

10 Tips for Successful Montessori Classroom Management

One of the most difficult parts of Montessori education is managing a large classroom of multi-age children. It's easy to stray in one direction or another: too much freedom, and the kids run wild; too much control, and the children don't get to make their own choices. What is the best way to maintain a healthy balance? Here are some tips that may prove helpful.

1. Leverage Positive Peer Pressure

Peer pressure can be a powerful force in the life of a child. Rather than letting it take on a negative form, use it for good. Pair up a child who has difficulty making choices with one who is very good at it. Encourage (and compliment) children when they are polite and kind with each other.

2. Be Firm, But Kind

Sister Mary used to call this having a hand of steel in a glove of velvet. The best way I can describe it is this: the child should know that you are confident and assured, but directions should be issued in a gentle voice. If consequences are necessary for negative behavior, they should be issued in a calm manner. The children should know that you care about them enough *not* to let them hurt themselves or each other.

3. Be Consistent and Fair

If you enforce certain consequences with one child for a specific behavior, be sure to do it with all of them. Special treatment results in hurt feelings and confusion. If you are in a situation where enforcing consequences is impossible (a field trip, for example), be sure and deal with the situation when you return to school. Don't let misbehavior slide just because circumstances are tricky.

4. Ask for Another Perspective

Struggling with a specific child or situation? Ask another teacher to observe and share some thoughts. It's amazing what someone can see when they are not emotionally involved in the situation. Be open to constructive criticism, and be ready to accept that you may be part of the problem. That's so hard to do, but often it's something that must be faced before changes can be made.

5. Control the Environment

Sometimes the simplest changes can make a huge difference. For instance, in one classroom where I observed, the teacher sat with her back facing the door when conducting line time or reading a story. This meant that the children faced the door, and were constantly distracted if someone walked by. Flipping this around (even though it meant she needed to rearrange a little bit) made a huge difference. What part of the environment can you change?

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6. Create and Post Ground Rules

This should ideally be done at the beginning of the year. Have the children brainstorm about rules, stated positively (i.e., “be kind” rather than “don’t hit”). Write them on a piece of paper and have all the children sign it. Post it in the classroom and refer to it often.

7. Role-play and Talk About Situations

Children love to role-play – it’s a fun and non-threatening way to cope with negative behaviors. Use this method: if you see an unpleasant situation between two kids in class, bring it up at line time without mentioning names (details can be changed slightly, too). Choose two children to role-play the situation and figure out a good way of resolving it. Note: make sure you don’t choose the original two children! They need to watch someone else so that they can become objective observers of the conflict.

8. Teach Conflict Resolution Skills

Children can be taught how to listen to opposing points of view and how to compromise so that everyone can feel satisfied. Tried and true methods include having a “peace table” or “peace corner” where kids can go to resolve conflict. A pleasant object can be kept on the table for kids to hold while talking: whoever is holding the object gets to talk while the other one listens.

9. Get Ideas from the Children

Sometimes when you are completely stumped by the situation, children can be very helpful. They often observe things that adults don’t notice; their whispered conversations at recess can contain more information about classroom conflicts than the teacher will ever know about. Ask them for their advice; you can do this in a group, if the situation includes most of the children, or only with the children involved. Let them suggest ways to improve their own relationships.

10. Use the Age Differences to Your Advantage

Multi-age classrooms can be a challenge, especially since children are working at their own pace regardless of grade or age. Still, having a mix of older and younger children can work in your favor. Older children, especially those familiar with the ground rules and with conflict resolution, can often mediate between two other children. Many times children are willing to open up to another child and share hurt feelings in a way that they wouldn’t share with an adult.

If necessary, appoint a specific child or children to the task of “peacemaker” in the classroom. You will know who is capable of handling that responsibility graciously. Keep open lines of communication with the peacemaker, so that they are not unduly burdened with classroom conflicts. Let them know you’re available to help whenever it’s needed.

We Can Do It!

Most of us will spend the rest of our lives in the delicate balance between freedom and responsibility. No book can tell us exactly how to achieve this equilibrium; our wisdom will be hard won after many years of experience. Each group of children will be different, and our lives will change with the years as well. In spite of all these different dynamics, we can have balanced, harmonious classrooms where learning is a joy.