

Montessori For Life

How Montessori principles inform best practice for intergenerational engagement.





Introduction

I was a Montessori early childhood teacher for many years before my experiences with my own beloved, ageing grandparents inspired me to begin exploring ideas associated with aged care support and positive ageing. This quickly led me to focus on the benefits - for child and adult alike - of intergenerational engagement. Bringing children and older adults together enhances the emotional well-being, cognitive outcomes and social success of everyone involved (including the teachers!) The more that I learned about intergenerational engagement, the more I was struck by the many parallels and overlaps between Montessori principles and the 'best practice' recommendations for intergenerational interactions. This brought me to the realisation that Montessori is not just for classrooms, or for aged care settings, or even for intergenerational engagement: Montessori is **for life**. The same philosophy and practices apply in all settings to support human dignity and facilitate flourishing. It is this intersection that I describe throughout this document.



This brief summary is designed to empower any educator, aged care worker or other enthusiastic individual to create or contribute to a meaningful intergenerational program. In particular, it may help Montessori practitioners understand how they can translate their existing expertise into intergenerational experiences. Montessori settings are perfectly positioned to embrace intergenerational engagement, with so many of their underlying principles and practices acting in harmony with best practice in intergenerational interaction. However, intergenerational engagement can - and should - be accessible for every child, and for all older adults. There is no reason that an educator or aged care practitioner needs prior Montessori experience to utilise the techniques described here in relation to their intergenerational endeavours.

I use the term 'Grandfriends' to refer to the older adults participating in intergenerational engagement. This is the phrase that was most naturally and broadly adopted by educators, children and families in our intergenerational setting, Echoes Montessori in Adelaide, South Australia. For clarity, 'intergenerational' engagement refers here to any type of intentional interactions between different generations. It is not limited to particular ages - children of any age could be involved, from infants through to adolescents, just as there is no threshold an older adult must reach before they start participating in these experiences with their younger counterparts. Intergenerational engagement, within this document, is expansive enough to include a variety of different activities, programs or environments. The ideal intergenerational experiences are frequent and consistent, so that deep relationships can develop, but even occasional interactions are beneficial and to be celebrated.

The **Montessori For Life** guide is divided into three sections - *Place, Person, Perspective*. Each section gathers a collection of Montessori principles by a theme that is vital to high quality intergenerational practice. We design and develop a **PLACE** that facilitates effective engagement between generations. We use practices that empower each **PERSON** to participate meaningfully and comfortably. Within these places and in relation to these people, we look through the lens of a **PERSPECTIVE** that upholds dignity and respect to inspire meaningful and powerful intergenerational engagement.

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PLACE

The Montessori method is deep and detailed in its consideration of how each human being is influenced and inspired by the physical environment around them. Many systems now recognise the impact of space and place on human functioning, health and well-being. By applying the Montessori **principles of place** within an intergenerational context, we create a physical environment that facilitates inclusion and fosters connection.

Prepared Environment

One of the roles of the Montessori educator is to be the 'architect of the environment'. They carefully consider the design, layout, furnishings and decor of the physical space, and are particular about the quality and purpose of materials or objects that they introduce to it. The goal is to ensure that the physical space sparks the child's curiosity and enables 'auto-education'. That is, the child has the capacity to learn spontaneously through exploration within the environment, rather than depending on the teacher to feed them information. These same principles apply in intergenerational contexts. Whether it is a permanent space that will always be shared, or temporary adaptations to a classroom to welcome visiting grandfriends, the practitioners facilitating the experience must act as the architects of the intergenerational environment so that it can spark engagement⁽¹⁾. In practical terms, this may mean considerations such as whether a grandfriend with a walking aid or wheelchair has space between tables to navigate through the room, whether the furniture comfortably accommodates children and grandfriends alike without creating a physical barrier between them, and whether the materials on the shelves (or at tables) have appropriate 'points of interest' that will be as appealing to an adult as a child.

Aesthetics

One of the defining features of a Montessori environment is a sense of simplicity. The tendency for minimalism is more than an aesthetic preference, it is a practical tool for cultivating concentration and protecting a sense of self-regulation. Highly decorated settings, with many bright colours and images all vying for attention, can be overstimulating for children and adults alike. Montessori environments, by contrast, lack this contrast! Instead, there is a sense of peace and harmony. Neutral colours, natural materials, and a sense of order prevail. In a classroom the lack of clutter protects growing minds from overstimulation, and in the case of intergenerational engagement also preserves ageing brains from the difficulties of distraction. A minimalist Montessori aesthetic is as appropriate for the child who needs to concentrate as it is for the adult who needs to focus. It also provides a particular emphasis on inclusion, as a child with sensory processing difficulties is scaffolded for success in a calm, orderly room just as an adult with Dementia, hearing loss or vision impairment is empowered by this space ⁽²⁾.



