is more to the Montessori classroom than the activities of one particular child. Try to observe in a context - alternate between a wide-angled view of the entire classroom and focus on a particular child. Listen to the activity level as it rises and falls. There will be some individual learning activities, some small group learning activities, or a large group lesson being presented.

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 different 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. If your child has experienced a Primary Montessori education, you will notice the different behaviour patterns in the Elementary student. While Primary students are focused on "process", Elementary students become aware of "finished accomplishment and product" as well.

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.

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 a judicious absence. There is a basic respect for each individual child's particular style of learning in the Montessori classroom.

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 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 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: 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 chosen by the child. The structure of the classroom provides the child with as much time as s/he needs to complete the task. Elementary students have assigned work as well as free choice in their academic presentations. It is their responsibility to stay focused and current with their assignments.

Conclusion: We recognize that you will not be able to sort out and see all the dimensions of the classroom that are outlined above, and hope that you are not disappointed in us or yourself when you discover that all aspects of the classroom have either not been present during your observation or that you did not see it all. We know that learning how to "read" the Montessori classroom is difficult as first, but we know that with each successive observation your skills will become increasingly honed. We look forward to your next visit to the classroom, and are eager to share with you the excitement that we feel in being a part of the child's growing years.