



# MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

December 2005

## Have Yourself a Montessori Christmas

With holiday shopping upon us, the staff at CFMS would like to make a few suggestions about presents for children from a Montessori perspective. We start with a few general principles, then give specific suggestions for each plane.

### *For All Ages*

- **Less is more** - Children need limits on their toys. Your child should only have access to the number of toys he or she can keep neat. Other toys can be kept in storage, and rotated in and out, perhaps on a monthly or quarterly basis. After the holidays, old toys can be rotated out to make room for the new ones, or even retired (stored for the grandkids, or donated to a younger friend or a charity).
- **Order is essential** - Storage space is a precious commodity in any child's room. Have low, open shelves for primary-aged children, and lots of bins or drawers for older children to organize. Children can and should be tidying up regularly; if toys are constantly all over, they can disappear into storage.
- **Reality can be as much fun as fantasy** - While children may ask for any glittery licensed merchandise they've been exposed to, they actually crave, and get more long-term enjoyment out of, simpler and more reality-based playthings. *Bratz* and *Yu-gi-Oh!* will only last until the next heavily-advertised thing comes along, but a real mop or screwdriver provides skills for a lifetime. Not only will a good, generic wooden dollhouse or blocks last for generations, they'll do more to spark your child's imagination and creativity than the latest plastic brand-name toy.
- **Family fun is number one** - What children really long for most of all is more fun time with their parents. Board games to play with parents, tools or art materials that come with parental supervision and lessons, read-aloud books, and gift certificates for one-on-one special events are far more memorable and durable than the latest gadget.

### *Gifts for Primary Students*

- Child-sized but truly functional cleaning tools: broom, mop, bucket, sponge, crumber, duster, scrub-brush, carpet-sweeper (and chances to really use them!)
- Blocks, including pattern blocks (small, colored geometric shapes to make patterns)
- Beads for stringing; sewing/lacing cards
- Child-sized, sturdy tables, chairs and easels
- Books, including children's cookbooks, holiday books, art books, poetry, etc.
- Real, child-sized kitchen tools: bowls, spoons, cutting boards, vegetable slicer, etc. (so your child can really help in the kitchen!)
- A big cardboard box of thrift-store dress-up clothes and accessories
- Puzzles - especially maps, realistic multi-cultural scenes, letters and numbers
- Simple board games
- A play parachute, a tent (or a big, colorful sheet that could be either)
- Realistic baby dolls whose life-size clothes need buttoning, tying, lacing, etc.
- Simple, acoustic musical instruments

### *Gifts for Elementary Students*

- Artist-quality art materials and papers, sketchbooks and journals
- Musical instruments (and lessons or how-to books)
- Craft kits - knitting, beading, woodworking, etc.
- Science kits - microscope, chemistry set, rock tumbler, etc.
- Gardening tools, seeds and potting equipment
- Blocks, including pattern blocks (really, they're not too old!)
- Art materials - primary-sized and washable
- Cameras, from disposable to digital to video
- Really big books of lists and facts (almanacs, how everything works)
- Simple cookbooks (at child's reading level)
- Tool kits and projects for using them, like do-it-yourself furniture
- Sewing kit; beginner's sewing machine

- Family board games and puzzles
- Gift certificates for one-on-one day trips (museums, window shopping, hiking, etc.)

### *Sources for Great Gifts:*

- Local independent toy stores - Franklin's, Child's Play (D.C.), Crown Educational (DC)
- Thrift stores
- Hardware and garden stores

### On-line:

- <http://www.montessoriservices.com/> (cleaning, kitchen, gardening, tools)
- [http://www.communityplaythings.com\(furniture\)](http://www.communityplaythings.com(furniture))
- <http://www.michaelolaf.com> (practical life, science and cultural)
- <http://www.ravensburger.com> (puzzles and games)
- <http://www.melissaanddoug.com> (wooden puzzles, dollhouses, etc.)
- <http://www.thinkfun.com> (puzzles and games, brainteasers)
- <http://www.hearthsong.com> (toys, games, books, art)

## **From the Director of Education**

Recently, I had the privilege of visiting with two longtime friends of CFMS. Heinz Bondy was Director at CFMS for a number of years. Mariann Payne is an alumnae parent whose two children are now in high school. Heinz asked about our children who he had last seen when awarding them their graduation diploma when they finished 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Mariann and I indulged in a little maternal bragging. Mariann shared that her 10<sup>th</sup> grade son Zach was planning to organize a soccer camp next summer to share soccer skills with neighborhood kids while her daughter Olivia is busy looking at colleges and doing an internship at the National Zoo. I filled Heinz in on my oldest son Luke and his friend David (also a CFMS alum) who are preparing to spend 6 to 8 weeks in Latin America next summer with the community service oriented "Amigos" program.