Freedom of Movement

An uncluttered environment not only offers a sense of visual harmony, but also provides sufficient space for free movement. The items that are included in the room are arranged to leave gaps between the furniture, and to encourage navigation from one place to another when collecting materials for an activity. Children are encouraged to move freely as a way of directing their own learning, finding their way to the activity that has captured their interest. The items that are *excluded* from the room are equally important, with the educator being very particular about what is or isn't allowed in the room to avoid crowding, overstimulation or distraction. Dr Montessori understood the value of controlled, coordinated movement for the child's developing mind and body, so we provide room for that movement and use furnishings and space to suggest pathways to navigate with care. When grandfriends join the space, this is equally important to their minds and bodies. Their movements may be a little slower than they once were, their steps needing to be more measured. Here, the uncluttered and open spaces show them how to safely make their way from where they are, to where they want to be. For adults and children alike, this freedom of movement protects their dignity by providing autonomy. They can make *choices* about what they do, when they do it and with whom. They are not placed in a chair at a table and expected to make do with what is in front of them and who is beside them. They can exercise their autonomy, building that sense in childhood or preserving it in their later years (3). Freedom of movement also ensures the best practice of ensuring that the program will be personalised, as each participant has the ability to express their interests and preferences. Even those who are non-verbal, whether because they are still developing language or because cognitive decline has impaired that faculty, can navigate to a trusted friend or move to the material that sparks their curiosity.

Just as we have to prepare a special environment for sport, like a tennis court if we are to play tennis, the child must be given the means for the kind of exercise which is necessary for his life. It is essential that the small child has the opportunity for movement.

Dr Maria Montessori, The 1946 London Lectures, Pg 125



Materials

The inimitable Montessori materials invite the initial interest that prompts free movement, then continue to provoke controlled movement throughout their use. This primarily relates to movements of the fingers and hands, which Dr Montessori called "the instruments of intelligence" (4). This mindful movement activates attention and provides tactile sensory input to strengthen impressions and recollections. Dr Montessori identified that the use of our hands is how we learn most effectively. Dr Cameron Camp, who pioneered the application of Montessori principles with adults living with Dementia, highlights that using our hands is also how we *remember* (5). The hands-on nature of the Montessori materials utilises the power of muscle memory. For children, they are developing their repertoire of controlled movements through these activities, such as refining their pincer grip each time they grasp the wooden knob to retrieve a cylinder from The Cylinder Block. For grandfriends, engaging in these hands-on tasks can feel empowering, provoking a response in a well-developed catalogue of muscle memories that highlight their capabilities and experience. The activation of muscle memory is also a form of inclusion for grandfriends living with cognitive decline or Dementia. These motor movement memories are stored in the cerebellum and tend to be retained longer than conceptual or declarative memory. Opportunities to use hands-on materials, as opposed to more abstract activities or language based games, ensures that those who may struggle to recall or verbalise their thoughts can continue to use their hands as 'instruments of intelligence'. This involves them in a meaningful, dignified manner and can actively improve their brain function by strengthening the hands (6).

PERSON

In intergenerational interactions, each **individual person** needs to be empowered and included in a way that creates a meaningful and cohesive **community of people**. These Montessori principles apply in intergenerational contexts to uplift each person and unite the group of people.

Autonomy

A sense of positive self-esteem for children and adults alike is a goal of intergenerational learning (7). One of the ways that Montessori practice aids the development of self-esteem is by enabling autonomy, allowing the learner to choose their own pathway of participation. The learner, not the 'teacher', decides when, where, how, why and with whom they will engage in activities. This self-determination fosters a sense of identity, confidence and capability for children (8). These characteristics are equally important for older adults, with autonomy allowing grandfriends to maintain their self-image as a whole and capable person.



Mixed Age Range

A defining characteristic of Montessori classrooms is the mixed age range, rather than a single year level. Montessori children follow a 3 year 'cycle', from 0-3, then 3-6, 6-9 and so on. This ensures that the younger, or less confident, children have experienced peers to support them. It allows children to learn by teaching, acting as mentors to not help others while reinforcing their own understanding. It establishes a courteous community with clear boundaries for prosocial behaviour, as there are always experienced role models for the new arrivals to emulate. It also ensures that diversity is not only accepted, but expected. Children of the same age do not follow the same developmental pathway, yet classrooms with a single year level imply that they should. In a mixed age classroom it is clear that all the children will be at different levels. Variation is embraced and valued. These same principles and benefits apply when the mixed age is extended to include grandfriends, who will also vary in their abilities and interests. A mixed age range helps to focus on each unique person, not their age, which is conducive to a respectful and positive intergenerational experience.

