

Normalization 101: A Neuroscientific Approach

Presented by Julia Volkman for the South Carolina Montessori Alliance, October, 2011

Key Findings from Neuroscience— We Learn...

1. Through relationship/emotional connection.
2. Indirectly by absorbing our surroundings.
3. Directly by application: actively laying our hands on a work.
4. Dynamically: we progress and regress predictably on the road to mastery.
5. Contextually: while we are learning, some environments prompt our memory more than others.
6. More easily when we have a positive/optimistic orientation.
7. When we are inspired/intrigued/curious.

The 3-Keys to Normalization...and inner peace:

1. Self-Discipline
2. Self-Awareness
3. Self-Satisfaction

Freedom & Discipline

The children do not arrive normalized and, therefore, they are not ready for complete freedom. Yet, normalization requires freedom and freedom requires self-discipline. Self-discipline arises from:

- Concentration
- Practice
- Choice/the Will

The “Normalized” child

- Has internal peace, joy, tranquility, happiness
- Is able to concentrate
- Can choose work and complete full work cycle
- Can handle frustration
- Can make rational choices
- Can adapt
- Has self-discipline/self-control
- Is independent
- Is secure within himself
- Has a positive, balanced self-image and self-esteem
- Is aware and considerate of others and their needs

The Development of the Will

When they first arrive in the children’s house, many are firmly settled in Stage 1. By the time the normalized child enters the second plane, after three years with us, they can be fully established in stage 3. We must be careful to adjust ourselves to meet the developmental stage of the child before us.

- Stage 1: The child does something only if s/he wants to
- Stage 2: The child does something because s/he is asked to
- Stage 3: The child does something because it is the right thing to do

Role of the Montessori Guide

- Prepare the environment
- Maintain the environment
- Demonstrate how to use the materials/how to BE in the environment
- Inspire the use of the child to meaningful, purposeful work
- Get out of the way!

“Every unnecessary aid is an obstacle to development.” -Maria Montessori

The Human Tendencies

When we see a child who is not normalized, we must ask ourselves which of his human tendencies is obstructed by the physical and/or procedural environment (i.e., what we actually do not simply what we imagine we do).

Human Tendency	Things that Encourage this Tendency
Communication	The children are greeted upon arrival. They are free to respectfully speak with others throughout the day.
Gregariousness	The children are given explicit Grace & Courtesy lessons on how to engage socially with others (e.g., how to say hello, how to ask for/offer help, how to invite someone to play).
Exploration	The work cycle is long enough for children to delve into the deeper works and they are free to choose their work.
Imitation	The adults are mindful of their movements and speech. They are role models of gracious, kind, and joyful living. Their movements are consistent (e.g., you always stand up and tuck in your chair before lifting the work try to return it to the shelf).
Independence	The children are taught how to tend to their coat, backpack, and lunchbox upon arrival. They can get the materials they need without help. They are given instruction on how to use the toilet and sink. There is enough time for the child to be independent in transitioning to the next event.
Movement	The children are free to respectfully move about the environment without being questioned or interrupted. The environment allows for and inspires purposeful movement.
Order	The materials are in sequence and organized. The walls are uncluttered and include art at the child’s eye level (nothing above) with plenty of white space in between wall hangings. Procedures are consistently followed.
Concentration	The children are not interrupted during the work cycle (by adults, other children, or sounds such as bells).
Precision	Each material is complete and includes the means for the child to maintain the material in the course of using it (e.g., drying off a damp tray).
Perfection/Control of Error	The activities allow the children to correct their own errors. The adults refrain from praise/criticism but joyfully notice and rejoice in meaningful work.
Repetition	The children are both encouraged and inspired to repeat the lessons.
Self-control	Adults pause/adjust to the children’s time table as the children develop their will. The room is calm so that the children are not overloaded by sensorial input.
Work	The children are shown how to revel in the modes of activity. They are free to choose work that they’ve received a lesson on. The work has meaning for the child. They witness adults working (e.g., taking observation notes).

Practical Neuroscience: Adjusting the Environment

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The Room

1. Everything that is in your albums is on the shelves (and nothing else).
2. The shelves are sequenced (left-to-right, top-to-bottom in order of increasing challenge) and organized into subject areas (e.g., practical life, sensorial, language).
3. All materials are in good repair/maintained/clean/complete.
4. The child is invited, encouraged, and inspired to care for the environment.
5. Allow for independence; the child does not have to seek assistance at any point (e.g., to obtain a supply) in order to complete the entire activity.
6. Practical Life and cultural materials have a meaningful purpose in teaching a specific skill needed for daily life or as a preparatory exercise that is foundational for such a skill (e.g., a preliminary exercise on putting on, taking off, and folding a smock which they will need to wear when painting on the easel)
7. Practical Life materials Match the developmental needs of the children (e.g., no spooning work if everyone has mastered the use of the spoon).
8. Everything that is within reach/sight of the children is *meant* for the children (e.g., teacher storage items are out of sight).

Download detailed information on setting up each area of your classroom at:

www.maitrilearning.com/resources

Giving Lessons

While there will be variations in how we work with each individual child, we can maintain the intention of precisely honoring all eight of the following steps.

1. Invite the child to do the work with you.
2. Go together to the shelf and name the work.
3. Demonstrate how to carry the work to the work area.
4. Give the full presentation, including putting the work back on the tray ready for the child to use, before giving the child his/her turn (invite the child to help carry cloths, etc. to maintain interest).
5. Give the child his/her turn and *fade/observe* while they do the work (step in as necessary, preferably without words).
6. Inspire the child to repeat the lesson (e.g., Say, “now we can mix them up and sort it again!”).
7. Tell the child they are free to do the work as much as they like (or, if they are not ready, clarify that you’d like to do it together again next time).
8. Return the work to the shelf together, ready for the next child to use.

Redirecting

You must intervene immediately if behavior is:

- Dangerous
- Destructive
- Disrespectful

Otherwise, pause and observe. Look to see which of the child’s human tendencies is being obstructed. Is there something in the physical or emotional environment that can be adjusted?