When we finished with our boasting, Heinz remarked, "It seems that CFMS alumnae continue to lean towards service kinds of activities. It makes sense to me since I recall from my days at CFMS that children learn to help each other right from the beginning."

His comment stirred an appreciation in me for what many of us take for granted at CFMS. "*Children learn to help each other.*" I couldn't help but recall a few images from the

past week. A three year old rolling mats to straighten up the mat box for the class. A five year old "giving a lesson" to a three year old on how to make the "red rod maze". A third grader helping a younger classmate find a particular material. Two fifth graders helping out at a local soup kitchen and saying "yes" to every task they were given. A sixth grader helping the dance teacher during the primary dance class. These kinds of things happen every day at CFMS. They are commonplace for the children.

Heinz believes that it is this kind of "climate of service" that leads our alumnae to the various adventures they choose. Heinz is now in his 80's. He worked his whole life in education and dedicated himself to making good education accessible to lower income families. He continues to stay close to the educational world as a volunteer with a group working to create improvements in public schools. He reflected that the schools that seem to have the greatest success with children are marked by an atmosphere of care and trust. He remarked that CFMS was founded with these qualities, he did his best to nurture them during his time at the school, and it seems that they continue to flourish today.

One final image remains in my mind. I stopped by the school Saturday morning to pick up something in the office. There busily sweeping, scrubbing, and dusting were the members of one of the coop work crews. The climate of service is not experienced among the children alone; they have wonderful models in the adults in their lives.

Judy Walsh-Mellett

## **From the Director of Religious Education**

### *December in the Atrium*

In every atrium in the school the prayer table has been covered with a purple cloth - a sign of Advent. The children have also made Advent wreaths for each prayer table, with a candle for each of the four weeks of Advent. One will be lit the first week, two the second, and so on at the weekly gathering for prayer. Our readings will focus on the prophecies of the Old Testament that speak of the Messiah, and the narratives at the beginning of the gospels of Luke and Matthew of the birth of Christ. Both sets of readings are full of images and names that are also signs of who Jesus is. Here are a few examples:

- *The great light* - a sign of hope in "dark" times
- *Emanuel* - God with us
- *Prince of Peace* - the source of peace who calls us to be peacemakers

- *Bethlehem* - a tiny town that reminds us how God brings great things out of small and humble places, and that Jesus is born in the city and line of David, the great king of Israel
- *A manger* - Jesus, who offers himself in bread and wine, is laid in a food box at his birth
- *A star to guide the magi* - the good news is proclaimed in creation itself, and Jesus has come for all people.
- *The three gifts of the magi* **gold** - a gift for a king, **frankincense** - a gift for God, and **myrrh** - a gift for one who will die, point to the humanity and divinity of Jesus

As we place these prophecies and infancy narratives in the hands of the children we invite them to meditate on the meaning of these signs. Our work, songs, and art will celebrate the birth of Jesus, remind us that he is with us today, and (for the older children) offer us the hope of the *parousia* when "Christ will come again."

I know the season of Advent is busy with holiday preparations, but I hope you and your family will protect a short time each day to recall and reflect on the meaning of the season. Here's a sample format: light a candle (or an Advent wreath) and say together "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9: 1). Pray for the light of Christ to shine in every part of the world and of our lives. Sing an Advent or Christmas carol together.

The Center for Children and Theology has a set of four prophecies introduced in the primary atrium that form a beautiful star when mounted together. You can put one up each week of Advent and place your crèche beneath this star at Christmas. The cost is \$10. Send a check back to the school made out to the "Center for Children and Theology" with "prophecies" in the memo line if you would like a set sent home with your child.

May the light of Christ shine in each of your lives this month.

