

VOICES OF AMI TRAINING

“An Eye That Sees, a Hand That Obeys, a Soul That Feels”: Nurturing the Child’s Artistic Development

Liza Davis, AMI 3–6 Trainer

Art and music are often regulated to an elective class in many educational approaches. In Montessori, though, art is understood not as an isolated subject or a prescribed project, but as a natural extension of the child’s developmental process. Creative expression, defined as the use of imagination or original ideas—particularly in artistic work—is fundamentally linked to the way the child perceives and interacts with the world. In this sense, the focus is not on crafting or producing products, but on cultivating the conditions in which imagination and expression can emerge freely and authentically.

Dr. Montessori’s call to help the child nurture “an eye that sees, a hand that obeys, a soul that feels” (Advanced Montessori Method, Volume II) underscores the deep integration of perception, physical coordination, and emotional awareness in the development of creative expression. Artistic development is an unfolding supported by carefully prepared experiences and materials that refine the senses and strengthen purposeful movement.

Focusing on the 3–6 child’s experience in the Casa, for example, sensorial materials offer a precise and intentional education of the senses, allowing children to perceive subtleties in colour, form, texture, and spatial relationships. These materials do not teach art per se but prepare the perceptual foundations necessary for nuanced observation—an essential precursor to artistic work. The ability to distinguish variations in tone or shape, to recognize form, to sense texture and pitch—these are internalised through repeated sensorial experiences and later reemerge as elements of expression.

Alongside the perceptual, the physical must be readied. The development of fine motor control and hand–eye coordination through practical life work and early writing activities prepares the hand as an instrument of expression. The metal insets, for example, and other art activities that offer a means of refining lightness of touch, flow of movement, and artistic sensitivity. The act of tracing, filling, shading, and patterning all engage the child in creative processes, even as they build motor control and visual discrimination.

Underlying all of this is the cultivation of a feeling soul—a child capable of experiencing beauty, wonder, and the impulse to represent inner experiences outwardly. From the earliest years, the child is immersed in an environment designed to offer aesthetic impressions: orderly materials, beautiful natural elements, and art from of diverse cultures and styles. Sculpture, textile arts, and artefacts from diverse cultures offer rich points of engagement.

A carefully chosen print or a small sculpture, rotated periodically and paired with stories or context, can provide meaningful inspiration. Books with rich imagery and narratives about artists deepen the child's connection to human creativity. These encounters are not didactic but inspirational, planting the seeds of aesthetic awareness. As imagination awakens as the child develops, children begin to construct mental images, create from experience, and venture into symbolic representation.

This approach to artistic development is not a supplemental class or enrichment activity that can be added or removed at will. It is embedded in the very structure of the environment, and in the lived experiences of the child within it. Just as movement, language, and relationship are essential to human development, so too is expression. To eliminate opportunities for artistic exploration is to misunderstand its function—not as a subject to be taught, but as a manifestation of the child's inner life. We do not teach creativity; we prepare the space in which it may unfold. We extend a sustaining hand not to the product of creation, but to the spirit that seeks to rise.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Liza Davis is the Interim Executive Director and Co-Director of Pedagogy and 3-6 Training at the Montessori Center of Minnesota (MCM). She joined MCM in 2009 as Head of School at Cornerstone Montessori School, MCM's early childhood program, and helped found Cornerstone Montessori Elementary School, a separate public charter school. Liza has served in various key roles –including training, marketing, mentoring, and assessment coordination—to support MCM's mission. Before joining MCM, she served as the head of pedagogy and as a 3-6 guide of a startup Montessori school in Germany. Liza has a Master of Arts in Education with an emphasis on Trauma and Resilience from Concordia University, a BA in Art History and American Racial Multicultural Studies from St. Olaf College, and an AMI 3-6 Diploma from MCM.

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