

VOICES OF AMI TRAINING

Collaborating Toward Sleep Independence

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In her 1946 London Lectures, amidst a talk entitled “Education for Independence” Maria Montessori dryly joked, “We say we love the children very much, but we do not love them at six in the morning!” Alongside the seriousness of her approach to child development, Dr. Montessori used humour to great effect in her lectures from time to time, and her point here is truly funny because it holds a grain of truth that any honest parent can recognise. Walking alongside a child on their natural path of development is not easy. It can at times be quite inconvenient and even exhausting. The young child, driven and directed by their powerful hormone, sensitive periods and human tendencies does not possess the reasoning faculties, nor the life experience to understand abstract concepts like “the benefits of adequate sleep” or “the importance of developing functional independence.”

It is therefore incumbent upon the adult to prepare an environment for this young child that offers an appropriate balance of independence and collaboration in all aspects of daily life – including sleep. Moving into and out of various states of consciousness during sleep is a complicated biological process controlled by the central nervous system and endocrine system working together to alter one’s overall state of alertness and the electrical activity in the brain. During one seven hour stretch of sleep, a typical adult will cycle multiple times through light sleep stages, deep sleep stages, and dream stages. A newborn baby transitions between these same stages of sleep but in a completely different order and for much shorter periods of time, developing sleep cycle maturity slowly throughout the 15 years of life.

Each stage of sleep benefits us in different ways and all stages of sleep are important to our health and well-being. Studies have shown again and again that inadequate amounts of sleep can cause problems with memory, concentration, motor skill performance, and emotional reactivity. More serious, long-term sleep deprivation has been directly connected to increased risks of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, cancer, depression, anxiety, suicide, accidental injury and death, and Alzheimer’s disease.

All this is to say, sleep is vital to our survival, but it is complicated! Children must be allowed to develop independence at times of sleep transition over time according to their own unique path of development, and just as in other areas of development like movement or language, no stage of development should be rushed or skipped for the convenience of the adult. Biological temperament plays a large role in the regularity of functions like sleep, and some children will move quickly toward independence while others require more collaboration for a longer period of time, depending on the work of their nervous system, endocrine system, and their life experiences. The role of the adult is to observe the child, meet them where they are and walk alongside them as their trusted collaborators, willingly receding as the child gains independence, but offering their availability as a point of reference as needed.

Leaving a child alone in discomfort during their transition to sleep does not help them develop independence. A child may exhaust themselves and fall asleep eventually, but experiencing high levels of stress on a daily basis does not help the child build self-confidence or trust in the world. Falling into an exhausted sleep after a period of high stress is simply a resignation on the part of the child. There may be a time when an overwhelmed, exhausted adult can no longer safely collaborate with a tired, crying baby, and in this case, the child should be placed somewhere safe and another adult should be asked to take over collaboration. This should be the exception and not the rule, however, and there are ways to arrange the environment to make sleep transitions a time of comfortable collaboration rather than a time of struggle and stress.

One key aspect of this balanced environment is order. Whether it is nap time or bedtime, the transition from a wakeful explorative state to one of rest and falling asleep requires routine and predictability. The list of steps should be the same each time, they should take place in the same location, and any adults collaborating with the child should do so with a consistent attitude and level of response. All this predictability allows the child to feel confident and relaxed throughout the transition, which is key, as tension and worry on either the part of the adult or the child do not lend themselves well to a peaceful transition to sleep.

Looking at the physical environment, the most important developmental aid we can offer is the floor bed. Collaboration between a baby and an adult during sleep transitions is all but impossible when using a raised crib, as the only options are complete connection (the baby held in arms) or complete separation (lying alone separated by the bars of the crib). A floor bed, on the other hand, allows for collaboration in which the adult can sit comfortably next to the child if needed, give some gentle pats, sing a song, or just be present as the child relaxes

and transitions to sleep as independently as possible in their own sleeping space. The adult can also gradually remove themselves from the process as the child demonstrates greater independence. In this way, the child practices falling asleep on their bed and waking up in the same basic state, all while building foundational trust that the world is a safe place where their needs will be met, as well as trust in themselves as they become more confident and comfortable transitioning between wakefulness and sleep.

We must consider the development of sleep independence as we do so many other areas of development like the ability to walk, use the toilet independently, or move through the weaning process at mealtimes. The adult allows the child to gain independence little by little, dedicating ourselves to the same level of collaboration where sleep is concerned. It is not the adult's role to "get the child to sleep" but to create an environment where their independence comes about as a happy by-product of the adult's gentle and willing collaboration, observation, and withdrawal from the process over time in a prepared environment.

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Molly Schayot is an AMI 0-3 Trainer and Examiner, as well as the School Outreach Coordinator for the Montessori Institute of North Texas. She earned her AMI 0-3 Diploma from MINT in 2006 and led toddler communities in central and north Texas for 15 years. She worked on 0-3 diploma courses for many years with Director of Training Sara Brady and developed MINT's first blended 0-3 diploma course. Molly graduated from Southwestern University with a degree in English and worked in corporate public affairs before joining the Montessori community professionally. Molly is married to Jason Schayot. They live in Dallas and have three daughters who bring them great joy.

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