Catherine

## From the Primary Classes

### *Kristi's Class*

Last year on the first day of school, a new three-year-old boy bolted across the classroom, running directly over a white rug where a five-year-old girl was working. Calmly she stood and walked over to the three-year-old. She placed her hand gently on his shoulder and said in a kind

way, "Can I show you how to walk around a rug?" He looked up at this bigger child with a bit of awe, and nodded his head. Together, they walked back to her rug where she silently demonstrated carefully walking around the rug, and then invited the child to practice.

Any child that's been in our classroom for a while knows, you just don't walk on or over white work rugs. But of course, in our homes, we walk over rugs. That's what they are for. There was no way that new three-year-old could have known. (Even adults visiting our classroom will walk across those rugs unknowingly.) But for that five-year-old to recognize that he couldn't know what she had known for years, to respond not with a frustrated, "DON'T RUN OVER MY RUG!" but rather gentleness and patience was an amazing thing to witness.

Children of this age are deeply attuned to their social environment and how the people in their environment interact. They want to know how to navigate their social world. Grace and Courtesy lessons are the way we give the children in the classroom the means to practice dealing with a social situation. Grace is harmony between mind and body; Courtesy is harmony between oneself and others

These lessons are very effective in the classroom, and can be a very effective parenting tool as well. When there is a problem in the classroom, such as work not being put away, or pushing another child when they are blocking your way, I always try to think, "Is there some way I could address this problem through a lesson?" Children always love Grace and Courtesy lessons—they are a little bit pretend, but they also get to see the details of how to do things.

That little girl's lesson on walking around a rug is a good example of what a Grace and Courtesy lesson looks like. Any explaining about why or how is kept to an absolute minimum. These lessons are given at a neutral time, and not as an immediate correction of a mistake. Lessons are short—quite basic and brief—allowing them to master a particular skill.

A lesson involving grace might be how to walk in the classroom, how to hang up your coat, how to push in your chair, even how to blow your nose. I remember being nine years old, and handing a tissue to a very snotty-nosed three-year-old cousin. As I held the tissue to her nose, I said, "Okay, blow." My cousin just stood there. She didn't know what I was talking about. Now as a teacher, I realize I have to say first, "Let me show you how I blow my nose." And then I can say, "Do you want to practice it?" Then I have to step back and resist the temptation to wipe their noses for them.

A lesson on courtesy might be, how to greet a visitor, how to introduce yourself, how to say excuse me, or I'm sorry.

A typical lesson might go something like this lesson on what to do when someone does something you don't like, "I'm going to pretend that I'm a little girl in the classroom. I'm a little girl and I'm just three-years-old. And Clara, could you pretend that you are also a little girl in the classroom. I'm going to pretend that Clara just tugged on my shirt. I don't like it when Clara tugs on my shirt. Listen to what I say to her when she does something I don't like." The child and teacher act out scene in which Clara pulls on her shirt. "Clara, I don't like it when you pull on my shirt."

After the lesson, the children are given the opportunity to practice. At another lesson, the focus would be on, how to listen and what do say when someone tells you they don't like something you did. An example might be, "I heard what you said. I'm sorry I did that." We always try to make it clear that adults too might do something that you don't like, and it is okay to say to an adult, "I don't like it when you do that."

These two lessons—how to tell someone you don't like something, and how to respond when someone doesn't like something you did—are probably my favorite two *Grace and Courtesy* lessons, because they are such important life skills. If you've spent any time around two or more children, you have been bombarded with a barrage of, "She took my toy!...He pulled my hair!...She pushed me." Our response at school is always, Did you talk with him? Did you tell her what you didn't like? And then, Did he listen to you when you spoke? If the child who feels abused has not been listened to, an adult goes over as a mediator, trying not to solve the problem for them, but to make sure that child is heard. Often that is what they need more than anything, to feel heard. I've seen so many of our children stepping in to mediate conversations between two children that are having a conflict, or even, in some cases, to mediate a conversation between adults.

There is a Ghandi quote that I love, that says, "Peace begins with the child." That little five year old, who showed the three year old how to walk around a rug, displayed an amount of emotional competence and empathy that is rare in our world (think of driving on the Beltway with thousands of hurried drivers, or standing in line during the Christmas season). One of our deepest desires in the Montessori classroom, is to help nurture a space where children can develop that sort of emotional and social intelligence.

