

OMA *FORZA VITALE!*

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Bringing Montessori to Teen Parents

By Meredith Crandall Brown

One Friday evening a little over a year ago, I turned on OPB and was transfixed by that week's Portland City Club speaker. Dennis Morrow was talking about his work with homeless youth and teen parents through the organization Janus (www.janusyouth.org). I had joined the Board of the OMA that year with the intention of doing some sort of outreach program. We had formed a new committee and had some big ideas, one being to share parenting skills from the Montessori perspective with parents not involved with a school. When I was a guide I really enjoyed sharing our approach during conferences and casual conversation, feeling any help at home was of great benefit not just to the child but to the whole family. However, I couldn't help but feel we were preaching to the choir. My desire to participate on the board, as well as my goal for the Outreach Committee, was to get beyond what I felt to be a Montessori bubble.

When I heard Dennis Morrow speak I had already been in touch with the Multnomah County Library and was in the process of setting-up free public talks with them, but felt we would be reaching a similar cross-section of parents as those who already had their children in a Montessori school. I wanted to bring Montessori to a more "at risk" population. Janus Youth Programs seemed a great place to start, as their approach to helping people help themselves resonated with Montessori. I got in touch with their Insights Teen Parent Program, which has been providing parenting education and support services to teens for over 30 years through home visits and support groups; they offer a wide range of support focusing on child development, domestic violence, homelessness and foster care involvement for teen parents or their children (www.insightstpp.org).

I introduced myself through email to one of their coordinators and was pleasantly surprised by their quick response. Over the past year we have been developing a relationship. Initially, Cathy Dorner and Ursula Melvin gave a more traditional talk on toys, a topic identified by the Insights coordinators as particularly relevant to their parents. Since then I have gone twice this year; first giving a talk on observation and the

second time facilitating a playgroup. The parents bring their children to the meetings, so I brought my younger one-year-old son along too, finding him to be a great conversation starter, as well as giving me the opportunity to model some of the things I was talking about. For example, discipline. We had a consequential conversation about how to deal with a situation that arose when a 3-year old boy playing a toy piano suddenly found himself surrounded by three little toddlers all wanting to bang on it at the same time. I demonstrated how to redirect the other children to something else until he was done. Even the breakdown of the word “redirecting” was educational. During another conversation I was joking with one of the dads about being silly when nobody is watching and how ridiculous we must look as we goof around with our children. I could tell from his laugh and sparkle that this was a highlight of parenting for him. He shared that he had begun to really bond with his daughter and was no longer intimidated when he was alone with her.

This opportunity for relaxed conversation came in handy later on in the group when I was touching on language development. I asked if any of them read to their kids. The dad I had been laughing with earlier said he didn't because he has ADD. It was then easy to tie in how despite his own experience, books can be a fun, even silly time with your kids, and also a great thing to do when you don't know *what* to do with your child. If he found he was having trouble, he didn't have to read them, he could make up his own stories or simply talk about the pictures. He really liked this idea and we talked about where he could find some board books in the children's section of the library. At times the parents tune-out, but when I can see an idea settling in their minds of lasting impact, the other periods of disinterest feel completely worthwhile.

My work with Insights, though just starting, has been very satisfying. Their needs change each six-week rotation, but currently they would like me to be a consistent participant, developing a relationship with the parents by hosting one group each session. Even after two visits I can see the benefits of this approach. I was able to have some follow-up with a mother who had attended both of the groups I led. It was fun to see and discuss how much her child had grown in two months and to have the beginning of some sort of relationship. I am not a trained social worker, but my experience as a guide and parent seems to be adequate preparation for my level of involvement in their young lives. It feels wonderful to bring the common sense, compassionate approach of Montessori to a group of people who might otherwise never have the opportunity hear it.

Meredith Crandall Brown was an Elementary teacher for a few years before getting her Primary training with Lynne Lawrence in London. She was a guide at Pacific Crest Montessori School in Seattle and Childpeace in Portland before staying home to raise her two sons, Abe and Zach. She has been a member of the OMA board since 2008 and is Chair of the Outreach Committee. Feel free to contact her at meredithcrandall@gmail.com if you would like to become involved.