

VOICES OF AMI TRAINING

Connection and Independence from Birth to Three

Erin Smith, AMI 0–3 Trainer

Independence is a topic that tends to be given “top billing” in any discussion of Montessori education. But despite the prevalence of lectures and articles on this subject, I can’t help but think that even as Montessorians we get a bit off course in these discussions.

Topics that begin with how to support a child in becoming independent can quickly segue into conversations about how to demand, tempt or coerce a child into behaving with more independence. When looking at independence through this lens, it becomes behaviour that renders the adult less necessary to the child’s success. And in my experience when people describe the ways they support children in being more independent from this perspective, it is often a process rife with power struggles and frustration for both children and adults.

Here is the reality when it comes to independence: Maria Montessori emphasized the importance of independence because in her years of observing humans, as an anthropologist, physician, and therapeutic educator of children, with a wide range of support needs—all human beings grow toward independence, naturally. Furthermore, when humans experience daily life in an environment that is prepared specifically for them, they can do so with what Maria Montessori referred to as, “effortless effort.”

So, what does this mean for us? It means we don’t have to force children to be more independent. We don’t have to enter power struggles and insist, “You do know how to put your shoes on! You did it yesterday.” We don’t have to shame them by saying, “Be a big girl and do it yourself” or praise them, “I was SO proud of you when you put your work away without asking for my help this morning.”

When we interject in this way we distort the natural evolution of the child’s budding independence, with its intrinsic focus, especially in the first years of life. When we shift the child’s focus away from their self-construction and on us instead, their everyday actions get reflected back to them as a kind of performance, of which we are the judge. I often think that it is these early experiences that are at the root of both people-pleasing and oppositional or defiant behaviours, later in life.

If the child doesn’t need our feedback or doesn’t benefit from our feedback, what do they need from us? The young child needs our presence and our connection. They need to know that they are not alone in this great, big world when they are so small and new. They need to be

surrounded by adults who understand that humans are not born with the ability to regulate their own behaviour or their own nervous system. Instead, human infants and toddlers rely largely on the nervous system of their caregiver, to give them important information about their world and about themselves.

The young child is often asking (through a variety of behaviours): “Am I safe?” and “Am I seen?” If the perceived answer is no, they try to create a sense of safety by “calling in” their caregivers. And what is the best way to do that? It depends on the responses of the adult. If their caregivers are people who respond to the child’s bid for connection with openness, empathy, and love—the child’s communication might be playful and affectionate. This might look like a child wrapping their arms around their caregiver with a spontaneous hug.

If the child is feeling disconnected from the adult, their bid for connection might look like defiance, “naughty” behaviour or a temper tantrum. The reality is that no adult is connected to a child all the time. But responsive caregivers working closely with children will inevitably help them to move further along the path toward greater self-regulation and independence.

The key to successfully supporting this important aspect of development is Trust. We must trust the laws of development that Maria Montessori so keenly observed and so generously shared with the world. We must trust that the child is doing the best they can, in every moment. We must trust the child’s effort to communicate with us—in whatever form it takes. And we must trust in the power we have to inform the child’s understanding of the world, of human beings, of relationships and we must wield that power responsibly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Smith has been working in Montessori environments since 2001 and as a classroom guide for sixteen years. She has worked as an Assistant, Nido guide, Toddler guide, Primary guide, Parent-Infant Class Facilitator and Instructional Coach. Erin is also an AMI Trainer at the Assistants to Infancy level and an A to I Consultant for AMI/USA. She has worked on AMI training courses in the United States, Europe and Asia. Erin’s personal Montessori journey began at The Montessori Institute (TMI) in Denver when she attended training in 2002–2003, learning from Judi Orion and Cha Cha Vidales. She went on to earn her Masters at Loyola University in Maryland in 2005. Erin completed her Primary training with Annette Haines in 2008. Upon entering AMI’s Training of Trainers program in 2010, Erin returned to TMI to support students and further her own learning, later joining the TMI faculty as a Trainer in 2018. Erin is honoured to be working on behalf of TMI in the role of Executive Director, amongst a team of talented and dedicated Trainers at the A to I, Primary and Elementary levels, as well as the wonderful administrators and staff. TMI is an AMI Training Center with a long legacy and a bright future, and it is pleased to serve such a special organisation.

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