## From the Lower Elementary

Looking into our lunchroom trash, what might you see? Crusts from sandwiches, half eaten apples or other fruit, and one day someone had even thrown away cereal and milk.

Another by product of lunch is plastic. Lunchables (though discouraged) packaging, juice boxes, sandwich bags, etc. So much so that occasionally our children do talk about the waste in the lunchroom and try to come up with a way to curtail it, but it doesn't take long for them to feel overwhelmed by the task.

Well it is time for us adults to get the ball rolling. I just read an article on Obento boxes. The Japanese art of making appealing lunches for their children, with the least amount of trash. I would like to share some of the highlights with you.

First I do believe we are on the right track in sending our children to school with reusable lunch boxes and cloth napkins. Now if we can just add an assortment of smaller washable food grade containers that will fit into the lunch boxes, we could eliminate assorted packaging. So we are already on the way of throwing less away.

We should also be aware at just how much our child can eat. Some children just have too much of a serving size or just too much of an assortment of food for them to choose from.

Let's just keep it simple. It is the policy at C.F.M.S. to send home uneaten food items, although that doesn't always happen. But take a look at what your child does bring back home to help you gage what is an appropriate serving size of different food items for your child.

Next we take a cue from restaurants and think presentation, presentation, presentation. We can start by being aware of the different colors and textures as well as taste that make up the lunch. And this doesn't have to be a monumental task. As you are making dinner set aside some of the broccoli and red peppers you are cooking to add to your child's lunch. Having chicken for dinner? How about making a little chicken salad for tomorrow's lunch? Reserve a few spoons of that pasta to make a pasta salad.

Still feeling a time crunch? When you're shopping buy those baby carrots, grape tomatoes, pre-cubed cheese, or yogurt covered raisins to liven up the lunch.

Now if you're anything like me old habits are hard to let go of. Just the fact that it is the way you've always done it makes it seem easier. So how about just trying this one

day out of the week to see how it goes. And then when your comfortable with that add another day, and then another.

I'd like to make a request to our "closet" chefs. The ones out there that love to cook and have no problem putting appealing but simple meals together. Send in just one idea that you've found works with your child. I'd like to share them through the Wednesday envelope. Something simple, healthy, CHEAP, and doable let's say in about 10 minutes?

If we can commit, with our children to trying just one new lunch a week, we just may find that little by little we have incorporated a new habit. One that will help our children get a handle on all the trash thrown away at lunch and, over time, help them to see a difference.

How about it?

Sincerely,  
Mrs. Proctor

P.S. (My contribution)

sliced turkey rolled up  
6 whole wheat crackers  
cucumber slices  
6 oz. yogurt

### From the Upper Elementary

The freedom to choose work is a key to the Montessori method. It is through freely chosen work that the children respond most deeply to their environments, and incorporate them in the process of self-construction. Knowing this, I've still struggled with implementing freedom in the classroom. Classroom management tools such as a weekly work plan, a minimum number of minutes per subject and monthly, planned topics in various subjects are compromises. They limit the students' freedom to choose work, but they have helped me make sure that students are being exposed to the things I think they need to learn.

This fall I've begun trying to give the students more freedom in a number of ways. In October, as a team-building exercise, I had students do group projects. They chose their groups, their topics and the way they would present the topics. One group chose to design and build a cupcake tower as an experiment in calculating volume (as measured in "cubic cupcakes!") Another wrote a report on tigers, and built a tiger habitat with a moveable tiger puppet inside. Two groups wrote stories about prehistoric people, illustrated with dioramas. One story featured the discovery of agriculture by a formerly nomadic tribe, and

the other was the adventure of a girl who gets separated from her tribe and ends up having to rescue them from kidnappers. The last group, also experimenting with volume, built an Arctic scene featuring igloos and polar bears constructed from sugar cubes. On the day the projects were due, we held a "project fair" and invited the lower elementary and afternoon primary classes to come view the completed projects and ask questions. Then we celebrated by demolishing the cupcake tower and eating the cupcakes.

