

VOICES OF AMI TRAINING

The Power of Silence

Ann Velasco, AMI 3–6 Trainer

“One day I came into class holding in my arms a baby four months old. ...The silence of the little creature struck me, and I wanted the children to share my feeling. “See,” I said, “it isn’t making a sound.” And, joking, I added “Look how still it keeps...None of you could keep as still as that.” To my amazement I saw an extraordinary tension in the children who watched me. It seemed as though they were hanging on my words, and felt deeply all I was saying. “It’s breathing, how soft it is. None of you could breathe without making a sound...” The children, surprised and motionless, softened their breath. In that moment there was an extraordinary silence. The tick of the clock, which generally could not be heard, became perceptible. It seemed as if the baby had brought with it an atmosphere of silence such as does not exist in ordinary life. At once the children sat still, controlling even their breath, and so they remained, with the serene, intense look of those engaged in meditation.” (Maria Montessori, The Secret of Childhood)

In the passage above, Dr. Montessori describes the moment that inspired The Silence Game, an activity that would go on to become a hallmark exercise in Montessori Children’s House (3–6 years) environments. During the first months of school, through a variety of games, exercises and activities, we support the children in their ability to control their bodies, and to sit in a state of stillness and silence for gradually longer periods of time. Then one day, the children can be asked to bring themselves to a state of silence directly. The adult will move a moderate distance away from the children, and will whisper their names, one by one. Upon hearing their name, they will walk to the Guide striving not to make a sound, taking care that not even their footsteps can be heard.

This exercise seems simple on the surface. But in reality, it is a manifestation of many of the outcomes that we strive for in our Montessori environments. For it to be successful, everyone in the room must want to work together to achieve silence. If one or more participants are not able to quiet their voices and bodies, the group will not achieve a collective silence. So, this is an excellent lesson in **cooperation**. Doing one’s part to make the Silence Game successful shows a high degree of **respect for others** and an understanding of what is best for the group as a whole.

In order to be able to bring one’s body to stillness and silence, the child must have **control over their movements**. They must have developed a certain level of **self-awareness and willpower**. We focus on stillness with the children because movements create sounds, and so in order to achieve silence, we must inhibit our movements. The power of their will is exercised as the children exert their own self-control over their bodies and movements.

This journey towards stillness and silence can be likened to mindfulness practices. Mindfulness is essentially paying intentional attention: creating awareness of our present moment. When we sit with the children and help channel their awareness towards their arms and hands and the movements they can make, and then guide them to rest their arms and hands by bringing them to stillness, it is an exercise in mindfulness. Mario Montessori once likened silence to a microscope for sound; that when the children are in a state of silence and stillness, it brings into focus all of the surrounding sounds that are normally imperceptible. Their attention may then focus on the faint buzzing of an insect, the chirp of an outside bird, or the swish of a dress of a classmate.

Of course, we as adults must embrace the magic of silence and stillness ourselves before we can fully share it with the children. As with every aspect of our daily lives, we must model that which we hope to see reflected in the children. We must quiet our own bodies and voices as we move about the environment. If we still our mind as we observe, it allows us to see what is true in a more objective way. If we spend less time talking and more time engaged in deep listening, making space to be fully present and awake with the child who is talking to us, focusing less on our own thoughts, then we can better hear what the child is trying to communicate to us.

Dr. Montessori once said, “Silence is missing in human life.” This is truer today than ever. By offering the children the opportunity to experience the magic of silence and stillness, they too will be able to internalize it and make it part of themselves. They will carry it with them into their adulthoods, and into the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ann Velasco is an AMI Primary Trainer and has been the Director of Training for the Southwest Institute of Montessori Studies based in Phoenix, Arizona since 2014. She conducts Primary level teacher-training courses to prepare those who wish to work with children ages 2 ½ – 6. She collaborates with the Indigenous Montessori Institute in New Mexico to offer teacher training that centres Indigenous learning systems. Ann’s first introduction to Montessori was as a child. Her mother was a Montessori teacher, and so Ann had the benefit of a Montessori Children’s House education. When she became a mother herself, she knew she wanted her own daughter to have that same experience. Although her professional background was in economic development up until that point, when she began researching Montessori as a parent, she consequently decided to pursue a career in Montessori education as well. She taught for 12 years in both primary and elementary settings before completing the AMI Training of Trainers program. Ms. Velasco holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Marketing and Business Administration from the University of Arizona and a Master’s Degree in Education from Loyola University of Baltimore. She holds both Primary and Elementary Diplomas from the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI).

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