Observation

The Montessori method prevails upon educators to develop their understanding of the child through observation, not assumption (9). While there are commonalities between all children, every child in the Montessori classroom is studied so that they may reveal their own individual attributes, strengths, interests and needs. This process is both a science and an art. It requires the scientist's open and analytical mind to unpack the observation, alongside the artist's creativity and imagination to determine how to respond. This process applies equally to grandfriends, ensuring the facilitator approaches them with an open-mind and curiosity to learn about their personalities and preferences. An ongoing process of observation and responsiveness ensures the intergenerational program will evolve meaningfully to suit its participants. This occurs at the individual level, with each child and each grandfriend understood and supported to follow their own interests and comfort level in the ways that they participate. It also happens at the collective level, with the types of activities, events or interactions changing over time to reflect the group dynamic.



Practical Life

Dr Montessori advocated for children to learn practical tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, constructing or cultivating gardens, to put them on a pathway to freedom through independence (10). She strongly believed that empowering children to learn the skills they need to care for themselves, for others and for their surroundings would liberate them from the harmful state of continued dependence. Today, we might frame this in terms of avoiding a state of 'learned helplessness', whereby an individual's psychological state and personal functioning are compromised by the feeling that they do not have the power to resolve their problems (11). The Montessori 'Practical Life' curriculum is like an inoculation against learned helplessness for children, and an antidote for it for older adults. Ensuring that children and adults practise specific practical skills helps them solve individual problems in a literal sense, such as ensuring they know how to use a screwdriver effectively to repair a chair. It also develops the sense of *capacity* and *self-confidence* to approach problems with a positive and solutions-oriented attitude. It helps to avoid the pitfalls of learned helplessness and can aid children and adults alike in maintaining a psychological landscape that is both functioning and flourishing.

Practical Life experiences in an intergenerational setting, especially when developed in response to the expressed or identified strengths of the grandfriends, also help to reinforce the holistic sense of 'self' for adult participants. It allows them to use their skills, thereby reminding themselves and others that they are capable and contributing members of society. It also gives them an opportunity to teach and pass on those skills, positioning them as the 'mentor' at a time in their lives when they are too often limited to being on the receiving end of care and information from others.

As well as preserving a positive self-image, working together on Practical Life tasks exercises fine motor movement. This helps children develop their dexterity and precision which can then be applied in a range of contexts. Neurons that fire together, wire together, so the more often a child repeats a grasp or movement, the deeper that cognitive connection becomes. Hand movements during a practical task (such as grasping tweezers, or squeezing the bulb of a baster) create a muscle memory that scaffolds the child for success with seemingly unrelated tasks like holding a pencil to write. Meanwhile, grandfriends maintain their dexterity - and therefore their independence - through these experiences. Brains take a 'use it or lose it' approach to determining which pieces of cognitive real estate are valuable enough to maintain. When older adults stop exercising their motor movements, the rate of decline is more rapid. Inviting them to undertake practical tasks within the joyful context of connecting with children and sharing their skills gives deep motivation to participate in the task. This is good for the hands and the mind since cognitive function can be maintained and improved through experiences that strengthen the hands.

PERSPECTIVE

The lens through which each intergenerational participant is viewed can be the difference between a tokenistic (or even patronising) intergenerational activity, and a truly significant and sustainable intergenerational connection. Here we find Montessori principles ready and waiting to inform a **respectful perspective** that inspires a high-quality intergenerational program.

Prepared Adult

During their Montessori training, educators encounter the idea of the 'preparation of the adult'. This refers to the process of self-examination and self-improvement that each individual goes through in order to realise their potential not only as a professional but as a person (12). This preparation aids the educator in deconstructing their own unconscious biases and achieving the sense of humility needed to truly view the child with the respect and reverence they deserve. It helps the educator to see them not as empty vessels waiting to be filled by a knowledgeable teacher, but as capable and complete human beings who will create themselves. This concept of personal preparation can apply to all practitioners in intergenerational settings, who must actively and intentionally work to view the children and adults not as 'students' or 'patients' respectively but as equal collaborators and true friends.



Dignity

Dr Montessori described children as “the forgotten citizens” (13). She identified that children were not valued as they deserved either socially or politically. She implored parents, educator, politicians and policy-makers to treat children with the same respect, and afford them the same rights, as adults. In modern society, another group could easily be described as our ‘forgotten citizens’, with older people often being marginalised, muted or mistreated. The Montessori perspective ensures that facilitators treat children and grandfriends with dignity, and encourages them to go a step further by advocating for this more broadly. Celebrating and sharing intergenerational programs helps *demonstrate* the dignity of children and older adults, showcasing their capacity, capability and connections to ensure that they are no longer ‘forgotten citizens’.