In addition to facts about the Arctic, volume, editing stories or tigers, the students learned how to plan and complete a long-term project. In addition to synthesizing and expressing what they learned about prehistory, (both in the classroom and thorough our Ancient Ways program), zoology, geography or geometry, they learned a little more about themselves and their friends, and how they work together as groups.

This past week, I took another step toward freedom, with what I called "free choice week." Previously, I required students to do two works in each subject each week, and each work had to take at least 20 minutes. I also told them what lessons they would be receiving each week, and made sure they had at least one lesson per subject per week. During free choice week, these restrictions would be dropped - they would only have the lessons they asked for, and they could work on any subject for as long or as little as they chose. I gave them "lesson request forms" the previous Friday, asking them to request one math, one language and one other lesson for the week. Those were the only lessons I planned for them, and the rest of the time they were responsible to keep working.

The results were encouraging. The students asked for a wide variety of lessons, and had no trouble keeping themselves working with less intervention from me. They often spent much longer on a certain work or subject than I would ever have expected. Many students surprised themselves by working nearly the whole morning on one work! Several groups wrote stories, others worked on making card games for their foreign language groups. Many students ended up having more math lessons than usual - sometimes several in one day - because they got interested in what their friends were doing. (Overall, math was the most-requested subject for lessons, by far.) Several groups began new projects or began planning Going Out adventures.

When we evaluated the week on Friday afternoon, the students and I agreed it had gone well, but we're making a few changes. First, they felt a little unfinished if they had spent all week on certain subjects to the complete exclusion of others. They decided it would be good to have

the goal (not requirement) of doing at least some work in each subject each week. The older students also expressed some frustration at the feeling that they'd "done all the works" in certain areas, so we agreed that there should be at least one new work in each subject available each week. (They hadn't noticed that I do this already.) Finally, some students expressed the need for more structure, either through more lessons or more suggestions if they were at a loss for what to do. We brainstormed some ways to provide this, and came up with several solutions. We decided to continue with the free choice plan at least through Christmas, when we'll evaluate it again.

My hope is that through increasing the freedom to choose, students will be more deeply and genuinely engaged in their learning. My concern, of course, is that they won't get "enough" of something I think is important, or that society expects them to know. Still, through observing these children carefully, and providing a wide variety of work to choose, I think we'll cover the bases over time.

Melinda

### **From the Board**

Searching for a new home can be exciting, joyful, nerve-racking and overwhelming, and our search for a new home for CFMS is no exception. Although the home search committee has done some research and looked at a number of properties, it is important that the CFMS family community define a vision of its "dream home" so that the board can best represent the community's interests as it continues in this process. The Strategic Planning Committee of the Board is developing a long-term process by which we will chart our course for the home search and the future of CFMS. Over the next two months, parents, students, and the greater CFMS community will be asked for their input on two defining attributes of our new home: Footprint (physical aspects such as size, green space, etc.) and Location.

As a first step, following the Thanksgiving Liturgy, about a dozen parents were able to stay for a brief conversation about this initial phase. The greatest energy in the group surrounded aspects of outdoor space and the school's surrounding area, and parents offered diverse thoughts about green space features, safety issues, and features of the surrounding community (environmental quality, public transit accessibility, economic and cultural diversity, etc.) Above all else, the parents' enthusiasm and passion were an important reminder of what calls many of us to the school: the unique sense of community that stems from our

commitment to our children, to the school's mission, and to one another.

Before the holidays, parents will receive a survey with questions relating to Footprint and Location. We will then hold a community visioning forum in January to discuss the survey results and reflect on our collective vision for the school. Finally, we will hold a focus group for those interested in learning more about the Center for Children and Theology and the impact of any future relationship between the CCT and CFMS on our new home. By the end of January, we hope to have a clear vision that the Home Search Committee can use to evaluate and prioritize opportunities that will bring us as close as reality allows to our dream home.

This is a first step in a long-term process, and there will be many more opportunities for your input into the design and future of CFMS. We welcome any suggestions or volunteers in this important effort, so please don't hesitate to contact any of us if you have questions, ideas, or wish to get involved.

Peace,

The CFMS Strategic Planning Committee  
Anna Lovejoy, Jodi-beth McCain, Maureen Dwyer, and  
Jeremy Welter