

## Observing in the Classroom

by Margot Garfield-Anderson

**Y**ears ago a dear friend of mine enrolled her child in a local Montessori school. This child was very near and dear to me, so when I asked his parents if I could go and observe him in class, I was most excited.

The school used an observation sheet that guides visitors in the process (see page 25). It also helps visitors to remember to be mindful of Montessori classroom etiquette. Sheet in hand and excitement high, I went into the classroom and tried to be as unobtrusive as possible.

In this particular Montessori school, I was allowed to sit in the classroom, and I was delighted with what I observed; however, I found out later that my visit had some unexpected results. When I quietly left the classroom, my three-year-old friend did not understand that he was not leaving with me. He was quite upset and, lacking the verbal skills to clearly articulate his confusion, it took his Montessori guides some time to reassure him that his parents would, indeed, pick him up later in the day.

My granddaughter Blakely's school has a one-way observation mirror. Her parents chose not to tell her that I would be there at her school until it was time to go home for the day. This way she was not thinking about me watching her. But this is just one of many possible ways a school might offer a parent (or grandparent) the opportunity of observing in the classroom. Some schools, as the one I described earlier, allow adults in the room but require very quiet and unobtrusive involvement, so that the normal



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routines of the class are not altered nor disrupted. With proper understanding, visitors can observe the children's routines and get a sense of what goes on in the classroom during the day.

Whether you are behind a one-way mirror or seated in a Montessori classroom, now what? Why are children taking things off of shelves and then working alone? Where is the teacher in all of this? How is it that these children are so totally engrossed in what they are doing that they don't even sense a foreign presence in the room?

Since you will probably visit in the morning, it is important to remember that the morning is the time for what is referred to as the "children's uninterrupted

work cycle" (typically, the first 2.5-3 hours of the day). This is the time of day when children (who have eaten a good breakfast) are at their best levels of attention and very focused on their 'work.' Since not all children move or are motivated to learn at the same pace, this time provides them an opportunity to concentrate on the task or project they have chosen. This learned ability to focus will help them throughout life. This is why Montessori discourages the interruption of a child who is hard at work, unless it is very necessary to do so. Interruptions include questioning a child; so when you are observing, you are not there to engage in conversation.

While you are observing your own student, take time to look at others in the environment to get a

sense of what else might take place during this time. Take notes so that you can ask more specific questions of the child later in the day. Instead of asking, "What did you do in school today?" to which the answer is usually, "Nothing," ask something like, "What was it like working with the Pink Tower or Metal Insets or Brown Stair?" You will probably get a much different answer.

Observing in the classroom is a wonderful way for parents and grandparents to connect deeper, understand greater, and reinforce more of the Montessori way of life. Enjoy each experience with them because before you know it, they grow up! ■