

# Understanding Montessori

## The Kids Talk Way



### Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood

November 29, 2009

*One is none. Two is ten.--Icelandic proverb about children*

For a while, this parenting stuff can seem like you've got it under control. Then comes the second child. As Uncle Norm told me years ago, "Before I had children I had ten theories about raising children. Now I have ten children and no theories."

As a new parent a cold lack of confidence in the pit of my stomach seemed to never go away. I appreciated the humorous assurances "my elders" could give me. Now I know that there are guiding principles of human relations that can give us confidence about heading in the right direction and calm our apprehensions about raising children.

Principles from Stephen Covey's book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, are some that I have found to be invaluable. One is "Seek first to understand, and then to be understood."

Part of our training as Montessori teachers is to observe the child at work. At its essence, observing the child engaged in an activity gives us a window to understand

who he or she is.

What an uncommon thing it is in our lives to have someone desire to understand us. Someone who will put their own work, attitudes and prejudices aside to observe us, searching to understand our uniqueness.

As we observe children work (engaged in purposeful activity) we get an understanding of who they are, their likes and dislikes, their strengths and weaknesses. These observations allow us to be truly helpful to the child, especially a child whom we may view as difficult, unpleasant, or problematic.

As we seek to understand through observation, we will see patterns emerge in a child's behavior. Perhaps a tantrum frequently occurs between 9:30 and 9:45 a.m. Offering a snack at 9:00 a.m. results in no more tantrums.

Perhaps a child who is "naughty" (one who does what he or she should not) picks all of the neighbor's tulips. Our first impulse might be to make the child understand what he or she did wrong. If we seek first to understand, then we might see the incident as an insight to the child's personality. We could try to be understood first by saying, "Don't pick the neighbors flowers." By seeking first to understand, we might see the child's love of flowers, desire to be helpful by making a flower arrangement, and desire for beauty. Understanding the child first, will help the child understand us.

Later, we can feed the child's interest by giving the names of different flowers, showing how to do flower arrangements, naming the parts of flowers, and drawing flowers. Another issue, of course, is to teach respect for other people's property.

We might approach the child this way, "Dennis, I see you picked Mr. Wilson's tulips. Aren't they beautiful? Oh, you picked them for me? Dennis, that is very thoughtful of you, but these flowers are Mr. Wilson's. He might be sad that they aren't in his yard anymore. We might be sad if our flowers were gone. Let's put them in a vase and take them to Mr. Wilson. We need to tell him we're sorry about picking without permission."

Guiding children is a challenging joy. When we see our job as helping children discover themselves and their work, perhaps we can lay aside our need to be understood, and seek to understand children first. This understanding will lead us to be true helpers to our children. In return, children will seek to understand those things we need them to understand, such as, "Please, please, don't pick Mr. Wilson's flowers."

**Next week:** Three Ways to Change Behavior