Respect for ability

Montessori is essentially a strengths-based approach, with a curriculum that ensures children build upon prior experiences to develop their abilities. It views the child as inherently capable, and empowers them with opportunities for exploration and experiential activity to build their own knowledge. This same attitude applies to the adults involved in intergenerational interactions. The focus is on what the participants **can do**, with the teacher or facilitator responding to help build on that existing skill or established strength. There is not a deficit model of focusing on correcting what the grandfriends can't do, which is sometimes found in care facilities or rehabilitative programs which encourage exercise of what the person is struggling with the most. This type of treatment has a place and purpose, but for best practice in intergenerational programs we wish to highlight and build on ability.

Intrinsic Motivation

Montessori classrooms are devoid of sticker charts to track achievement or lolly jars to reward desired behaviour. Montessori educators will not announce that a child is a “good girl” or “good boy”. Nor will they ever use fixed language such as “naughty” to describe a child or their behaviour, or impose a punishment for a child’s mistakes. Rewards, person-based praise and punishments are all forms of external motivation. They are pressures coming from outside of the individual designed to shape, moderate or manipulate their behaviours, usually to reach a goal determined by the person applying the pressure. When viewing the child through a lens of dignity and capability, it is difficult to justify why they would need to be motivated with stickers or punished by time outs. Furthermore, Montessori educators recognise the inverse relationship between rewards and motivation, with the ‘overjustification effect’ causing individuals to lose interest in tasks when a reward is on offer (14). Montessori educators know and trust that the child is naturally and inexhaustibly motivated by an innate desire to learn. This is more than enough to propel them, so there is no need for the teacher to compel them. Importantly, this is sustainable because in a Montessori setting the children are *free* - to move around the room, to follow their interests and to direct their own learning. Since the educator is not trying to herd everyone towards a common, predetermined goal it is easy to allow each individual to follow their own intrinsic motivation. In an intergenerational setting, the idea of cultivating and protecting intrinsic motivation is just as important. Each participant deserves the dignity of not being patronised or controlled with the promise of a prize. With adults in the room, it is also particularly important to avoid condescending (albeit well-intentioned) person-based praise like “You’re so clever!”. This can be replaced with specific, process-based feedback, which acknowledges effort, fosters self-esteem and encourages a growth mindset (15). Grandfriends and children in an intergenerational setting, program or activity should be free to follow their intrinsic motivation, allowing them to embrace their interests and express their disposition. A best practice intergenerational program is not ‘one size fits all’, but a place where everyone can find a place to truly fit.

Play is the work

Those who are new to Montessori sometimes find it surprising, or even unnerving, that educators refer to the activities, experiments and games in the classroom as “work” rather than calling it “play”. This choice of language is intentional, designed to express the *importance* of the child’s experiences. It is not meant to discriminate between types of activities by saying that a child must ‘work’ rather than ‘play’. The point of this terminology is to highlight that the child’s play **is** their work, and their work **is** play. The two are one and the same. The vital task of the child is to learn through play, to use effort and energy to build their sense of self and their understanding of the world. Every time the child plays, they are working on their own self-development. Whatever activity a child works on, it is playful through the joy they feel and the creativity they express. This perspective of play as work, and work as play, is equally applicable in an intergenerational setting. The shared experiences should be playful, as this helps to infuse them with joy which promotes positive well-being for children and grandfriends. A playful approach also ensures emotional enrichment, which contributes to stronger formation and retention of memories. However, the ‘play’ in an intergenerational environment is still ‘work’, in the Montessori sense that it is vital and important to the continued growth, development and satisfaction of every participant, regardless of age. Intergenerational activities are fun, but not frivolous. They are contributing to the psychological health, physical functioning, social well-being and cognitive ability of every child and every grandfriend. In these settings, we are together as we learn to play and play to learn.

“Playtime for them is a time of learning by practice...Every plaything he uses is a tool for his work. Play time is never wasted. So long as the children are busily absorbed, they are working at their own development.”

Maria Montessori Speaks to Parents, pg. 65 & 34



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Resources

Montessori For Life, www.montessoriforlife.com.au

Australian Institute for Intergenerational Practice (AIIP), www.aiip.net.au

Centre for Applied Research in Dementia, www.cen4ard.com

Generations Working Together (GWT), www.generationsworkingtogether.org

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www.montessoriforlife.com.au



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Dr Montessori said, "the greatness of the human personality begins at the hour of birth" and our Echoes children prove this. Our Encore grandfriends show us that this greatness continues through every hour of our lifetime.

Learn more:
www.samontessori.com.au/echoes/